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(DIS)TRUST INTO POLITICAL INSTITUTIONS AND CONSPIRACY THEORIES: CASE OF SLOVENIA

Miro HAČEK[1]

After the collapse of the non-democratic regimes in the late 1980s and early 1990s, new democratic states emerged in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) and began their state building on the wave of democratic enthusiasm. Majority of those countries, including Slovenia, entered European Union in early 2000s as consolidated well-working democracies, although public trust in democratic political institutions has been on the slow decline since gaining independence, only to drop substantially more after global economic crisis and wave of populist politics hit CEE in the last decade. Author is analyzing trends in (dis)trust levels in key political institutions in Slovenia with emphasis on the wave of conspiracy theories, which extensively spread during and after global coronavirus pandemic. Crisis events such as recent global pandemic have triggered a wave of concerns about the actual backgrounds of global crises, and those concerns eroded public trust into key political and administrative institutions and added fuel to the conspiracy theories that were often embraced by political parties and non-governmental stakeholders that exploited sometimes-legitimate concerns to their own benefits.

Key words: conspiracy theories; political trust; information; institutions; Slovenia.

1 INTRODUCTION

Conspiracy theories are theories or beliefs that certain events, decisions, situations, or phenomenon have been caused by a group of people who are secretly working together to achieve a specific but mysterious goal. There are usually certain sinister, frightening intentions behind such theories (Barkun 2013, 3-4). Conspiracy theories often lack evidence and may be based on speculation or hearsay. Conspiracy theories may also result from *post hoc ergo prompter hoc*, which is Latin for "after this, therefore because of this." It is a logical fallacy in which two events occur sequentially or simultaneously that leads to misattribution to one event appearing to be the cause of the following

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event. Several of the conspiracy theories surrounding the novel coronavirus stem from numerous sources and logical fallacies.

The spread of the coronavirus has been accompanied by a massive spread of conspiracy theories (Bierwiaczonek, Gunderson and Kunst 2022, 1; see also Šteger 2024, 83). One of the most pervasive conspiracy theories about the spread of coronavirus is that it was deliberately released into the population by some nefarious group or organization, most often the government of China. This theory is based on the idea that the virus was created in a lab, possibly as a bioweapon, and then accidentally or deliberately released into the public to cause mass chaos and destruction (Birchall and Knight 2023, 60). The fact the virus originated in the Wuhan region of China has been used to attribute the discovery of the virus to nefarious actors in China, regardless of the severe lack of evidence. Bierwiaczonek, Gunderson and Kunst's (2022, 3) study on the impact of conspiratorial claims regarding coronavirus has had a significant and detrimental effect on public health simply due to the scale of a worldwide pandemic.

Another common conspiracy theory is that the virus was deliberately spread by 5G networks. This theory claims that 5G radiation is powerful enough to weaken the immune system, allowing the virus to spread more quickly (Birchall and Knight 2023, 96). While there is no scientific evidence to support this claim, the theory continues to circulate. Another popular conspiracy theory is that the virus was created as a way to control the population by imposing restrictions on travel and public gatherings. This theory suggests that the virus was created as a tool of social engineering, to keep people in their homes and limit their ability to interact with one another. However, a motive for such social engineering never materializes in this discourse. Finally, there is the theory that the virus is part of a vast conspiracy to increase the power and wealth of a select group of people. This theory suggests that the virus was released to cause mass economic disruption, giving those in power an opportunity to amass even more wealth and power. How this global phenomenon leads to creating more wealth during global lockdowns seems to contradict this claim but does not halt its spread.

As noted by Douglas, Sutton and Cichocka (2017), exposure to conspiracy theories is having a negative effect on some forms of political participation of citizens, such as participation in elections. The authors note similar findings in some studies that followed this one (e.g. Douglas and Sutton 2018, 280). Conspiracy theories, among other things, are supposed to encourage a sense of helplessness (Wardawy-Dudziak 2024, 53; see also Matuszewski et al 2024, 87), which is an important factor in an individual's decision not to participate in the elections. With this, the authors indicate the influence that conspiracy theories can have in political arena. Einstein and Glick (2015, 682-685) were one of the first to investigate the connection between beliefs in conspiracy theories and trust in the government. According to them, it is intuitive to expect that exposure to various conspiracy theories about the government's involvement in sinister principles affects an individual's attitude towards government and political institutions in general. The goal of their experimental research was to determine the connection between exposure to conspiracy theories in the mass media and trust in the government. Their findings confirm that exposure to conspiracy theories has a negative effect on trust in the government and political institutions, even when the institutions are not directly involved in the conspiracy theory itself. Mari et al. (2022, 288) make a similar observation on the example of a study that covered almost 12,000 people in different cultural settings in Europe, America, and New Zealand.

The goal of this article is to analyze trends in (dis)trust levels in key political institutions in Slovenia with an emphasis on the most recent period before, during and after coronavirus pandemic, when the wave of conspiracy theories, both old and new ones, especially intensified and spread. After we determine the state of public (dis)trust towards major Slovenian political and administrative institutions, we will connect those findings with the results of empirical research among followers and sympathizers of conspiracy theorist profiles on Slovenian social media sites, mostly Facebook, to ascertain the levels of embeddedness of conspiracy theories in Slovenia and to discover the profile of average Slovenian conspiracy theories follower and his/her attitude towards mainstream politics.

2 (DIS)TRUST IN KEY DECISION-MAKING POLITICAL AND ADMINISTRATIVE INSTITUTIONS

In dealing with and managing crisis situations such as global economic crisis of 2008-2014 (Koller 2021, 61) migration wave of 2015 or novel coronavirus pandemic of 2020-2022, a policy narrative framework is extremely important for at least two reasons. First, a clear policy framework reduces ambiguity and thus challenges policy implementation, but it cannot ensure effective implementation. The latter depends on structural issues or the capacity of the system. In other words, if appropriate resources are not allocated to the establishment of an adequate policy response, the crisis situation cannot be successfully addressed, no matter how good the policy narrative (Kukovič 2021, 639–641). Second, an effective framework for action increases the likelihood that citizens will correctly interpret and support the public policies and actions implemented. The latter is essential for policy implementation and compliance. At the operational level, it is important that leaders provide accurate, timely and credible information across the hierarchy of decision-making and crisis response, as well as to citizens and communities involved in crisis management in different settings (Boin and 't Hart 2010, 360; Prebilič and Kukovič 2021, 539–540). Based on the analysis of political leaders' responses, Mintrom and O'Connor (2020, 209) formulate the following four recommendations:[2] 1) convincing accounts of what is happening, why it is happening, and what can be done about it; 2) building a broad coalition of support for the policy actions to be taken and minimizing opportunities for conflict; 3) fostering trust and collaboration among key actors and groups whose actions are relevant to managing the crisis; and 4) empowering individuals and communities to make informed decisions about crisis management in their respective jurisdictions.

The lack of a clear framework for action leads to doubt and ambiguity in the messages that political leaders try to convey, leading to varying degrees of confusion among citizens. If we take most recent coronavirus crisis situation as the latest example, we could observe a contagious coronavirus on one side and the complacency and deviant behavior by a small number of citizens that lead to the rapid spread of the virus with disastrous and fatal results. Because of the high virulence of the novel coronavirus, it was necessary to take rapid action, which inevitably had a major impact on people's daily routines. Many political leaders issued emergency powers in their jurisdictions to enforce social distancing and lockdown measures, which were a serious violation of social norms. For this reason, it was necessary to create a clear political narrative simultaneously with the legalization of measures, which some political leaders succeeded in doing

[2] It should be added, however, that new crisis situations will challenge other behavioral patterns of political leaders.

much better than others (Koller 2022). Those politicians who failed to enforce an effective political narrative among the population quickly became targets of a blame game, which led to disregard for the measures taken to combat the novel coronavirus and a decline in citizens' support for and trust in policymakers. Indeed, Haček and Brezovšek (2014, 3) explain that the trust we have in the representatives of a particular political or administrative institution generates trust in the institution as a whole. However, the consequences of distrust in political institutions - especially in crisis situations – can be fatal.

Gamson (1968, 42) argues that trust in political and administrative institutions is important because it serves as a creator of collective power, enabling government to make decisions and commit resources without resorting to coercion or seeking the explicit consent of citizens for every decision. When trust is high, governments can make new commitments based on that trust and, if successful, increase support even further. A virtuous spiral is created. On the other hand, if trust is low, governments cannot govern effectively, trust is further eroded, and a vicious cycle is created (Muller and Jukam 1977). Trust is particularly important for democratic governments because they cannot rely on coercion to the same extent as non-democratic regimes. Trust is therefore essential for representative relations (Bianco 1994). In modern democracies, where citizens exercise control over government through representative institutions, it is trust that gives representatives the latitude to set aside short-term concerns of the electorate while pursuing long-term national interests (Mishler and Rose 1997, 419). Trust is necessary for individuals to voluntarily participate in collective institutions, whether political or civic. However, trust is a double-edged sword. Democracy requires trust, but it also requires an active and vigilant citizenry (Haček 2019, 420) with a healthy skepticism of government and a willingness to suspend trust when necessary and assert control over government by replacing the current government.

We begin our analysis by examining the level of trust in (political) institutions in selected European Union member states, namely Slovenia, Austria, Hungary, Croatia and Poland, countries that share many aspects of their recent political history and political culture. Four time periods have been included in the analysis, namely (a) the period before the novel coronavirus pandemic (2018 and 2019), (b) the period of the novel coronavirus pandemic outbreak (2020), (c) the period of the second and third waves of the novel coronavirus pandemic (2021 and 2022) and (d) the period after novel coronavirus pandemic (2023).

Based on the publicly available data presented in Table 1, two clusters of countries can be observed. The first cluster consists of countries (Austria, Hungary) whose populations have maintained relatively high levels of trust in all major political and administrative institutions (namely national government, national parliament, political parties, police, judiciary, and public administration) from before the novel coronavirus pandemic to the last measurement after the pandemic in early 2023, when countries already implemented exit strategies from the crisis situation. Still, the first group also includes cases with a slight downward trend in public confidence, with Austria showing the largest decrease in public confidence, as trust in national parliament fell by ten per cent and in national government by seventeen per cent between 2018 and 2023. The second cluster of countries are those that have stable, but very low levels of public trust towards major political and administrative institutions, well below the EU-27 averages (Slovenia, Croatia, Poland). It should be added that the increase or decrease in public trust is influenced by various factors, one of which was certainly the change of government that we have experienced in Slovenia in April

2022, but we can also clearly see that trust levels returned to the pre-electoral levels just nine months after (most recent Eurobarometer survey in spring 2023).

TABLE 1: TRUST IN KEY POLITICAL INSTITUTIONS (TEND TO TRUST; IN PER CENT)

	NATIONAL GOVERNMENT						NATIONAL PARLIAMENT					
	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023
Austria	55	50	59	45	39	38	56	54	58	50	47	46
Croatia	19	15	24	22	20	24	18	16	21	22	21	26
Hungary	48	48	46	45	48	41	46	45	42	42	44	38
Slovenia	23	31	25	25	37	25	22	26	22	19	34	23
Poland	33	34	34	28	26	31	26	30	28	26	38	29
EU-27	35	35	40	37	34	32	35	36	36	35	34	33

Sources: European Union (2018; 2019; 2020; 2021; 2022; 2023).

TABLE 1 CONT.: TRUST IN KEY POLITICAL INSTITUTIONS (TEND TO TRUST; IN PER CENT)

	POLITICAL PARTIES						PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION				
	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022
Austria	33	33	41	35	32	27	67	68	73	65	66
Croatia	12	12	14	12	11	19	27	23	31	33	34
Hungary	28	30	25	26	27	21	58	57	62	62	61
Slovenia	10	14	12	10	14	11	41	39	44	41	40
Poland	14	22	22	22	24	23	45	44	48	46	45
EU-27	18	20	23	21	21	20	50	49	52	52	50

Sources: European Union (2018; 2019; 2020; 2021; 2022; 2023).

TABLE 1 CONT.: TRUST IN KEY POLITICAL INSTITUTIONS (TEND TO TRUST; IN PER CENT)

	JUSTICE SYSTEM						THE POLICE					
	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023
Austria	73	69	73	70	68	68	77	75	77	76	77	75
Croatia	24	20	23	21	26	36	58	53	54	55	54	61
Hungary	50	50	50	53	55	52	63	64	65	67	66	63
Slovenia	22	25	36	33	37	34	63	65	67	58	57	67
Poland	35	36	35	35	37	40	58	53	52	46	45	46
EU-27	51	51	52	54	52	52	72	71	71	71	69	69

Sources: European Union (2018; 2019; 2020; 2021; 2022; 2023).

In addition to public trust in key decision-making political institutions measured by Eurobarometer, we also examined public trust in key Slovenian political institutions (see Table 2) measured by most publicly recognized public opinion trackers, namely Centre for Public Opinion and Mass Communication Research, with data all the way from 2010 to 2022. We can observe that levels of public trust towards major political institutions were on the quite low levels until 2022, when the post-covid elections saw the biggest voter turnout in the last couple of decades that also brought major change to the political landscape, and, at least temporarily, increased levels of public trust towards major political institutions.

TABLE 2: TRUST IN KEY POLITICAL INSTITUTIONS IN SLOVENIA: SURVEYS FROM 2010 TO 2022

	2010	2012	2014	2016	2018	2020	2022
National parliament	2,98	2,96	2,76	3,33	3,58	3,86	4,21
President of the Republic	4,17	4,49	4,36	4,99	-	-	5,02
National government	2,75	2,69	2,69	3,27	3,53	-	4,31
Legal system	3,08	3,28	3,13	3,63	3,92	4,31	-
The police	4,99	5,38	5,47	6,02	6,15	6,21	6,04
Politicians	2,25	2,30	1,90	2,44	2,67	2,72	-
Political parties	2,24	2,27	2,00	2,47	2,70	2,78	3,37

* Question was "Please use a scale from 0 to 10 to rate how much you personally trust each of the following institutions. How much you trust: The National Assembly Please use a scale from 0 to 10 to rate how much you personally trust each of the following institutions. 0 means you don't trust the institution at all, and 10 means you trust it completely."
Sources: Centre for Public Opinion and Mass Communication Research (2020; 2022); Toš (2021a: 644) and Toš (2021b: 99).

With the help of comparative analysis, we can establish the following facts. First, public trust in the main political and administrative institutions is on the highest levels in Austria and Hungary, and quite a bit lower in Slovenia, Poland, and

Croatia; the lowest trust in the key political institutions is perceived in Croatia. Second, the coronavirus crisis did not have major impact on the public trust into key political and administrative institutions in any of the five analyzed Central and Eastern European states with some drops in public trust detected that were mere temporal in nature. Third, Slovenian public trust into key political and administrative institutions is in most part well below EU-27 average in all five analyzed Eurobarometer measurements from 2018 to 2022. And fourth, we can see that the coronavirus crisis and political backslash to it (Kukovič 2022, 17) had important – but also short-lived – influence on political events (prime example being the national elections held in Slovenia in late April 2022) that brought major changes to the political landscape, including increased public trust towards major political and administrative institutions.

3 EMPIRICAL STUDY ON CONSPIRACY THEORIES IN SLOVENIA

3.1 Research design

In order to answer the research questions on the levels of embeddedness of conspiracy theories in Slovenian society and to discover the profile of average Slovenian conspiracy theories followers and their attitude towards mainstream politics, we conducted empirical research among followers and sympathizers of most frequented Slovenian conspiracy theories groups profiles on Facebook. The Generic Conspiracist Beliefs Scale/GCBS (Brotherton 2015) was used to explore conspiracy mentality. Survey took place between February and April 2023, when followers of mentioned groups were invited several times to fill out web-based anonymous questionnaire; 257 respondents answered the questionnaire, of which 115 were men and 142 were women. Most respondents were quite young, as 51,4 percent declared they are between 18 and 24 years of age, and only 3,5 percent of respondents were over 65 years of age; the facts that could also very well be contributed to the nature of our research, as social media activity is much more populated by younger compared to older population. The largest part of our respondents (65,4 percent) completed high school, 30,4 percent obtained higher, or university level diploma and 3,1 percent obtained master and/or PhD. Most respondents were married or in relationship (47,1 percent) and 46,3 percent were single when conducting our survey.[3]

3.2 Results

We will analyze and debate some of the most intriguing and interesting results of the quite extensive study among Slovenian conspiracy theories followers. We presented a series of statements to the survey respondents, where they evaluated the degree to which they believe each statement is likely to be true on the scale from 1 (definitely not true) to 5 (definitely true).

The first four statements are testing the conspiracy theories that suggests that the virus was released to cause mass economic disruption, giving those in power an opportunity to amass even more wealth and power and that there is secret group of people behind the world governments that is pulling many if not all the strings. We can see quite substantial support amongst Slovenian conspiracy theories followers for all four statements, which is not really surprising, as "secret group" conspiracy theory is the most well-established and well-known.

[3] As with any survey conducted on the social media, we should treat this survey with grain of salt and appropriate critical distance.

Strongest support (65 percent of respondents believe that it's probably or definitely true) was given to the statement that claims that the power held by heads of state is second to that of small unknown groups who really control world politics; weakest support (55,4 percent of respondents believe that it's probably or definitely true) was given to the similar statement that claims small, secret group of people is responsible for making all major world decisions, such as going to war.

TABLE 3: CONSPIRACY THEORIES FOLLOWERS' OPINIONS ON SELECTED STATEMENTS

STATEMENTS	Definitely not true (1)	Probably not true (2)	Not sure; cannot decide (3)	Probably true (4)	Definitely true (5)	Mean value (1-5)
1) The power held by heads of state is second to that of small unknown groups who really control world politics.	19 (7,4%)	40 (16,5%)	31 (12,1%)	87 (33,9%)	80 (31,1%)	3,66
2) The spread of certain viruses and/or diseases is the result of the deliberate, concealed efforts of secret organization.	34 (13,2%)	36 (14,0%)	42 (16,3%)	76 (29,6%)	69 (26,8%)	3,43
3) A small, secret group of people is responsible for making all major world decisions, such as going to war.	36 (14,1%)	36 (14,1%)	42 (16,4%)	70 (27,3%)	72 (28,1%)	3,41
4) Certain significant events have been the result of the activity of a small group who secretly manipulate world events.	34 (13,2%)	31 (12,1%)	36 (14,0%)	73 (28,4%)	83 (32,3%)	3,54
5) Vaccines are harmful, and this fact is hidden from people.	61 (23,7%)	39 (15,2%)	45 (17,5%)	86 (33,5%)	26 (10,1%)	2,91
6) Vaccine safety data are often fabricated.	50 (19,5%)	45 (17,5%)	47 (18,3%)	79 (30,7%)	36 (14,0%)	3,02
7) There is a link between autism and vaccines.	69 (26,8%)	35 (13,6%)	57 (22,2%)	59 (23,0%)	37 (14,4%)	2,84
8) The Covid-19 pandemic is a tool to control society.	45 (17,6%)	33 (12,9%)	31 (12,1%)	91 (35,5%)	56 (21,9%)	3,31
9) The SARS-CoV-2 coronavirus was deliberately created to benefit the richest.	48 (18,7%)	43 (16,7%)	33 (12,8%)	85 (33,1%)	48 (18,7%)	3,16
10) Statistics on COVID-19 cases and deaths are deliberately fabricated.	41 (16,0%)	31 (12,1%)	25 (9,7%)	100 (38,9%)	60 (23,3%)	3,42
11) Evidence of the dangers of 5G radiation is being hidden from the public.	67 (26,1%)	42 (16,3%)	47 (18,3%)	61 (23,7%)	40 (15,6%)	2,86
12) The introduction of the 5G network is related to the COVID-19 pandemic.	100 (39,1%)	36 (14,1%)	46 (18,0%)	38 (14,8%)	36 (14,1%)	2,51

* The question was: " There is often debate about whether or not the public is told the whole truth about various important issues. This brief survey is designed to assess your beliefs about some of these subjects. Please indicate the degree to which you believe each statement is likely to be true on the following scale." N= 257.
Source: Haček (2023).

The next six statements (numbered from 5-10) focus to the vaccines and covid-19 global pandemic and relate to the two popular and well-established conspiracy theories claiming a) that the virus was created in a lab and accidentally or deliberately released into the public to cause mass chaos and that coronavirus is tool of social engineering, to keep people in their homes and limit their ability to interact with one another and b) vaccines are harmful and their safety data is compromised and fabricated. We can clearly see from Table 3 that support of conspiracy theories followers towards those two statement clusters is not overwhelming, especially towards the statements regarding the vaccines. In fact, there is large group of conspiracy theories followers that are strongly opposing statements regarding the supposed harmfulness of vaccines and the link between vaccines and autism.

The situation is quite different with three statements (numbered from 8-10) regarding covid-19 disease and global coronavirus pandemic, where 50 to 60 percent of conspiracy theories followers are (strongly) supporting all three statements, with strongest support (62,2 percent of respondents (strongly) agreeing) towards the statement claiming that the statistics on covid-19 disease cases and deaths are deliberately fabricated. It should also be noted that there is (weak to moderate) negative correlation between correspondent's interest in politics and their support for these three statements.

The last two statements (numbered from 11-12) relate to the common conspiracy theory that claims the virus was deliberately spread by 5G networks. As we can see from the Table 3, there is no clear cut support for either of those two statements, as majority of conspiracy theories followers (53,2 percent) do not agree that the introduction of the 5G network is related to the COVID-19 pandemic, and there are also more conspiracy theories followers (42,3 percent) not agreeing with the statement "Evidence of the dangers of 5G radiation is being hidden from the public" than those agreeing with that particular statement (39,3 percent).

TABLE 4: CONSPIRACY THEORIES FOLLOWERS' LEVELS OF INTERACTION

	Not at all (1)	Once a week or less (2)	Two or three times a week (3)	Every day or almost every day (4)	Mean value
Started discussions about these topics on social media.	180 (70,0%)	44 (17,1%)	20 (7,8%)	13 (5,1%)	1,48
Replied to other people's posts.	160 (62,3%)	60 (23,3%)	28 (10,9%)	9 (3,5%)	1,56
Retweeted (shared) entries devoted to these topics to other users.	166 (64,8%)	54 (21,1%)	21 (8,2%)	15 (5,9%)	1,55
Used the "like", "like", "thumbs up" functions on posts dedicated to these topics.	100 (39,1%)	84 (32,8%)	39 (15,2%)	33 (12,9%)	2,02
Discussed by e-mail or private messages.	135 (52,7%)	77 (30,1%)	28 (10,9%)	16 (6,3%)	1,71
Participated in discussion forums or wrote comments under articles on the Internet.	188 (73,2%)	46 (17,9%)	13 (5,1%)	10 (3,9%)	1,40
Share video on these topics with other users.	150 (58,6%)	69 (27,0%)	25 (9,8%)	12 (4,7%)	1,61

* The question was: "We would now like to ask you about your experiences on the Internet related to content such as vaccinations, 5G, the pandemic or the obscure and harmful plans of people in power. How often in the last month have you...?" N= 257.
Source: Haček (2023).

We also asked conspiracy theories followers how often in the last month have they interacted about their experiences online related to content such as vaccinations, 5G, the pandemic or the harmful plans of people in power (Table 4). We can see that Slovenian conspiracy theories followers are quite passive and not personally engaged in online activities regarding mentioned topics; most of them are following and not too often, just once or maybe twice weekly, also "liking" posts dedicated to those topics, but not also replying, starting discussions, participating in discussions or sharing videos. There is quite small sub-group of conspiracy theories followers (less than 15 percent of them) that are in fact very active with staring discussion, replying to other people's posts, sharing video or other contents, and participating in discussion forums.

It's also interesting to analyze the sources of Slovenian conspiracy theories followers' information (Table 5). We can see that (strongly) prevailing sources of information are in fact not traditional media channels, like television, news press or the radio, but the online news sites, friends and family members and also social media, especially Facebook, where more that 40 percent of conspiracy theories followers get their information about currents event in the country and globally at least two or three times a week. The least popular sources of information are Telegram, TikTok and Twitter/X social media networks.

TABLE 5: SOURCES OF INFORMATION FOR CONSPIRACY THEORIES FOLLOWERS

SOURCES OF INFORMATION	Not at all (1)	Once a week or less (2)	Two or three times a week (3)	Every day or almost every day (4)	Mean value (1-4)
News and current affairs programs on television.	78 (30,6%)	77 (30,2%)	51 (20,0%)	49 (19,2%)	2,28
From friends and family members.	40 (15,7%)	102 (40,2%)	67 (26,4%)	45 (17,7%)	2,46
From newspapers and magazines.	140 (55,1%)	65 (25,6%)	34 (13,4%)	15 (5,9%)	1,70
From online news sites.	58 (22,7%)	73 (28,5%)	63 (24,6%)	62 (24,2%)	2,50
From blogs and websites of Internet users.	121 (47,6%)	68 (26,8%)	40 (15,7%)	25 (9,8%)	1,88
From YouTube.	107 (42,0%)	80 (31,4%)	33 (12,9%)	35 (13,7%)	1,98
From Twitter/X.	181 (71,0%)	30 (11,8%)	15 (5,9%)	29 (11,4%)	1,58
From Facebook.	72 (28,2%)	73 (28,6%)	56 (22,0%)	54 (21,2%)	2,36
From Telegram.	198 (77,6%)	24 (9,4%)	14 (5,5%)	19 (7,5%)	1,43
From TikTok.	177 (69,4%)	32 (12,5%)	28 (11,0%)	18 (7,1%)	1,56

* The question was: "How often during the last month did you get information about current events in Slovenia and in the world from the following sources?" N= 257.
Source: Haček (2023).

TABLE 6: TRUST INTO VARIOUS INSTITUTIONS

INSTITUTIONS	Trust	Do not trust	Don't know
Political parties	22 (8,6%)	185 (72,0%)	50 (19,5%)
Police	118 (45,9%)	95 (37,0%)	44 (17,1%)
Regional or local authorities	87 (33,9%)	118 (45,9%)	52 (20,2%)
Government	39 (15,2%)	178 (69,3%)	40 (15,6%)
Parliament	47 (18,3%)	163 (63,4%)	47 (18,3%)
Church	25 (9,7%)	192 (74,7%)	40 (15,6%)

* The question was: "To what extent do you trust the following institutions?" N= 257.
Source: Haček (2023).

We also asked Slovenian conspiracy theories followers how interested about politics they are. The results are interesting, as 48 percent of conspiracy theories followers are following what is happening in politics quite or very closely and only 25,4 percent of them are not interesting in politics and are often overlooking even most important events. The group is also very active regarding various elections, as they claim willing to cast the vote at presidential elections (72,8 percent), parliamentary elections (72 percent), local elections (66,9 percent) and even at the elections to the European parliament (54,5 percent), contradicting the findings of Douglas, Sutton and Cichocka (2017), that found that exposure to conspiracy theories is having a negative effect on some forms of political participation. At the same time, the group is also very reserved regarding their trust levels into various institutions (Table 6), especially institutions from the political sphere, like political parties (72 percent do not trust), parliament (63,4 percent do not trust) or government (69,3 percent do not trust); the levels of distrust are (just) a bit higher compared to the general population results presented and analyzed in the second chapter.

4 CONCLUSION

Crisis events such as the global economic crisis in early 2000s, the wave of migration in mid 2010s or the recent pandemic have triggered a wave of concerns about the actual backgrounds of those crises, eroded public trust into key political and administrative institutions and added fuel to the spread of conspiracy theories that were often embraced by both political and non-political

stakeholders that exploited sometimes-legitimate concerns to their own benefits. The goal of this article was to analyze trends in (dis)trust levels in key political institutions in Slovenia with an emphasis on the most recent period before, during and after coronavirus pandemic, when the wave of conspiracy theories, both old and new ones, especially intensified and spread. Using both sets of international (Eurobarometer, see Table 1) and national (Centre for Public Opinion and Mass Communication Research, see Table 2) data its very straightforward conclusion that Slovenia can be regarded to be among the EU members with below-average levels of public trust towards major political and administrative institutions and that 2020-22 global coronavirus pandemic has not had much either negative or positive influence on those (dis)trust levels at all.

We have then analyzed those findings in the light of the results of empirical research among followers and sympathizers of conspiracy theorists' profiles on Slovenian social media sites, mostly Facebook, to ascertain the levels of embeddedness of conspiracy theories in Slovenia and to discover the profile of average Slovenian conspiracy theories follower and his/her attitude towards mainstream politics. We could ascertain that levels of support of Slovenian conspiracy theories followers are stronger towards covid-19 related conspiracy theories and also towards more established traditional theories, like the one that suggests there is secret group of people behind the world governments that is pulling many strings; at the same time levels of support are weaker towards the vaccine and 5G related conspiracy theories. We could also clearly establish that Slovenian conspiracy theories followers are quite passive, mostly just following and maybe also liking posts regarding established conspiracy theories, but (mostly) not also actively participating. We could also establish that the most important news sources of conspiracy theories followers are online news sites, friends and family members and social media, and that conspiracy theories followers are on one side above-averagely political active, but on the other also very distrustful towards major political institutions.

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(NE)ZAUPANJE V POLITIČNE INSTITUCIJE IN TEORIJE ZAROT: PRIMER SLOVENIJE

Po razpadu nedemokratičnih režimov v poznih osemdesetih in zgodnjih devetdesetih letih prejšnjega stoletja so v srednji in vzhodni Evropi nastale nove demokratične države, ki so izgrajevale države na valu demokratičnega navdušenja. Večina teh držav - vključno s Slovenijo - je vstopila v Evropsko unijo v prvem desetletju tega tisočletja kot utrjene, dobro delujoče demokracije, čeprav je zaupanje javnosti v demokratične politične institucije od osamosvojitve počasi upadalo. Po svetovni gospodarski krizi in valu populizma v zadnjem desetletju je zaupanje javnosti v demokratične politične institucije še dodatno strmoglavilo. Avtor analizira trende (ne)zaupanja v ključne politične institucije v Sloveniji s poudarkom na valu teorij zarote, ki se je močno razširil med in po globalni pandemiji koronavirusa. Krizni dogodki, kot je nedavna pandemija, so sprožili val skrbi glede dejanskih ozadij svetovnih kriz, tovrstni pomisleki pa so še dodatno zmanjšali zaupanje javnosti v ključne politične institucije ter podžgali teorije zarote, ki so jih pogosto sprejemale tudi politične stranke in nevladne organizacije ter jih izkoriščale v lastno korist.

Ključne besede: teorije zarote; političnо zaupanje; informacije; ustanove; Slovenija.

PARTY AFFILIATION AND BELIEF IN CONSPIRACY THEORIES: CASE STUDY OF SMOLENSK PLANE CRASH

Maciej MARMOLA and Agata OLSZANECKA-MARMOLA[1]

On April 10, 2010, ninety-six people died in the plane crash near Smolensk, including the President of the Republic of Poland, Lech Kaczyński. To this day, many conspiracies have grown around this event regarding the alleged assassination in which Russian secret services were supposed to be involved. The aim of the article is to diagnose how social identity created based on party identification affects conspiracy thinking connected with the presidential Tu-154 plane crash. We analyse research on belief in the Smolensk attack theory conducted by Polish opinion research centres in 2010-2022. They show that the voters of the Law and Justice party believe to a much greater extent that the Smolensk catastrophe is, in fact, an assassination of President Lech Kaczyński ordered by Vladimir Putin. The conducted analysis confirms that the political dimension of social identity (conceptualized in the study as trust in Law and Justice government and party identification) determines the endorsement of the Smolensk conspiracy. This factor is more important for belief in the assassination theory than such factors as conspiracy mentality, gender, age, place of residence, and education.

Key words: conspiracy theories; conspiracy beliefs; social identity; party affiliation; Smolensk plane crash.

1 INTRODUCTION: SOCIAL IDENTITY AND GROUP IDENTIFICATION

Social identity theory is one of the main approaches explaining people's behaviours and attitudes related to group membership (Turner et al. 1987). It assumes that part of self-image (*personal identity*) results from membership in a particular type of group (*social identity*). As individuals, we are somehow predisposed to adopting a social identity. Firstly, it results from the evolution of the human species because survival depends on ethnocentrism, which consists of perceiving one's own group as better than others and preferring it over out-

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groups (Hartshorn, Kaznatcheev and Shultz 2013). Secondly, it helps reduce uncertainty because strong identification with a group allows people to find their way more easily in social situations, especially those unexpected and unpredictable. The stronger the feeling of uncertainty, the greater the individual's tendency to identify with the group (Choi and Hogg 2020) and the more substantial the need for populist, autocratic leaders within it (Hogg 2021).

Social identity is one of the sources of self-esteem. Maintaining a positive social identity, therefore, becomes an essential factor motivating human behaviour. The individuals reach that through a favourable comparison between their own group and out-groups. They strengthen self-esteem by emphasizing the superiority of in-groups in relation to lower-status out-groups. Importantly, when social identity is unsatisfactory, individuals should seek to leave their existing group and join another more positively evaluated one and/or to make their current group more positively distinct (Tajfel and Turner 1986).

Social identity contains four modes of in-group identification: *importance* (the degree to which an individual considers group membership to be an essential part of who he or she is), *commitment* (the likelihood to act for the group's benefit, even at the expense of one's own interests), *deference* (the degree to which an individual conforms to the group's norms, symbols, and leaders), and *superiority* (an individual's belief that my group is superior to other groups) (Roccas et al. 2008).

Group identification is a concept like social identity, and both terms are often used interchangeably (Brown 2000; Sahdra and Ross 2007). However, these concepts are not synonymous. Social identity refers to the nature or content of a particular identity (as part of the self that results from being a group member), whereas group identification indicates the psychological ties that connect an individual with a given group (Ellemers, Spears and Doosje 2002). Group identification concerns both the strength of an individual's relationship with a given group and other characteristics of this relationship, i.e., the extent to which it is based on an emotional ties with other group members, the extent to which being a member of a group and the group itself are assessed positively, and finally, whether the group's assessment is grounded or uncertain, filled with hidden doubts and dependent on situational factors (Amiot and Aubin 2013; Cameron 2004; Golec de Zavala, Cichocka and Bilewicz 2013).

Individuals can identify with the group in a secure, non-narcissistic and narcissistic way. Secure in-group identification is characterized by the fact that members of such groups have a positive but not exaggerated image of their own group, which generates positive attitudes towards members of out-groups. It increases the likelihood of perceiving fewer threats from others and diminishes belief in conspiracy theories (Cichocka et al. 2018). In turn, narcissistic in-group identification (so-called collective narcissism) causes the assignment of exaggerated, unparalleled greatness to one's own group with excessive sensitivity to criticism and a defensive reaction to violations of group norms (Golec de Zavala and Lantos 2020). The level of collective narcissism increases following negative evaluations of the in-group or when people feel temporarily insecure as members of the group (Golec de Zavala 2011). Beyond the national group, collective narcissism has been identified in relation to an ethnic group and an ideological organization, such as a political party or a religious group (Golec de Zavala et al. 2009; Golec de Zavala, Cichocka and Bilewicz 2013).

To maintain a positive in-group image, their members often resort to collective self-victimization. This process relates to the "belief that one's own group has been intentionally and undeservingly harmed by another group" (Bar-Tal et al. 2009). Groups that permanently feel victims of various types of injustice are characterized by the mentality of a besieged fortress. Therefore, a national identity built on being a victim also fosters the construction of conspiracy theories aimed at a group treated as oppressors (Oren, Bar-Tal and David 2004). In this context, it is worth mentioning that studies on collective self-victimization conducted in Poland bring interesting results. Although the victim identity is not dominant among Poles, the Law and Justice voters present a significantly higher level of victim identity than individuals declaring support for other parties (Skarżyńska 2020).

2 HOW IN-GROUP IDENTIFICATION AFFECTS BELIEF IN CONSPIRACY THEORIES

Most conspiracy theories involve convictions about a powerful and evil outgroup that secretly tries to harm one's own group (van Prooijen and van Lange 2014; Matuszewski, Rams-Ługowski and Pawłowski 2024). Recent studies confirm the robust association between in-group identification and believing in conspiracy theories (Douglas et al. 2019; van Prooijen 2022). This applies to specific conspiracy theories, and the strength of the relationship depends on the content of the conspiracy theories (scales or questionnaires used in the research). This is evidenced by the meta-analysis proposed in relation to collective narcissism understood as "a belief that one's own group is exceptional but not sufficiently recognized by others" (Golec de Zavala and Lantos 2020). It confirms that the links between collective narcissism and conspiracy theories are the strongest for these conspiracy theories assigning hostile intentions to specific malevolent out-group actors threatening a given group. This relationship is demonstrated to a lesser extent in relation to vaguely defined, powerful 'others' and to generic conspiracy thinking (Golec de Zavala, Bierwiaczonek and Ciesielski 2022). The belief that others are conspiring against a given group is more likely to occur when the group thinks of itself as undervalued or marginalized. Thus, conspiratorial thinking becomes a mechanism for defending one's social group and a factor strengthening in-group identification (Golec de Zavala et al. 2009). To sum up, the research on the role of social identity in conspiracy thinking confirms that the feeling of being weakened and threatened (especially in an international relations context) may facilitate the development of conspiracy theories to justify the group's unfavourable position.

Social identity is strongly related to both conspiracy beliefs and political attitudes (Van Prooijen 2018). As Robertson notes, "political actors may use conspiracy theories to foster strong partisan identities, crafting narratives that pit malevolent elites against the common people" (Robertson et al. 2022). Moreover, research suggests that belief in conspiracy theories does not result from a lack of cognitive competence but is motivated by the defence of positive in-group or cultural identity (Kahan 2015). Conspiracy belief is closely connected with maintaining positive relationships with one's environment (family, friends) and the values professed in this environment (Soral and Grzesiak-Feldman 2015). Thus, conspiracy theories often develop in response to threats to people's social identities (Robertson et al. 2022). They may arise because of racial, national, religious, or political identification. In the latter case, a relationship is diagnosed according to which individuals believe in conspiracy theories that are ideologically consistent with their party identification (Uscinski, Klofstad and

Atkinson 2016). Additionally, those who vote for the party that lost the election are more likely to endorse conspiracy theories because they feel marginalized (Uscinski and Parent 2014).

Conspiracy beliefs based on social identity are aimed at various types of out-groups. Most often, such studies focus on specific national or religious identities. Moreover, scientists even construct unique scales or measures to investigate conspiracies referring to social identity, e.g., Islamophobic conspiracist beliefs (Swami et al. 2018), index of Muslim conspiracy theories and index of Jewish conspiracy theories (van Prooijen, Staman and Krouwel 2018), Republican Conspiracy Theories, Democratic Conspiracy Theories and Nonpartisan Conspiracy Theories (Enders and Smallpage 2019) or Upward and Downward Conspiracy Beliefs (Nera et al. 2021). They also create different scenarios of the same events, assigning responsibility for them to various out-groups. The conducted research proves that both the national identification of the malevolent actor and the recipients of the conspiracy influence belief in a specific conspiracy theory (Andrade 2021; J. M. Miller 2020; Radnitz 2022). Endorsement of conspiracies is also related to collective narcissism (Golec de Zavala, Bierwiaczonek and Ciesielski 2022) and religiosity (Frenken, Bilewicz and Imhoff 2023). Importantly, there is another mechanism for how social identity affects conspiracy thinking. If conspiracies are aimed at our group (primarily national), then in defence of our in-group identification, we do not believe in them (Wang et al. 2021).

An important research direction is the impact of party identification on belief in specific conspiracy theories. The research subject here usually involves events important to the electorate of a given party, e.g., the death of a political leader or mysterious, incomprehensible actions of political competitors. The strong effect of party identification (as the political dimension of social identity) on conspiracy thinking is diagnosed across the world, e.g., in the United States (Enders and Smallpage 2019; Enders and Uscinski 2021; Hollander 2018), Venezuela (Carey 2019), and Pakistan (Siddiqui 2020). Similar relationships are also confirmed in relation to political ideology (Krouwel et al. 2017; Min 2021; Jolley et al. 2022; Wardawy-Dudziak 2024), attitudes toward the establishment/elites (Stecula and Pickup 2021; Wood and Gray 2019), geopolitical preferences (Onderco and Stoeckel 2023), and even identification with a specific event important for a whole society (Chayinska and Minescu 2018; Šteger 2024).

3 PRESIDENTIAL TU-154 PLANE CRASH IN SMOLENSK AS A DRIVING FORCE OF CONSPIRACY THEORIES

On April 10, the entire Polish delegation (96 people in total), which was to go to Katyn to take part in the memorial of the 70th anniversary of the crime committed against Polish officers by the NKVD during World War II, died in a plane crash near Smolensk in western Russia. The delegation included the President of the Republic of Poland, Lech Kaczyński, and his wife, the last President of the Republic of Poland in exile, Ryszard Kaczorowski, the Chief of the General Staff of the Polish Army, commanders of all branches of the armed forces, the President of the National Bank of Poland, the President of the Institute of National Remembrance, the Commissioner for Human Rights, highest-ranking public officials, members of parliament from all political options, clergy of various denominations, social activists, and the plane crew. The scale of the disaster was enormous, not only for Poland. The plane crash deprived Poland of several authorities at various levels. The sudden and unexpected loss of such a

prominent political elite created a sense of threat, uncertainty, and instability, both in the social and political context. On the same day, the Speaker of the Sejm, Bronisław Komorowski, announced that, following the Constitution, he was temporarily taking over the duties of the head of state and declared seven days of national mourning. Crowds gathered in front of the Presidential Palace in Warsaw to commemorate the President and other victims. People sang patriotic songs, prayed, and lit thousands of candles.

At the same time, in the first hours after the disaster, conspiracy theories began appearing on the Internet. People spread rumours that the Russian special services caused lousy weather that prevented the safe landing of the presidential Tupolev. Statements such as “The Russians have mastered the art of making rain using silver iodide for several dozen years” and “The Russians have created an artificial fog for a long time, for example, in 1942 to mask the location of ships” were published on the Internet. The issue of the victims of the disaster also raised grave doubts. The uncertainty related to the fact that no one saw the victims led to the assumption that the plane did not crash in Smolensk but in some more secluded place where it would be easier to finish off the survivors. Whereas in Smolensk, another plane crashed - without passengers, previously prepared to leave a lot of pieces behind. The second theory regarding the victims indicated that the survivors were finished off at the Smolensk airport (Chaciński 2010).

A few days after the disaster, politicians also began to suggest an assassination theory. On April 12, in "Nasz Dziennik," Artur Górski (MP of Law and Justice) stated that the Russians were responsible for the plane crash and compared the disaster to what happened in Katyn 70 years earlier. Professor Zdzisław Krasnodębski, a close associate of Lech Kaczyński and later a member of the European Parliament, in the same newspaper announced that:

"If someone wants to believe in a coincidence, let him believe, but I am not able to believe. Things like this just don't happen. This death fits too well into the events of the last few weeks. A few days ago, other representatives of the Polish authorities were in Katyn and nothing happened to them" (Zychowicz 2010).

Despite the ongoing national mourning, the decision to bury the presidential couple at Wawel sparked a wave of protests and disputes about Lech Kaczyński's presidency (Bejma 2013). The catastrophe intended to end the "Polish-Polish war" led to even greater polarization of society, and the attitude to the Smolensk plane crash became a form of political identification (Dudek 2016). In the shadow of the Smolensk disaster, early presidential elections were held. The election campaign at that time was unique not only because of the unexpected elections, but primarily due to the candidates of the two largest parties - Law and Justice and the Civic Platform. They were represented by Jarosław Kaczyński (the twin brother of the late president, who was to fulfil his brother's mission) and Bronisław Komorowski (Speaker of the Sejm, acting as temporary head of state). Even before the official announcement of the election campaign, Jarosław Kaczyński delivered an online speech addressed to Russians. He began with the words: "Ladies and gentlemen, Russian friends." He thanked them for the help and kindness shown to Poles after the disaster. He also referred to the Katyn victims and argued that we should strive to discover the whole truth about their death, even if it were painful, because only the truth would allow for building stable relations between the two nations (Naszkowska 2010).

Immediately after the Smolensk plane crash, a large part of Polish society expressed hope for a "new opening" in relations with the Russian Federation. In May 2010, the percentage of people who assessed Polish-Russian relations positively increased from 8% to 29%. Only 8% indicated that relations between these countries would deteriorate after the Smolensk disaster, and 48% (including 40% of Law and Justice voters) believed they would improve. The majority of Poles also positively assessed the actions of the Russian authorities aimed at explaining the causes of the disaster (50%) and helping the victims' families (67%) (Feliksiak 2010).

The breakthrough moment that changed the approach of Poles to Russian authorities was the publication of a report by The Interstate Aviation Committee (IAC), controlled by the Russians. That committee placed the entire blame for the disaster on the Polish side, and among the causes of the catastrophe indicated: errors in the training of the crew, failure to decide to go to an alternate airport despite information about unfavourable weather conditions, approaching the landing without permission from the control tower, and the pressure exerted on the crew by General Andrzej Błasik - Commander of the Air Force (Kazimierczuk 2011). In response, the Committee for Investigation of National Aviation Accidents, which had been established by the Polish government, prepared a separate report. The commission, chaired by the Minister of Internal Affairs, Jerzy Miller, did not clearly point out the culprit for the disaster, but drew attention to the inappropriate preparation of the airport by the Russians, including errors of the flight control tower, which provided incorrect information about the glide path and divergent weather forecasts (Miller 2011). What is important, both investigations ruled out a terrorist attack, explosion or fire on board the aircraft as the cause of the crash. In August 2011, compared to surveys immediately after the disaster, the percentage of Poles claiming that the Russians wanted to explain the causes of the Smolensk plane crash dropped from 58 to 24%, and 60% (including 83% of Law and Justice voters) believed that the Russian authorities were hiding evidence and covering up the errors of flight controllers and airport staff (Pankowski 2011).

A real rash of conspiracy theories regarding the Smolensk disaster occurred during the operation of the Parliamentary Group for the Investigation of the Causes of the Tu-154M Catastrophe, established in November 2011 and consisting almost entirely of MPs and senators from the Law and Justice party. The commission, chaired by Antoni Macierewicz, legitimized the assassination theory and provided various reasons and methods for carrying it out. Importantly and characteristic of conspiracy theories, this parliamentary group did not create a coherent story. The parts of the justification story for the attempt on the President's life not only did not fit together, but often contradicted each other. The only feature connecting these conspiracy narratives was the rejection of the findings of previous investigations, which offered rational, non-conspiratory explanations for the disaster, such as: human errors, weather conditions, insufficient preparation of the airport, and pressure on the pilots. As rightly noted by commentators referring to the work of the Macierewicz's commission and the controversial theories it has built:

"It is difficult to assess how much of the conspiracy theories are political calculations and how much is a genuine need to understand a tragedy and restore the moral order violated by the senseless death of so many people from the very top of power, including the President. Finding the perpetrator and punishing him, at least symbolically, seems to believers of conspiracy theories to be a better solution than agreeing to trivial explanations that are disproportionate to the tragedy. It

doesn't matter whether it's based on personal conviction or political calculation" (Pacewicz 2016).

Regardless of whether the repetition of conspiracy theories by Law and Justice politicians resulted from the need to find an explanation for the national tragedy or from cold political calculation, this influenced the spread of the assassination theory in the public space. Among the potential causes of the presidential plane crash given at press conferences, Macierewicz's commission experts mentioned: one explosion inside the plane (Wierzchołowski and Misiak 2012) illustrated by the process of bursting a sausage during cooking (Siek 2013); linear explosive charge in the airplane wing (Koziołek 2015); multi-point explosion, derived from the analogy of a crushed soda can (Sobieniowski 2013); TNT explosion, traces of which were found on the fuselage (Gmyz 2012); thermobaric explosion after the plane landed (Jurszo 2019); artificial fog made by the Russians (Jopek 2016), activating an explosive charge with a radio signal (Pacewicz 2016), and Russian sabotage and damage to a Tupolev during aircraft renovation (Misiak and Wierzchołowski 2013). The public debate also included theories related to: spraying of helium, which reduced the lifting power of the plane (Krzymowski 2011), intentional misleading of pilots by Russian air traffic controllers (gb 2014), surviving the crash by three passengers of a presidential plane and killing them by Russian services (Pacewicz 2016), and even the theory of poisoning the passengers (Kwiatkowski 2018).

In addition, Antoni Macierewicz provided many contradictory theories related to the birch tree that the Tupolev hit. In various media statements, he claimed that the presidential plane did not encounter the birch, the birch was cut down five days before the crash, and even that the birch never existed (Pacewicz 2016). The records of the black boxes, which were allegedly manipulated by the Russian side, were also questioned. However, this did not prevent the commission's experts from referring to its records when it was part of subsequent conspiracy narratives (Pupiec 2022). All these conspiracy theories were supposed to appear credible to the public because they were proclaimed by the commission's experts - researchers with academic titles, but not specialists in plane crashes.

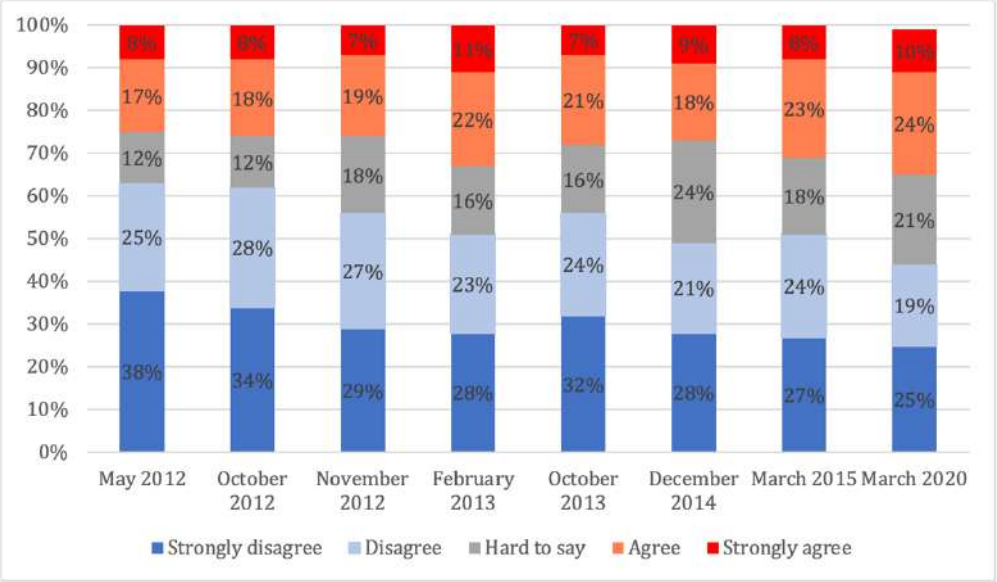
An important element of conspiracy theories is identifying the enemy responsible for the event that is the source of these theories. In the case of the Smolensk disaster, this enemy name was attributed to the Russian authorities, especially to Vladimir Putin. However, the narrative about the conspiracy between Polish Prime Minister Donald Tusk and Vladimir Putin quickly became popular, the details of which were discussed during the meeting of both politicians at the Sopot pier in 2009 during Putin's visit related to the 70th anniversary of the outbreak of World War II. Right-wing media fuelled these theories, emphasizing that the Russian leader manipulated the Polish Prime Minister and that Tusk's resignation from domestic politics and becoming the President of the European Council was an escape from responsibility (Janecki 2015). Additionally, Antoni Macierewicz, in the report "28 months after Smolensk" published by the Parliamentary Group for the Investigation of the Causes of the Tu-154M Catastrophe, accused Tusk and his government of cooperating with the Russian authorities to cover up the traces (Macierewicz 2012). The statements of Jarosław Kaczyński, who drew attention to the separation of the visits of Prime Minister Tusk and President Lech Kaczyński, also fuelled the conspiracy theory about assassination planned by the Polish and Russian authorities. The Law and Justice leader emphasized in interviews that “Putin was very unfavourable towards my brother and much more positive towards Tusk. If the visits had not been separated, the tragedy would not have occurred” (Kaczmarek 2016).

All the above narratives agreed on one thing - the motives of the potential attackers. They stressed that the plane crash was prepared to eliminate President Lech Kaczyński, who posed a threat to imperialist ambitions and the economic interests of the Russian Federation (Pacewicz 2016).

The popularity of the Smolensk conspiracies affected the media space. The publishing market began to be flooded with books presenting the Smolensk disaster as the result of an attack and planned actions of the Russian secret services (Grzesiak-Feldman 2016). As researchers note, expressive and shocking media messages contribute to creating conspiracy narratives regarding a given event (Raab et al. 2013). Thus, an unprecedented national tragedy, which seemed to be the beginning of national reconciliation, was used for political purposes.

Two years after the disaster, most of the Polish society still rejected the possibility of President Lech Kaczyński's death because of an attack. Almost two-thirds (63%) did not believe in the assassination theory, including 38% who strongly rejected this explanation. One-quarter of Poles declared that they believed in such a possibility, while 12% of them had no opinion on this matter. Law and Justice voters were the most likely to believe in the assassination theory (60% of this party's electorate). This distinguished them from voters of other large parties. The possibility of an attack was accepted by 24% of Polish Peasants' Party supporters, 12% of the Democratic Left Alliance electorate, and only 5% of Civic Platform voters. The belief in assassination theory was also stronger among respondents who were worse off, lived in smaller towns, and had lower education (Pankowski 2012). Similar results were recorded in the period until the Law and Justice party came to power after the 2015 parliamentary elections. The percentage of people who believed in the assassination theory ranged from 26% (October 2012) to 33% (February 2013).

FIGURE 1: DISTRIBUTION OF ANSWERS TO THE QUESTION "DO YOU BELIEVE THAT PRESIDENT LECH KACZYŃSKI MAY HAVE DIED AS A RESULT OF AN ASSASSINATION?"

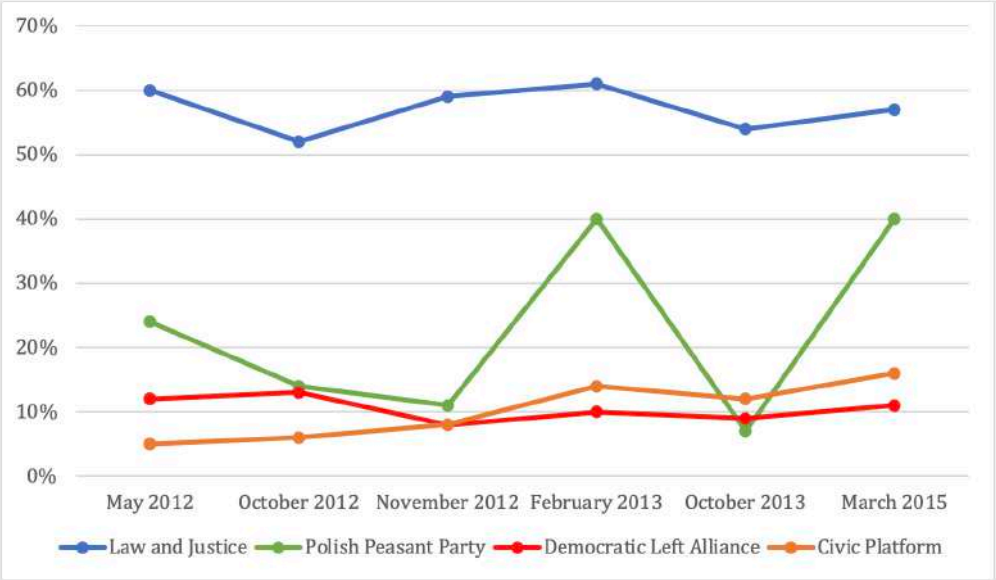


Source: own elaboration based on CBOS data (Bożewicz 2020).

The characteristics of people who believed in the Smolensk conspiracies did not change significantly. In the years 2012-2015, over half of the Law and Justice electorate confirmed that the cause of President Kaczyński's death may have been an assassination. The highest percentage of this party's voters (as much as 61%) endorsed the assassination theory in an opinion poll conducted in

February 2013. Considering political preferences, the group of supporters of the assassination theory was significantly lower, especially among the voters of the Civic Platform and the Democratic Left Alliance. The study conducted in 2015 also confirmed the essential characteristics of people who endorsed the assassination theory. These were people with right-wing views, inhabitants of villages and the smallest towns, citizens with a lower level of education and lower income, and those who more often participated in religious practices (Badora 2015).

FIGURE 2: PARTY PREFERENCES AND DISTRIBUTION OF ANSWERS TO THE QUESTION "DO YOU BELIEVE THAT PRESIDENT LECH KACZYŃSKI MAY HAVE DIED AS A RESULT OF AN ASSASSINATION?"



Source: own elaboration based on CBOS data (Pankowski 2013; Badora 2015).

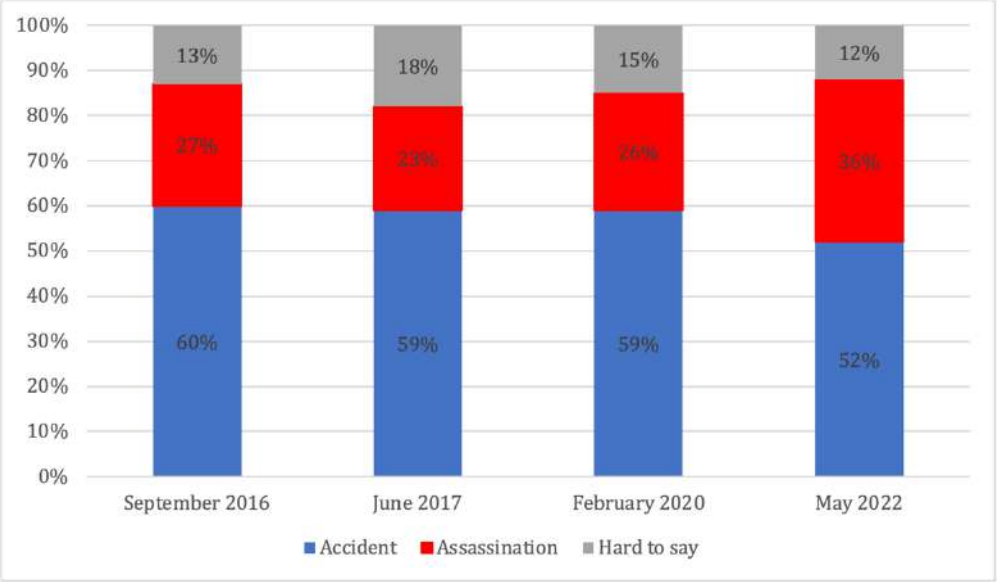
In April 2015, on the fifth anniversary of the disaster, the parliamentary group chaired by Antoni Macierewicz published the report "Who will be responsible for Smolensk." Once again, without any convincing proof, they clearly stated that the air disaster was caused by a series of explosions that killed most of the passengers before the plane hit the ground ("Kto Odpowie Za Smoleńsk" 2015). When the Law and Justice party took power after the 2015 parliamentary elections, the assassination theory became a political weapon aimed at the opposition Civic Platform. The essential in this context was Jarosław Kaczyński's speech during the Sejm session, in which he assigned blame for the death of his brother to the opposition. The Law and Justice leader then said, "Don't wipe your treacherous mugs with the name of my late brother. You destroyed him, you murdered him!" (Sokołowski 2017).

As the years passed, the assassination theory became the official narrative of the Law and Justice government. On the 10th anniversary of the disaster, Antoni Macierewicz again called a press conference, during which he presented a report containing theses about three explosions and attributed responsibility for the attack to the Russian authorities. Experts and political commentators savaged the report, pointing out numerous errors that have been repeated for years and correcting the manipulations contained in (Osiecki 2022). However, Macierewicz received strong support from Jarosław Kaczyński. The Law and Justice leader admitted in a public statement that his political camp "has no doubt that it was an assassination" (Główczewski 2022). Additionally, due to Russia's aggression against Ukraine, right-wing media returned to the theory about an alleged thermobaric explosion on board the presidential Tupolev in April 2010

(Wierzchołowski 2022). They tried to exploit a common fear of Russia and aversion to the Russian authorities in Polish society (Feliksiak and Roguska 2022) to attribute responsibility for the Smolensk disaster to Putin. In April 2023, 13 years after the disaster, despite the lack of evidence, the Macierewicz Commission decided to take the next step - it filed a notification with the prosecutor's office on the suspicion of committing the crime of assassination of President Lech Kaczyński and the murder of the remaining 95 people traveling in the Tu-154 (Jabłoński and Mikowski 2023).

In recent years, society's attitude towards the assassination theory has also changed. In a study conducted in May 2022, shortly after the Russian aggression against Ukraine, the percentage of Poles endorsing this theory increased by 10 percentage points (from 26 to 36%).

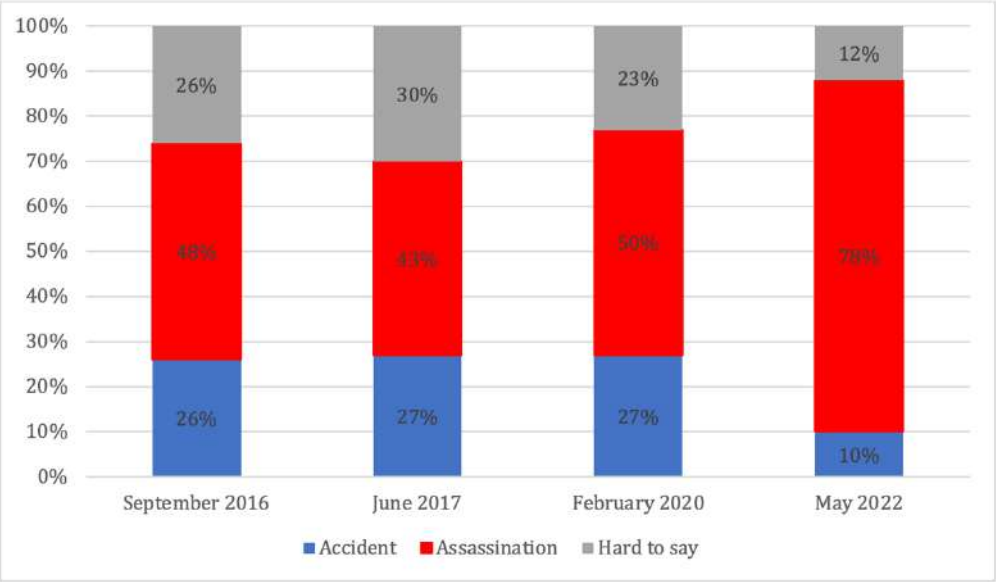
FIGURE 3: DISTRIBUTION OF ANSWERS TO THE QUESTION "IN YOUR OPINION, WAS THE PRESIDENTIAL PLANE CRASH IN SMOLENSK ON APRIL 10, 2010, AN ASSASSINATION OR AN ACCIDENT?"



Source: own elaboration based on Ipsos polls for OKO.press (Pacewicz 2022).

The belief in the Smolensk conspiracy also strengthened among supporters of Law and Justice. After Russia invaded Ukraine, this percentage in the Law and Justice electorate increased from 50% to 78%. Thus, almost four out of five voters for this party believe that the Smolensk air disaster was not an unfortunate accident, but a deliberate action. Additionally, those who believed in the assassination theory were characterized by a high frequency of participation in religious practices and a significantly lower level of education (Pacewicz 2022).

FIGURE 4: DISTRIBUTION OF ANSWERS TO THE QUESTION "IN YOUR OPINION, WAS THE PRESIDENTIAL PLANE CRASH IN SMOLENSK ON APRIL 10, 2010, AN ASSASSINATION OR AN ACCIDENT?" AMONG VOTERS OF THE LAW AND JUSTICE PARTY



Source: own elaboration based on Ipsos polls for OKO.press (Pacewicz 2022).

4 SOCIAL IDENTITY AND ENDORSEMENT OF THE SMOLENSK CONSPIRACY

4.1 Methods

To present the factors influencing belief in the Smolensk conspiracy, we conducted an analysis using data collected by Kofta and Soral (Kofta and Soral 2020a). We identified two main research questions: (1) Do political preferences determine the intensity of belief in the Smolensk assassination theory? (2) What factors have the most significant impact on conspiracy thinking about the Smolensk disaster?

We have also put forward two research hypotheses, which are an extension of the above questions and results from the state of research presented in the article:

H1: Law and Justice voters believe in the assassination theory more often than other parties' electorates.

H2: Factors related to social identity (party identification as well as trust in the Law and Justice government) have the greatest impact on conspiratorial thinking about the Smolensk disaster.

The dependent variable in our analysis was the 1-item Smolensk conspiracy mentality. ("Numerous premises indicate that the President's airplane crash near Smolensk was a result of assassination"). It measured the intensity of belief in the assassination theory using a 7-point scale (1 – Definitely disagree, 7 – Definitely agree). The independent variables included basic sociodemographic variables, such as gender (male-female), age (measured by years from birth), place of residence (six categories: village, city up to 19,999 inhabitants, city from 20,000 to 49,999 inhabitants, city from 50,000 to 99,999 inhabitants, city from 100,000 to 500,000 inhabitants, city over 500,000 inhabitants), and education (primary, vocational, secondary, higher education).

In addition, the variables potentially affecting belief in the Smolensk conspiracy include the 4-item scale of trust in the Law and Justice government (α = .95) developed by Kofta and Soral (Kofta and Soral 2020b). Participants rated their trust using a 7-point scale (1 – Definitely disagree, 7 – Definitely agree). The statements that made up this variable were: (1) Politicians of the current ruling party can be trusted. (2) I believe that politicians of the current ruling party care for the interests of Poles. (3) Actions of the current ruling party bring more good than bad. (4) Without a second thought I would entrust my fate to the current ruling party. Conspiracy mentality was measured with a 5-item Conspiracy Mentality Questionnaire (α = .84) (Bruder et al. 2013). The level of system justification (α = .82) was measured with a 3-item scale (Cichocka et al. 2015). Finally, we included in the analysis a party identification measured on a 3-point scale (1 - non-Law and Justice electorate; 2 - unstable Law and Justice voters; 3 - stable Law and Justice voters).

4.2 Results

We started our empirical analysis by comparing the averages in Smolensk conspiracy mentality among parties' electorates. To check this, we conducted one-way Welch's ANOVA and Games-Howell pairwise comparisons. The analysis revealed significant differences in assassination theory beliefs in the context of political preferences [F(8,167.456) = 34.494, p < .001]. Law and Justice electorate (M = 4.80, SD = 1.73) believed in the Smolensk conspiracy significantly more than those voting for Civic Platform (M = 1.82, SD = 1.29), Polish Peasants' Party (M = 1.67, SD = 1.14), and the Democratic Left Alliance (M = 1.70, SD = 1.48). Thus, we confirmed hypothesis H1, stating that Law and Justice voters endorse the assassination theory more often than other parties' electorates.

TABLE 1: FACTORS PREDICTING ENDORSEMENT OF THE SMOLENSK CONSPIRACY (MULTIPLE LINEAR REGRESSION)

	B	SE	β	t	p
Constant	1.759	.582		3.023	.003
Gender	.305	.122	.079	2.508	.012
Age	-.018	.005	-.119	-3.671	< .001
Place of Residence	-.070	.033	-.067	-2.132	.033
Education	-.391	.091	-.140	-4.282	< .001
Conspiracy mentality	.184	.077	.075	2.381	.018
System justification	.134	.090	.066	1.482	.139
Trust in the Law and Justice government	.543	.053	.507	10.325	< .001
Party identification	.328	.106	.113	3.079	.002

Source: own elaboration.

To diagnose the factors affecting belief in the Smolensk conspiracy, we conducted the multiple regression analysis. The overall regression was significant [$R^2_{adj.}$ = .44, $F(8, 592) = 58.931$, $p < .001$]. We found that the significant predictors of belief in the Smolensk conspiracy in our model were gender, age, place of residence, education, conspiracy mentality, and party identification. Consistent with hypothesis H2, factors related to social identity most strongly determined endorsement of the Smolensk conspiracy. The most important factors for predicting belief in assassination theory were trust in the Law and Justice government ($\beta = .507$, $p < .001$) and party identification ($\beta = .113$, $p = .002$). This means that those who trusted the Law and Justice government the most and identified with this party strongly endorsed the Smolensk conspiracies. The analysis also confirms that conspiracy mentality ($\beta = .075$, $p = .018$) and being a

woman (β = .079, p = .012) increase belief in the assassination theory to some extent. Considering other factors, younger, less educated and inhabitants of smaller towns were more likely to endorse the Smolensk conspiracy.

5 CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION

The plane crash near Smolensk on April 10, 2010, in which the President of Poland and other important officials died, was undoubtedly an unprecedented and traumatic event for the entire Polish society. Although, as numerous studies show, societal trauma can bring a lot of good to society, e.g., the desire to help each other, in this case, it leads to deep divisions and intragroup conflict with political origin (Bilewicz et al. 2019).

The Smolensk disaster sparked a political fight, and many conspiracy theories arose around its causes. In this article, we indicate how the belief in the Smolensk conspiracies has changed over the years in Polish society in different groups of the electorate.

Since 2010, belief in conspiracy theories about this event has been the strongest among the Law and Justice voters. From the first years after the Smolensk air disaster until 2015, this party remained in the parliamentary opposition, so its electorate could feel like a marginalized group, which additionally encouraged belief in conspiracy theories. This is in line with the results of other studies, which show that people were more likely to believe in conspiracy theories when their political group was not in power (Imhoff et al. 2022). Interestingly, voters of the Law and Justice have endorsed the Smolensk conspiracy even after their party took power in 2015 and maintained it in 2019. This support results from two factors: the exploit of the Smolensk issue by Jarosław Kaczyński in internal political rivalry and the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022.

Conspiracy theories surrounding the Smolensk disaster focused de facto on two culprits - Russia and the government of Donald Tusk. Polish-Russian relations have remained tense for centuries. One of the most inflammatory issues is the unresolved mystery of the genocide of the Polish elite by the NKVD in Katyn during World War II. These and other bloody incidents in relations with Russia have created historical trauma that remains very strong even in generations that do not remember these events.

An additional driving force behind emerging conspiracy theories has become internal political polarization, which is reflected in the intense dispute between the two largest parties – Civic Platform and Law and Justice. The source of the conspiracies about the alleged involvement of Tusk's government in the Smolensk disaster was a double delegation to the celebrations related to the 70th anniversary of the Katyn massacre. In January 2010, the offices of the Prime Minister and the President independently informed the public opinion about the participation of both politicians in the celebrations. According to the arrangements, Prime Minister Donald Tusk was to meet with the then Prime Minister of Russia, Vladimir Putin, and President Lech Kaczyński with President Dmitry Medvedev. On April 7, three days before the air crash of a presidential plane, Prime Minister Donald Tusk went to Russia (Skarżyński 2016). As it turned out, this visit and meeting with Putin were later to fuel conspiracy theories.

Referring to the results presented in this article, as we assumed, party identification is influential in endorsing the Smolensk conspiracies. In Poland, a

relatively young democracy, citizens do not identify with political parties. However, as research shows, the Law and Justice voters are the electorate very strongly identified with their party (Marmola 2020; Cybulska 2016). This identification is additionally combined with religiosity and attachment to tradition (Kotras 2021). Thus, party identification takes on the characteristics of something broader and more stable - social identity. The presented research confirms that social identity (conceptualized as trust in Law and Justice government and party identification) explains the belief in Smolensk conspiracies to a greater extent than conspiracy mentality and sociodemographic factors (age, gender, education, and place of residence). It will be difficult, especially in the current geopolitical situation, to weaken faith in the assassination theory. This belief does not result only from the lack of complete information about what happened in Smolensk, but above all, it is a form of protecting the identity of Law and Justice supporters. Thus, the disaster itself has become a convenient tool in a political struggle that will continue to polarize Polish society.

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STRANKARSKA PRIPADNOST IN PREPRIČANOST V TEORIJE ZAROT: ŠTUDIJA PRIMERA LETALSKE NESREČE V SMOLENSKU

10. aprila 2010 je v letalski nesreči pri Smolensku umrlo šestindevetdeset ljudi, med njimi tudi predsednik Republike Poljske Lech Kaczyński. Do danes so se okoli tega dogodka spletle številne zarote glede domnevnega atentata, v katerega naj bi bile vpletene ruske tajne službe. Namen članka je analizirati, kako družbena identiteta, ustvarjena na podlagi strankarske identifikacije, vpliva na razmišljanje o zaroti, povezano s strmoglavljenjem predsedniškega letala Tu-154. Analiziramo raziskave o prepričanjih v teorije o napadu na letalo, ki so jih izvedli poljski centri za merjenje javnega mnenja v letih 2010–2022. Rezultati kažejo, da volivci stranke Zakon in pravičnost v veliko večji meri verjamejo, da je katastrofa v Smolensku pravzaprav atentat na predsednika Lecha Kaczyńskega, ki ga je naročil Vladimir Putin. Izvedena analiza potrjuje, da politična razsežnost družbene identitete (konceptualizirana v študiji kot zaupanje v vlado Zakona in pravičnosti in strankarska identifikacija) bistveno vpliva na podporo zaroti atentata. Ta dejavnik je za prepričanje v teorijo atentata pomembnejši od dejavnikov, kot so mentaliteta zarote, spol, starost, kraj bivanja in izobrazba.

Ključne besede: teorije zarot; mentaliteta zarot; družbena identiteta; strankarska pripadnost; letalska nesreča; Smolensk.

RELIGIOSITY AND CONSPIRACY BELIEFS: PATTERNS OF RELATIONSHIPS

Agnieszka TURSKA-KAWA and Natalia GALICA[1]

Despite cognitive similarities, the relationship between religiosity and conspiracy beliefs remains ambiguous due to their heterogeneity and variation in cultural contexts. The Polish study addresses these discrepancies by using complementary measures, including the strength of faith, religious beliefs, experiences, and practices. Conspiracy theory beliefs were assessed using a generic measure and four specific theories on vaccination, the Ukrainian war, COVID-19, and 5G networks. An online survey was conducted, collecting 898 responses from conspiracy theory believers to explore the relationship. The results show that for generic conspiracist beliefs religious experience and religious beliefs emerge as positive determinants, while religious practices emerge as a negative determinant. For specific conspiracy theories on vaccination, the Ukrainian war, and 5G technology, the positive correlation occurs with the strength of faith and religious experience. None of the religious factors are statistically significant for COVID-19 conspiracy beliefs. The research findings highlight the need for more in-depth and comparative studies.

Key words: religiosity; conspiracy beliefs; conspiracy theories; conspiracy mentality.

1 BACKGROUND

The links between religiosity and believing in conspiracy theories seem obvious. They share a similar simplistic view of looking at the world, a belief that certain events are caused by invisible forces, determinism, and a lack of individual responsibility due to the sense of lack of influence and agency. They are supposed to satisfy similar psychological needs and rely on similar thinking patterns. However, unambiguous answers about their relationship are scarce (Frenken, Bilewicz and Imhoff 2023). The divergence observed in the research may be due to the cultural embeddedness of religiosity, but also to differences in research

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approaches. Researchers rarely take into account the inherent heterogeneity of concepts (Franks, Bangerter and Bauer 2013), which may affect the prevalent patterns of association between the two phenomena. The dominant research on conspiracy thinking has treated religiosity as only one or two of its various spiritual and secular manifestations (Kim and Kim 2021; Leibovitz et al. 2021). The purpose of this study is to examine the predictive role of religiosity for conspiratorial beliefs, considering their multifaceted significance.

The presented research was conducted in Poland, a state with a population of 37.7 million and over 187 registered religious denominations in 2021 (Główny Urząd Statystyczny 2022). The Roman Catholic Church holds the dominant position with 32.19 million registered members (ibid.). However, due to various factors, it is undergoing a process of secularisation, marked by a decline in the number of believers, which has fallen by 1.51 million since 2011 (Pew Research Centre 2018; Pilch, Turska-Kawa and Galica 2023; Boguszewski, Makowska and Podkowińska 2022).

Catholicism has a strong and deep-rooted presence in Poland, dating back to the adoption of Christianity in the 10th century. The involvement of the Catholic Church at key moments in Polish history shaped a special relationship between the sacred and the profane in public life. Despite political persecution, the Church's position in society was further strengthened during the communist regimes. This had consequences for the emerging post-Soviet system in Poland in the 1990s (Koller 2021), when the Church became a partner and an agent of change, sitting at the Democratic Round Table, securing Christian values within the young Polish democracy, and thus continuing its political mission. Thus, in Poland, the institutional role of the Church, the cultural embedding of religion, as well as its ludic nature, create a specific and unique national context of analysis (Pilch, Turska-Kawa and Galica 2023). As a result, the social behaviour of Polish Catholics may be mediated more by institutional trust in the Catholic Church rather than by faith or biblical teachings.

2 CONSPIRACY BELIEFS AND RELIGIOSITY

From a cognitive perspective, researchers see some similarities between religiosity and belief in conspiracy theories, which share a way of looking at the world and interpreting events. Researchers see a similarity between an all-powerful being (as described in many religions) and a hidden power that organises events or hides the truth (Pilch, Turska-Kawa and Galica 2023; Matuszewski, Rams-Ługowski and Pawłowski 2024). It is also important to highlight the tendency to detect agency, communication rituals, or the minimally counterintuitive nature of both religious and conspiracist beliefs (Franks, Bangerter and Bauer 2013). Religion is based on values that become an integral part of an individual's daily activities while at the same time shaping their attitudes towards the outside world. Bezalel (2021) argues that the nature of religious beliefs is important for understanding the epistemological underpinnings of worldviews that support conspiracy theories amid what might be called conspiratorial ambiguity. Drawing on the cognitive science of religion, Franks et al (2013) argue that conspiracy theories are quasi-religious representations because their content, forms and functions correspond to those found in the beliefs of institutionalised religions. However, conspiracy theories are quasi-religious in the sense that conspiracy theories and the communities

that support them do not share many of the institutional characteristics of organised religions.

Based on the similarities identified, researchers have argued that religiosity is associated with greater conspiracy beliefs (Kim and Kim 2021; Leibovitz et al. 2021; Dyrendal and Hestad 2021). In German study, Hillenbrand and Pollack (2023) found that belief in COVID-19 conspiracy theories was positively correlated with an image of a punishing God, exclusivist beliefs, and private prayer. A study conducted among Polish Roman Catholics (Łowicki et al. 2022) showed that religious fundamentalism is positively associated with coronavirus conspiracy beliefs. In other research alternative religious beliefs, measured by belief in reincarnation, are positively associated with belief in the Big Pharma conspiracy theory (Ladini 2022). However, this relationship is not a consistent finding in the research. Other studies either found no significant association (Agley and Xiao 2021; Furnham 2021; Teličák and Halama 2021), or the association varied across different conspiracy belief scales (Atari, Afhami and Swami 2019).

The study by Jasinskaja-Lahti and Jetten (2019) underlines the importance of distinguishing between religiosity as a self-categorisation and religiosity as a worldview. The authors find that it is not the self-categorisation as religious, but the extent to which religious worldviews are endorsed that can predict people's belief in conspiracy theories. In turn, research conducted in Germany, Poland, and the United States (Frenken, Bilewicz and Imhoff 2023) shows that the correlations between religiosity and a more needs-based conspiracy mentality differed between these countries. The authors demonstrate that similarities in explanatory style and ideology appear to be central to the relationship between intrinsic religiosity and conspiracy theories endorsement, but that psychological needs play only a minor role.

Religiosity is difficult to conceptualise and operationalise. Researchers present different approaches, considering religiosity, for example, in terms of religious commitment (Agley and Xiao 2021), religious belief (Freeman et al. 2022), or the importance of religion (Tonković et al. 2021). The nature of religiosity, as traditionally understood, is institutional, but today, more and more people have unorganised spiritual beliefs (Baker and Draper 2010; Yilmaz 2021). Researchers outline the relationships between religiosity and spirituality differently in their studies of conspiracy beliefs (Kosarkova et al. 2021; Gligorić et al. 2021; Leibovitz et al. 2021). Czech (2022) demonstrates that individual spirituality (the centrality of religiosity and the quest orientation of religiosity) is less important for conspiracy thinking than religion understood as a specific element of ideology (e.g. Catholic nationalism or collective narcissism).

Similar difficulties, although to a much lesser, extent, arise in the analysis of conspiracy beliefs. On the one hand, researchers undertake analyses using categories of general conspiratorial functioning, such as a Manichaean worldview, a belief in invisible forces, fatalism (Carey 2019), a belief in an unjust (Furnham 2021) or dangerous world (Hart and Graether 2018). They represent a particular way of looking at the world and explaining the events taking place in it. These general constructs of conspiratorial functioning represent universal predispositions that are not determined by socio-political or cultural contexts. Among them, conspiracy mentality, also referred to as “conspiracy ideation”, is an important construct (Wardawy-Dudziak 2024; Douglas et al. 2019). Conspiracy mentality describes the general, fundamental tendency to believe in

conspiracies, creating a monological belief system (Imhoff, Bertlich and Frenken 2022). It predicts belief in specific conspiracy theories – even contradictory ones (Wood et al., 2012) or fictitious ones (Swami et al. 2011). In recent years, the belief in conspiracy theories related to climate change (Bertin et al. 2021; Freeman et al. 2022; Hornsey, Harris and Fielding 2018), the COVID-19 pandemic (van Mulukom et al. 2022; Pilch et al. 2023) or military action in Ukraine (Ortmann 2022; Yablokov 2022; Turska-Kawa and Stępień-Lampa 2023; Gentile and Kragh 2022) has been particularly prominent in the literature. Despite the apparent links between conspiracy mentality and specific conspiracy theories, it is difficult to transfer links with religiosity from one construct to the other. Conspiracy mentality is less content-laden and more associated with a particular general cognitive approach. In contrast, specific conspiracy theories are more susceptible to other situational or elite cues, for example, from religious and political leaders (Frenken, Bilewicz and Imhoff 2023), as well as geopolitical and historical circumstances (Šteger 2024).

3 STUDY DESIGN

3.1 Research Model

Based on the discrepancies and interpretive difficulties observed in the literature on the relationship between conspiracy beliefs and religiosity, complementary measures were used to allow an in-depth analysis of the constructs. Religiosity was examined through the perspective of strength of faith, religious beliefs, religious experience, and religious practices. In contrast, conspiracy beliefs were examined using a general measure to diagnose the level of conspiracy ideation, as well as specific theories (vaccination, war in Ukraine, COVID pandemic, 5G technology). Breaking down the variables and treating them from separate theoretical perspectives allows us to diagnose the relationship between them and the strength of the connections. Two main research questions were posed at the outset of the research investigation: (1) Are there relationships between religiosity and conspiracy theories? (2) What is the predictive value of religious variables for variables describing conspiracy beliefs? In response to the first general research question, which expressed the search for links between religiosity and conspiracy theories, the following hypotheses were dissected:

H1: There is a relationship between general conspiracy beliefs and religiosity.

It is difficult to predict the direction of this relationship. Positive relationships may indicate an overlap in the functioning of cognitive schemas in the case of conspiracy beliefs and religiosity. In contrast, a negative correlation between general conspiracy thinking and religiosity suggests that the needs satisfied by religiosity or conspiracy beliefs are mutually exclusive and offer competing explanations of events.

H2: There is a relationship between belief in specific conspiracy theories and religiosity.

A positive relationship may indicate a cognitive proximity of explaining certain events through religiosity and conspiratorial thinking. A negative link between specific theories and religiosity may indicate the prevalence of a competing way of explaining specific events.

H3: There is a relationship between the intensity of religious practices and faith in conspiracy theories. Religious practices were treated separately in the study.

The negative relationship between the variables may be the result of contact with religious authorities, which discourages adherence to unofficial narratives (Koller 2022). The situation in Poland rather shows the proximity of political and religious authorities. Church authorities are in the habit of making public statements on political issues (Turska-Kawa and Wojtasik 2020), politicians, if ideologically coherent, like to present themselves as religious practitioners, accompanied by the hierarchs of the Catholic Church. Finally, state ceremonies are often combined with religious services. Concluding, one might think that contact with religious authorities may discourage adherence to unofficial narratives.

3.2 Sample

The research was conducted using an online survey questionnaire. It was posted on social profiles and FB fan pages that promote conspiracy content and bring together supporters of conspiracy thinking. Respondents received the research information sheet, which included information about the research objectives of the study, the institution responsible for the project, and the guarantee of anonymity of the data collected. In the introduction, the respondents were assured that their opinions would be respected. It was emphasised that the survey was aimed at people who were interested in current political events, the global political situation, determinants of public decision-making processes, as well as those who do not accept the official government explanations on public issues such as the COVID-19 pandemic, the vaccination system, and 5G networks. Despite this, the research was repeatedly removed from FB pages and the people who posted it were temporarily banned from access. The research was conducted between 20 January 2023 and 30 May 2023. There were 898 participants, including 711 women (79.2%) and 187 men (20.8%). The vast majority were under the age of 34 (90.4%) and unmarried (85.3%). More than half of the respondents declared tertiary education, including postgraduate degrees (57.0%), and slightly fewer reported secondary education with a baccalaureate (40.8%). The research was approved by the Ethics Committee of the University of Silesia (No. KEUS303/11.2022).

3.3 Research Variables and Tools

Conspiracy beliefs. The Generic Conspiracist Beliefs Scale/GCBS (Brotherton, French and Pickering 2013; Rob Brotherton 2015) in the Polish adaptation by Siwiak et al. (2019) was used to explore conspiracy mentality. The scale examines the general tendency to believe in conspiracy theories without referring to a specific theory, which allows for research at any historical moment and eliminates the effect of cultural differences. The reliability of the scale as measured by Cronbach's alpha was 0.92.

Belief in particular conspiracy theories. Four 3-item scales were introduced to diagnose belief in specific conspiracy theories: (1) the SARS-CoV-2 virus pandemic (e.g., COVID-19 morbidity and mortality statistics are deliberately fabricated); (2) 5G networks (e.g., the evidence of the dangerous effects of 5G radiation is being hidden from the public); (3) vaccines (e.g., vaccines are harmful and this fact is hidden from the people); (4) Russian aggression on Ukrainian territory (e.g., the war in Ukraine is necessary to remove the Nazi government

there). The reliability of the scales as measured by Cronbach's alpha was 0.87, 0.82, 0.87, 0.83 respectively.

Strength of religious faith. The study used the Brief Version of the Santa Clara Strength of Religious Faith (Plante et al. 2002). The scale consists of five statements: (1) I pray daily; (2) I look to my faith as providing meaning and purpose in my life; (3) I consider myself active in my faith or church; (4) I enjoy being around others who share my faith; (5) My faith impacts many of my decisions, to which the respondents are asked to respond on a 4-point scale, where 1 means strongly disagree, and 4 – strongly agree. The reliability of the scale as measured by Cronbach's alpha was 0.93.

Religious beliefs and religious experience. In the study, we used two scales derived from the Centrality of Religiosity Scale (Huber 1996; Huber 2003) in a Polish adaptation (Zarzycka 2007). The first scale diagnoses subjective assessments of the probability of the existence of a transcendent reality, using the following questions: (1) To what extent are you convinced that God exists? (2) How strong is your belief in the existence of life after death? (3) How strong is your belief in the existence of a Supreme Being? The reliability of the scale as measured by Cronbach's alpha was 0.92. The second scale measures the intensity of an individual's experience of a transcendent reality. It is measured by the following questions: (1) How often do you experience situations in which you have the sense that God wants to tell you something? (2) How often do you experience situations in which God intervenes in your life? (3) How often do you experience the presence of God? The reliability of the scale as measured by Cronbach's alpha was 0.95. For each scale, the respondents were given a 5-point response scale, where 1 means "strongly disagree" and 5 means "strongly agree".

Religious practices. The question on religious practices complemented the question on religiosity, understood as participation in religious services (including via radio, television, or the internet). When asked about the frequency of such activities, the respondents were given the following answers: never, once to several times a year, one to three times a month, once a week, more than once a week, difficult to say, don't want to answer.

4 RESULTS

4.1 Preliminary Analysis

The means and standard deviations of the variables used are shown in Table 1.

TABLE 1: THE MEANS AND STANDARD DEVIATIONS OF THE VARIABLES USED IN THE STUDY

	Mean	SD
Generic Conspiracist Beliefs Scale/GCBS	3.001	0.812
Vaccine conspiracy beliefs	2.539	1.097
Ukraine war conspiracy beliefs	2.072	0.943
5G Networks conspiracy beliefs	2.178	1.111
Pandemic conspiracy beliefs	2.861	1.203
Strength of faith	1.974	0.890
Religious beliefs	2.390	1.782
Religious experience	1.433	1.564
Religious practices	2.083	1.170

Correlations between religious and conspiracy variables participants are presented in Table 2.

TABLE 2: CORRELATIONS BETWEEN RELIGIOUS AND CONSPIRACY VARIABLES PARTICIPANTS

	Generic Conspiracist Beliefs Scale/GCBS	Vaccine conspiracy beliefs	Ukraine war conspiracy beliefs	5G networks conspiracy beliefs	Pandemic conspiracy beliefs
Strength of faith	0.235**	0.271**	0.273**	0.317**	0.246**
Religious beliefs	0.255**	0.202**	0.165**	0.211**	0.246**
Religious experience	0.268**	0.267**	0.258**	0.295**	0.272**
Religious practices	0.118**	0.176**	0.213**	0.244**	0.188**

** p<.01 (two-tailed)

4.2 Religiosity as a Predictor of Conspiracy Beliefs

To verify the predictive power of the religious variables for conspiracy beliefs, a series of regression analyses separate for the Generic Conspiracist Beliefs Scale/GCBS (model 1) and each of the specific conspiracy theories (models 2, 3, 4, 5) was used. In each model, the strength of faith, religious beliefs, religious experience, and religious practices were entered as independent variables.

In the first model, based on coefficient analysis, religious beliefs (beta = 0.158; p = 0.003), religious experience (beta = 0.202; p <0.001) and religious practices (beta = -0.097; p=0.014) were found to be significant predictors of overall conspiratorial beliefs as measured by the GCBS. Religious experience and religious beliefs strengthen conspiracist beliefs, whereas religious practices weaken them. The proposed model was found to fit the data well F (3,843) = 27.074; p<0.001 and explained 8.5% of the variance in the dependent variable.

In the second model, the analysis showed the significance of strength of faith (beta = 0.156; p = 0.02) and religious experience (beta = 0.129; p=0.011) for belief in vaccine theories. At higher levels of the predictor variables, we observed a higher intensity of belief in conspiracy theories about vaccines. The proposed model was found to fit the data well, with F (2,895) = 34.755; p<0.001 and explained 7.0% of the variance in the dependent variable.

In the third model, the strength of faith (beta = 0.220; p <0.001), religious beliefs (beta = -0,150; p=0,004), and religious experience (beta = 0.198; p<0.001) were found to be predictors of belief in conspiracy theories about the war in Ukraine. The proposed model was found to fit the data well F (3,894) = 27.670; p<0.001 and explained 10.2% of the variance in the dependent variable.

In the fourth model, analyses showed similar relationships – the strength of faith (beta = 0.209; p <0.001) and religious experience (beta = 0.118; p=0.019) were found to be significant predictors of conspiracy beliefs about the 5G network. The proposed model was found to fit the data well F (2,895) = 47.301; p<0.001 and explained 9.4% of the variance in the dependent variable.

In the fifth model, none of the religious predictors proved to be significant for belief in conspiracy theories about the COVID-19 pandemic.

5 DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

The study aimed to verify the predictive power of religiosity for conspiracy beliefs. To avoid oversimplifying the concept of religiosity and reducing it to a merely institutional or spiritual phenomenon, we proposed conceptualisation and operationalisation of the phenomenon, which included the following variables: strength of faith, religious belief, religious experience, and religious practice. We approached the phenomenon of conspiracy beliefs also in the complex way. We focused on the generic concept of conspiracist beliefs and specific conspiracy theories, distinguishing between four theories related to vaccination, 5G networks, COVID-19, and the war in Ukraine.

During the research process, three hypotheses were formulated concerning the relationships between religious variables and conspiracy beliefs. The first two hypotheses concerned the relationships between religiosity and generic and specific conspiracy beliefs. Religious experience and religious beliefs were found to be positive predictors of the generic conspiracist beliefs. In turn, in the case of belief in three specific conspiracy theories - the vaccine, the Ukrainian war and 5G networks - similar patterns were diagnosed for the strength of faith and religious experience, which were recognised as positive predictors. In the case of the Ukrainian war religious beliefs were found to be a negative predictor.

Religious experience emerged as the strongest predictor, consistently positive in each of the models. Religious experience is responsive and dialogic in nature, as opposed to being solely cognitive (Argyle 2005). It is characterised by inexpressibility and impermanence, while simultaneously emphasising its emotional element (Głaz 2021). This dimension encapsulates transcendence as an active reality directed towards an inner world of the individual. The more religious experiences one has, the more stable it becomes (Zarzycka 2007). This finding intriguingly aligns with the reflection on the relationships between religious beliefs and beliefs in paranormal and supernatural phenomena in the context of individual differences in cognitive style. Yilmaz (2021) argues that, on average, non-believers tend to be more open, reflective, and less likely to endorse epistemically doubtful beliefs (e.g., conspiracy theories) than those who believe in supernatural events or paranormal experiences, such as astrology or magic. Furthermore, increased religiosity implies a self-imposed immaturity (Kant 1999) and a deterministic and uncritical approach, as Grabow and Rock (2023) indicate: "Insofar as responsibility for events and outcomes is shifted to a supernatural agent; explanations by (religious) authorities are not challenged but tend to be unquestioningly accepted". The researchers argue that conspiracy narratives and religious doctrines may contradict each other on specific issues, but this does not diminish their positive associations (ibid.). The strength of the non-cognitive predictor, religious experience, supports this conclusion. It seems that logic does not prevent their emotional interaction.

As previously mentioned, religious experience is one of the five dimensions of the Centrality of Religiosity scale. In the study by Łowicki et al. (2022), where the scale was used as a single dimension, the indicator of religiosity centrality was either unrelated to or revealed a negative relationship with coronavirus conspiracy beliefs. This may call for a more in-depth analysis of the individual dimensions of religiosity, as their distinct significance for conspiracy beliefs may offset each other.

None of the religious predictors were statistically significant in relation to COVID-19 pandemic beliefs. The finding mirrors the results of the US study conducted by Agley and Xiao (2021), where religious commitment showed a marginal and typically non-significant association with COVID-19 conspiracy beliefs. However, another US study by Rogers and Powe (2022) and a UK study by Freeman et al. (2022) argue that coronavirus conspiracy beliefs were positively correlated with higher levels of religiosity. Rogers and Powe (2022) emphasise that this association was more pronounced on the early stages of the pandemic, while Leibovitz et al. (2021, 5) add that "longer-term follow-up might reveal a decreasing trend for conspiracy beliefs". This trend was also observed in an earlier study by Freeman and Bentall (2017). The disparities between the results of our study and the latter may be explained by variations in the cultural and religious context or the phase of the pandemic, during which the studies were conducted.

The third hypothesis explored the relationship between engagement in religious practices and conspiracy beliefs. In presented models, religious involvement seems to be overshadowed by other variables. An exception was observed in the generic beliefs model, where religious practices emerged as a significant negative predictor, aligning with our expectations. Similar results were found in a German study by Hillenbrand and Pollack (2023) and US study by Freeman and Bentall (2017). In contrast, Boguszewski et al. (2022) argue that in the Polish context, increased religiosity commitment during COVID-19 was positively correlated with beliefs in COVID-19 conspiracy theories, including the sources and causes of the pandemic. Religiosity, defined as ritual practices of a collective and individual nature, was also correlated with having less scientific knowledge and facts related to the coronavirus widespread (ibid.). The argument made by Olagoke et al. (2021) shows that informal knowledge collected and disseminated by church leaders may contradict scientific data and allow for more conspiratorial thinking. Therefore, the role of the church leaders in relation to generic and specific conspiracy beliefs should be further explored, especially in those countries characterised by high attendance at religious services.

The findings of the study are a catalyst for further research on this issue. The purposeful sampling strategy played a crucial role in effectively addressing the research questions. The primary criterion was the potential prevalence of conspiracy beliefs; as a result, the survey was distributed through social media profiles and Facebook fan pages that promote conspiracy content and attract conspiracy beliefs enthusiasts. Most of the respondents (90.4%) were under the age of 34 and had a relatively high level of education. This raises the important question of what knowledge, and skills citizens should acquire, and when, to be able to recognise and critically evaluate conspiracy theories. In the realm of mass information, the ability to assess the reliability of information and the trustworthiness of its sources is indispensable. This is a pathway to an informed society and a safeguard against the pitfalls of disinformation and the manipulation of public opinion. It also underlines the role of academia, including pedagogy, as well as research, in their mission to collaborate with and contribute to society. This also raises the question of what practices and assessment tools should be developed to enhance an informed society that can identify and debunk conspiracy theories in everyday life. Finally, further research efforts should focus on gender issues, as most of the respondents were women, almost 80% of whom were young, unmarried, and highly educated. This raises questions about their status in Poland and the motivation for their involvement in the aforementioned groups.

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RELIGIOZNOST IN PREPRIČANJA V TEORIJE ZAROT: VZORCI ODNOSOV

Kljub kognitivnim podobnostim odnos med religioznostjo in zarotniškimi prepričanji ostaja dvoumen zaradi heterogenosti teorij zarot in variacije v kulturnih kontekstih. Poljska študija obravnava ta neskladja z uporabo dopolnjujočih se ukrepov, vključno z močjo vere, verskimi prepričanji, izkušnjami in praksami. Prepričanja o teorijah zarot so bila ocenjena z uporabo splošnega merila in štirih posebnih teorij o cepljenju, ukrajinski vojni, covid-19 in omrežjih 5G. Izvedena je bila spletna anketa, ki je zbrala 898 odgovorov pripadnikov teorije zarot. Rezultati kažejo, da se za generična zarotniška prepričanja verske izkušnje in prepričanja pojavljajo kot pozitivne determinante, medtem ko se verske prakse pojavljajo kot negativna determinanta. Pri specifičnih teorijah zarot o cepljenju, ukrajinski vojni in omrežjih 5G se pozitivna povezava pojavi z močjo vere in verskimi izkušnjami. Noben od verskih dejavnikov ni statistično pomemben za prepričanja o teorijah zarot o covid-19. Izsledki raziskave poudarjajo potrebo po bolj poglobljenih in primerjalnih študijah.

Ključne besede: religioznost; teorije zarot; mentaliteta zarot; prepričanja.

"THEY WANT TO IMPLANT CHIPS TO OUR BODIES": COVID 19 CONSPIRACY THEORIES AND THEIR IMPACT ON CZECH SOCIETY

Denisa CHARVÁTOVÁ and Petr JUST[1]

Together with the dissatisfaction of citizens in connection with the Covid 19 pandemic aiming primarily against the restrictions and measures imposed by the government), a whole series of fake news, disinformation, hoaxes, and conspiracy theories began to spread through (not only) Czech society, which further undermined social attitudes, moods, but also shared values of the society. The rise of various conspiracy theories (especially in the social media environment) was then noted in the context of restrictions associated with vaccination against Covid 19. The chapter therefore aims, from the perspective of communication studies, to map these various misinformation and hoaxes that have spread in the communication space in recent years in Czech society (specifically on the social platform Facebook), and which resonate in selected groups to this day, with has an impact on political views and behaviour of the citizens. The goal will be to point out not only the stereotypical tendencies and argumentative strategies used in the given communication, but also the refutation, or clarification / explanation of the information on which the newly created misinformation is based.

Key words: Czechia; conspiracy theories; disinformation; fake news; hoaxes; Covid 19; Facebook; social media.

1 INTRODUCTION

Conspiracy theories, hoaxes and / or disinformation have influenced public life for centuries, however, their spread has long been influenced by the limited reach of the means of transfer of such information. Technological progress and mainly

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wide access to social media, such as Facebook or Twitter (just to name the most used ones), made the spread of disinformation much easier, both technologically and financially. It is therefore no surprise that the modern era built primarily on the transfer of many public activities to online space, brings not only benefits, but also great challenges regarding the spread of false information. Moreover, it puts governments and state administrations into a dilemma, how to combat the negative aspects of it. This is especially challenging for the governments in the region of post-Communist Central, Eastern and Southeastern Europe, where any attempts to regulate public debate immediately bring comparison to the censorship imposed by Communist regimes.

This chapter deals with the disinformation spread on Facebook in connection with Covid 19 pandemics in Czechia. Besides the generally accessible environment for spreading hoaxes, that exists today due to free access to several mean of communication with high reach and impact, the crisis as was the Covid 19 pandemics always bring the opportunity to create and spread falsified information. The governments' and states' roles increase in the times of crisis, as besides the roles they play in general (under normal circumstances) they serve as crisis managers. They are endowed with special powers to impose all necessary means to face the crisis, which sometimes includes restricting certain activities or imposing some measures, under the threat of punishment. Specifically in the times of Covid 19 pandemic, such powers included imposing mask mandates, social distancing, closures of stores selling non-essential products or providing non-essential services, ban of public assemblies or regulating number of people that can meet together and under what conditions, closures of borders, both between the countries as well as within the country, e.g. between the districts or regions (just to mention few). Despite majority of the population complied with the government-imposed measures, this policy also mobilized the anti-governmental forces which depicted governments' actions as limiting and violating basic human rights and freedoms. Online environment became an ideal space for spreading these narratives as it became the space where most of the people spent time due to the social distancing and transferring many of the previous offline activities to online form.

It needs to be said at the beginning, that the Czech authorities have long underestimated the role of disinformation being spread online in general. The crisis situation, as was the Covid 19 pandemics, showed the unpreparedness and thus the inability of the government, other state institutions as well as law enforcement bodies to combat the disinformation in full scale. The chapter opens with introducing the Czech disinformation scene in general, identifying the key actors (individual and institutional) as well as topics that were targeted by their activities. It is followed by the three case studies of the most common conspiracy theories related to Covid 19 pandemics that were spread via Facebook.

The chapter is based on the two main research questions: What conspiracy theories, hoaxes and / or disinformation has been the most frequently circulating in connection with the Covid 19 pandemics on Facebook? What was their dominant narrative?

2 CONTEXT: CZECH ONLINE SPACE AND THE DISINFORMATION SCENE

Facebook has long been one of the most used social media platforms in Czechia. Despite its failing popularity in recent years, especially among the younger generations, it still belongs among the most influential environments from which people draw information (Datareportal 2023). At the same time, it is one of the most effective tools for spreading fake news, disinformation, conspiracies and other false, misleading and / or lying information. It is also an environment where extremist content is spread, with the (mis-)use of the emotionally tinged communication[2] that is typical for many social media, not only Facebook. The above-mentioned description is supported by the existence of quasi-communities of Facebook groups, often counting tens of thousands of users, who share the content among themselves, thus supporting the creation of identical collective view and shared positions, emotions as well as values of the community. Moreover, they repost the content to other groups, resend it to other users and intend to spread it as effectively as possible.

One of the key tools in creating and spreading the dangerous content on Facebook are false or fake profiles, which artificially increase the popularity of posted or shared content, and optically increase the fan base of the specific Facebook group and / or page.[3] Their impact can be seen in strengthening of the search algorithms, but it also has psychological effect and aspect.[4] The essence of the existence of such fake or false profiles is simple. First of all, some individuals feel safer if they can act anonymously or under aliases while posting or sharing aggressive, hateful, incendiary, conspiracy and / or disinformation content. These users are very often connected to pro-Russian disinformation networks and circles which main goal is to undermine the citizens' trust in democratic political institutions, actors, procedures and processes and / or undermine the trust in pro-Western geopolitical orientation. They artfully use any events to their advantage to undermine this often already fragile trust of selected segments of society. Unfortunately, these fake or false profiles are often also connected by supporting the ANO 2011 movement (full name “Akce nespokojených občanů 2011”, in English "Action of Dissatisfied Citizens 2011”), political movement founded by and led by billionaire entrepreneur and now also politician Andrej Babiš. Both Babiš and many of the ANO 2011's political representatives use content created and / or spread by these fake or false profiles in their political communication and rhetoric, often even re-posting it on their own profiles on social media networks such as Facebook or X (formerly Twitter). One of the most prominent examples of such activities are the two profiles on X network

[2] In 2021, Facebook's internal documents revealed that Facebook was directly responsible for the company's divisiveness, as well as conflicts among its users. It may even have had a vested interest in knowingly encouraging them in their anger with sophisticated tactics. This was most evident in the issues that strongly divided not only American society - namely the political situation and the coronavirus pandemic. The documents show, among other things, that it was well known in the early days of the pandemic that once a post went viral, it was most often false information. There was research on this that suggested setting up algorithms to control the spread of such misleading posts. Workers even tested them and found that they were able to reduce the spread of misinformation about coronavirus by 38 percent (Dwoskin, Newmyer and Mahtani 2021).

[3] In that case, there is a lot of fake accounts without active involvement in discussions. At first glance, the accounts look like they were created by a computer, they do not have personal information, posts, photos, videos, or a network of user friends. In some cases, even dozens of such profiles can be acquired per day within groups (Jezberová 2023).

[4] A higher number of Facebook group members leads to greater confidence of such groups among the users.

(formerly Twitter): @JZdesena (which stands in Czech for the term “Jsem zděšena”, in English “I am horrified”) and @PeulnaMarkvart1 (which stands for Czech female name “Peťulína Markvartová”), behind whom Petr Markvart (male name) stands.[5] The activities of two mentioned exemplary profiles fit perfectly into previous description of the motives as well as forms of the communication hidden behind aliases, fake names or false names.

If we return to the individual Facebook groups, in the Czech environment we can meet a whole series of very numerous, pro-Russian oriented groups. As Jezberová states (2023), the most numerous groups include “LID PROTI PAVLOVI A FIALOVI…” (“THE PEOPLE AGAINST PAVEL AND FIALA...”, referring to the President Petr Pavel and the Prime Minister Petr Fiala) with more than 32.8 thousand members, “Češi, táhněme za jeden provaz” (“Czechs, let's pull together”) with around 34.2 thousand members, “Přátelé, kterým se líbí Andrej Babiš” ("Friends who like Andrej Babiš”) with around 18.9 thousand members, “Svobodné Česko” (“Free Czechia”) with 21.9 thousand members or “Přátelé Ruska v České republice ..." (“Friends of Russia in the Czech Republic …") with 19.5 thousand members, the last one characterized by a high frequency of new contributions (even several dozen posts per hour). For the purposes of our study, we also focused on private groups “Covidu se nebojíme, bojíme se „opatření“ – Nechte nás na pokoji!” (“We are not afraid of Covid, we are afraid of “measures” - Leave us alone!”) with approximately one thousand members and "#nenechameseockovat#” (“#wedontgetvaccinated#”) with 16 thousand members.

Some of the established groups, existing until now, were originally linked to an anti-epidemiological topic, specifically the group “Czechs, let's pull together”, which until now has the following description in its introductory information: "*(...) Covid is here and will be here. Even we experienced that. In the end we will all be infected anyway, so why destroy the economy, why don't they allow us to go to work, I understand some of the measures: face masks in hospitals, public transport, but why did they close my wife's gym where you could eat from the floor [“eat from the floor” is Czech metaphoric expression meaning that the place described like this is so clean and sterile that you could even eat from the floor], why do they close a restaurant that is cleaner than an operating room. (...) Why did they ban children from going to schools. (...) I will fight against that. And that's what this group is for. Together we can do it”* (Svoboda 2023).

Other groups focused on Covid 19 abandoned the original topic after the outbreak of the Russia's invasion to Ukraine and moved from attacking anti-Covid 19 measures to spreading the anti-Ukrainian sentiments. For example, Facebook group "Neočkování CZ SK” (“Non-vaccinated CZ SK”) changed its name to “Pro mír. Ne válce.” (“For the peace. Against the war” (elfwebmaster 2022), with their interpretation that the peace can be reached only by Ukraine giving up and surrendering to Russia. According to an analysis by the Czech Elves [internet community combating the disinformation and pro-Russian propaganda], up to 90 % of fake news related to Covid 19 came from around 30 long-term pro-Russian websites, such as pravdive.eu, cz24.news, Pravyprostor.cz, ac24.cz, Sputnik, Aeronet, etc. (mvr 2021). Political parties also participated in the spread of disinformation. In 2021, the SPD movement (full name “Svoboda a přímá demokracie”, in English "Freedom and Direct Democracy”) Volný blok (“Free Bloc”) were significant spreaders of disinformation content in the online

[5] Markvart does not run only these two profiles. He administers also other fake profiles, however, these two are the most prominent and active ones.

environment. Representatives of these political parties and movements used disinformation websites extensively, e.g. in September 2021, as an important platform for their election campaign before the October 2021 elections to the Chamber of Deputies (elfwebmaster 2021).

In addition to the social media networks, which have been clearly playing key role in sharing and distributing various conspiracy theories, disinformation and / or fake news, there is also one specific medium in Czechia – so called chain e-mails. This type of communication, targeted primarily at older generation and seniors, has been considerably strengthening in recent years. And they also played an important role during the Covid 19 era.

3 DISINFORMATION, MISINFORMATION, HOAXES AND SO ON – HOW TO UNDERSTAND THEM

For the purposes of these study, it is useful to clarify at this point what we mean by the various terms we are working with. The most basic concept is the term disinformation, which probably originates from the Russian word *dezinformacija* (дезинформация), which was first registered in 1949, in connection with Russian propaganda (cf. Ministry of Interior 2024; Ellul 2006, 23–24). According to Fallis (2015), disinformation consists of misleading people in the form of lies or propaganda, or in the form of conspiracy theories and false alarm messages, and can be socially very dangerous, especially when people are deliberately misled about essential matters such as investment opportunities, medical treatment, or political actors. The Ministry of the Interior of the Czech Republic then characterises the term disinformation as *"the dissemination of deliberately false information, especially by state actors or their offshoots vis-à-vis a foreign state or the media, with the aim of influencing the decision-making or opinions of those who receive it"* (Ministry of Interior 2024).

Misinformation can be distinguished from disinformation. Such communication is based on an error or mistake, i.e. it is inaccurate or misleading information that may be spread unintentionally due to mistakes or misinterpretation. However, if misinformation is widely disseminated, it may lead to the same result as disinformation, i.e. the adoption of opinions or decisions based on false information. The Ministry of the Interior of the Czech Republic defines misinformation as *"incorrect or misleading information which is neither systematically nor deliberately disseminated with the aim of influencing the decisions or opinions of those who receive it"* (Ministry of Interior 2024). Wardle and Derakhshan (2017) further distinguish malinformation, which works with true information, but the source spreads it with the intention of harming someone.

This brings us to a term that is very closely related and overlapping with disinformation and misinformation, which is fake news. Fake news can be defined as fabricated, deliberately misleading information that copies the content of the news media to appear credible, but which is verifiable and therefore can be considered deliberately deceptive and untrue to mislead the recipient (cf. Allcott and Gentzkow 2017; Vosoughi, Roy and Aral 2018). We can also talk about fake news as political weapons (Lazer et al. 2018) or to achieve financial profits. Controversial content is often used to gain more user clicks and subsequent sharing of these messages, especially in social media environments (Vargo, Guo and Amazeen 2018). This is a rather popular current trend.

This is closely related to the concept of hoax, which we have discussed extensively below. Hoax or swindle generally refers to false and misleading messages that appear in media content and are also shared by social media users. These relatively large-scale and deliberately created lies often aim to make someone believe false information or especially something unpleasant. Hoaxes include fake news, hoaxes, journalistic ducks, pranks, chain messages (email or the increasingly popular form of texts shared via WhatsApp) calling for further mass forwarding and sharing to deceive recipients (Nutil 2018, 137).

Last but not least, the key term conspiracy theory can be understood as "coordinated hidden acts of at least two actors to affect society or its parts negatively" (Matuszewski, Rams-Ługowski and Pawłowski 2024, 88). Although the conspiracy theories and other forms of manipulation with information have been around for centuries, it is obvious that their contemporary rise is closely connected with the emergence and wide spread of social media (Šteger 2024, 69; Wardawy-Dudziak 2024, 59).

4 METHODOLOGY

For the purposes of the research, the social network Facebook was chosen, especially for the following reasons. Facebook was used by 4.8 million users (45.8 % of the population) in the Czech Republic in 2023, according to data from advertising software, and it was clearly the most popular social communication platform in the Czech Republic (Datareportal 2023). At the same time, Facebook provides its users with a much more intensive connection, and in addition, many people use Facebook as a source of information about politics and current events.

The method of qualitative content analysis of selected posts that appeared in Facebook groups in the years 2020-2021, when Covid 19 resonated the most, was chosen to obtain data. The above-mentioned Facebook groups thus became the primary source, however, misinformation from other, smaller groups or websites was often shared within them as well. Here we then resorted to examining the primary sources from which the given disinformation or hoaxes reached the groups.

The aim of the presented chapter is to analyse the most prominent misinformation and conspiracy theories about the Covid 19, which were spread not only in the above-mentioned groups and gained many supporters and shares, but also those that subsequently spread in the Czech internet environment. The goal is also to clarify the argumentation strategies used in the given communication, but also to clarify and / or explain the information on which the communication created by disinformation is based, or what the sources of the disinformation and hoaxes are. We will also focus on images that were often intended to serve as evidence for the claims themselves and with their misleading, inaccurate and manipulative nature only fuelled anti-vaccination sentiments.

We deliberately omit from the study one of the first pieces of disinformation that appeared in the public space about Covid 19 and gradually became an effective communication tool of far-right parties in the Central Europe, namely the claim

that Covid 19 is an artificially created disease and a tool of global control.[6] The given claim was widely used by the far right to undermine trust in the European Union and the West in general. In the Czech environment, we are talking mainly about criticism coming from the supporters of the SPD movement.

The opinion that Covid 19 is an artificially created disease was supported by an argumentative strategy of shielding oneself with authority. A well-known Czech microbiologist Soňa Peková served this purpose after she became one of the first advocates of this disinformation in Czech public space shortly after the outbreak of the pandemics. Her statements were often quoted by the Czech media, not only the alternative ones, as it was completely new topic and there were only few authorities able to provide their expertise in this unprecedented situation. As an example, supporting and proving our previous argument, we can quote one of her responses from an interview in the Czech Radio, a public service medium, aired in April 2020: "*I believe it is a man-made virus. The virus behaves strangely, does not develop good immunity, cases of reinfection are known. It has many characteristics that we have not seen in nature before*," she said in the radio interview (Výborná 2020).

5 CONSPIRACY THEORY 1: "IMPLANTING MICROCHIPS TO THE BODY DURING TESTING OR VACCINATION"

One of the most widespread hoaxes related to the Covid 19 was the topic of microchips. The hoaxes claimed that the Covid 19 testing is just a way to implant a microchip into the body, thus allowing the governments to manipulate the people with it. Microchip related hoaxes appeared across many of the Facebook groups and in various modifications and forms of communication. We could come across both recorded videos, where important people expressed their opinions on the issue and addressed them directly to the viewers through the front camera of a mobile phone[7], as well as shared photos that were supposed to support the claims mentioned in the text and often included links to some other disinformation websites. The topic of microchips also appeared in a lot in chain e-mails.

The main idea of the mentioned conspiracy theory is the fact that, either by inoculation or with the help of a swab, a microchip is inserted into the body of people during testing for Covid 19. According to the conspiracy theory, such microchip or nanochip would subsequently enable the monitoring of such persons, and eventually (after the wide implementation) lead to absolute control of the population. According to disinformation websites, Bill Gates was the dominant figure who was supposed to have an enormous interest in chipping people. The monitoring tool should be 5G networks.[8] The proof that the microchip is part of the swab kit should have been the depth of the control swab, which depends on the necessity to plant the chip so deep in the cavity that it cannot be removed. A warning and all-clarifying picture was circulated in the

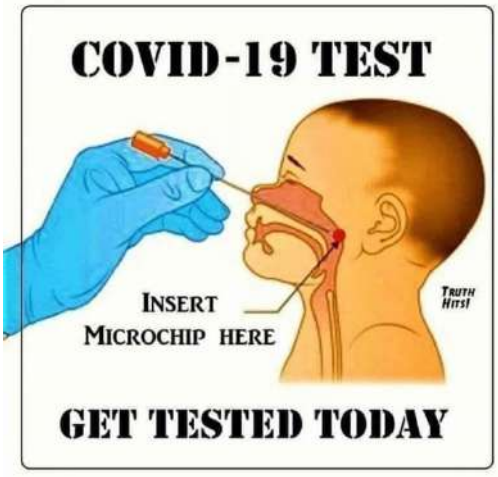
[6] The goal was supposed to be the absolute control of humanity and obedience / submission of the population, under the control of people such as Bill Gates, George Soros, or Donald Trump, or even institutions such as Communist Party of China or the Government of the United States of America (Máca 2020).

[7] It has become a very popular way for spreading the content in recent years, as it does not require creating long written texts. It has also become popular to shoot these videos while driving a car.

[8] It should be noted here that the smallest 5G chip that has ever been developed is the size of a penny coin.

groups (see Figure 1).

FIGURE 1: HOW THE CHIP IS SUPPOSEDLY INSERTED INTO THE BODY, ACCORDING TO THE DISINFORMATION SOURCES.



Source: @Bestincovid2020.

We found three dominant hoaxes in the Facebook groups that were supposed to support the truth of the given conspiracy theory. The first hoax that we will present comes from the video of Petra Rédová Fajmonová, a Czech manipulator, anti-vaxxer and unsuccessful candidate in the 2022 Senate election in the Brno district. During Covid 19 in 2021, she pretended to be the head nurse of the intensive care unit at the Brno University Hospital. Subsequently, she shared a video on Facebook[9] in which, to appear erudite, she spoke to the audience from the position of health authority and explained them why it is a mistake to get vaccinated[10] and to support the government's Covid 19 restrictions.

As evidence for her position, she presented the conclusions of her own amateur blood structure change tests, according to which the blood of vaccinated people is different from the blood of non-vaccinated people. The amateur testing was supposed to confirm the experts' conclusions. According to her research, the blood of the vaccinated people also reacts to magnetism. Moreover, now when Rédová's friend was supposed to start making a phone call, the blood of the vaccinated should have started to react to the transmitted magnetic waves, because of which something hidden until then appeared in the blood, which looked like a chip (mvr 2021).[11]

The Brno University Hospital immediately commented on the video, and strictly denied any connection of the hospital with Rédová. The hospital's Facebook statement literally stated: "This lady IS NOT and NEVER WAS in an employment-legal relationship with our hospital, she does not represent any opinion or testimony, attitudes or opinions of our hospital. As a medical facility, we distance ourselves from the statements and information in such a video" (Fakultní nemocnice Brno 2021). Unfortunately, the hospital made a small mistake, as it

[9] The original full video has already been deleted and cannot be recovered anymore. However, partial shots are still available online on some of the social media accounts or other channels, e.g. here:: https://gloria.tv/share/BskFb878stoR4FZfAYCfshoyU#320.

[10] The arguments that are heard here try to undermine the credibility of vaccines, for example, by saying that they do not protect against the severe course of Covid 19.

[11] The details of the video were broadcasted on the Czech Television program called “Czech TV Reporters”. The given passage of the original Rédlová's video cannot be currently found.

was discovered later that Rédová used to work there. Few days later after releasing the original statement, the hospital corrected it with an apology, stating that Mrs. Rédová, who appears in the video as a nurse at the Brno University Hospital, did indeed work here, but only between 1996-1998 and under a different name (Fakultní nemocnice Brno 2021). Unfortunately, this was enough to bring down a new wave of mistrust and the belief that the truth is being suppressed.

As this hoax began to spread relatively quickly in groups on social networks, Vaxinátor[12] responded to it with a video in which he directly contradicts some of Rédová's nonsensical claims. In a short video on the Facebook profile of the project, it vividly demonstrated what a drop of distilled water will do to, for example, cotton wool fibre, dust or just a dirty laboratory slide. If one uses a little imagination, one can really see something here that looks like a nanochip, but also like a parasite.[13] Here, not only the research conditions (including incorrect handling of the sample), but also the equipment is essential. Children's microscopes show more distortion than others (Vaxinátor 2021).

The second hoax that was strongly present in the public space were manipulative videos, which, as proof of the presence of a chip in the body, showed people holding a magnet to their skin at the site where vaccination was applied. The videos used the principle of comparison, when, for example, a man applied a magnet to the place after vaccination, then used an unvaccinated child as a second figure, whose arm the magnet did not hold. In the videos, phrases such as: we are infected, we are poisoned, etc. are heard.

These videos were spread in hundreds of groups, not only in the ones we analysed. One of the reported disinformation posts came from the "Otevři svou mysl" ("Open Your Mind") profile. In this case, it's an edited 15-minute video of various actors demonstrating how a magnet holds onto their arm.[14] It is not clear on the video whether these are vaccinated individuals or whether the site where they place the magnet is actual vaccination site. The fact that the magnet sticks to the skin is not due to the magnetization of the chip, but it is caused by the oiliness of the skin. For example, if a person rubs his skin with oil, metal objects such as a magnet, but also a coin, which certainly cannot be claimed to be magnetic, will stick to him. Vaccines do not contain anything that the magnet could possibly react to.[15]

However, users in the comments appeal with the usual disinformation mantra that everyone must quickly share the post so that the message reaches as many people as possible, because it is immediately deleted for individual users of the post (exceptionally, Facebook's algorithms probably worked). Some of the videos using the given hoax did not even come from the domestic (Czech) environment, they were mostly videos from English-speaking countries, such as the United States and Canada. AFP Fact check USA, a department within the AFP news agency, called them fraudulent, saying that it is not possible for vaccination to magnetize people and that the goal is only to create fear and mistrust of

[12] It is a Slovak Facebook page that was created in response to anti-vaxxer sentiments in society.

[13] Some of the hoaxes included claims that vaccines contain the parasite called Trypanosoma cruzi, which causes the deadly Chagas disease, and which can allegedly cause AIDS. Here, however, it subsequently turned out that the circulating photo of the parasite comes from a parasitological atlas. Among other things, the already mentioned Rédová or the disinformation website Aeronet flooded the public space with a similar claim.

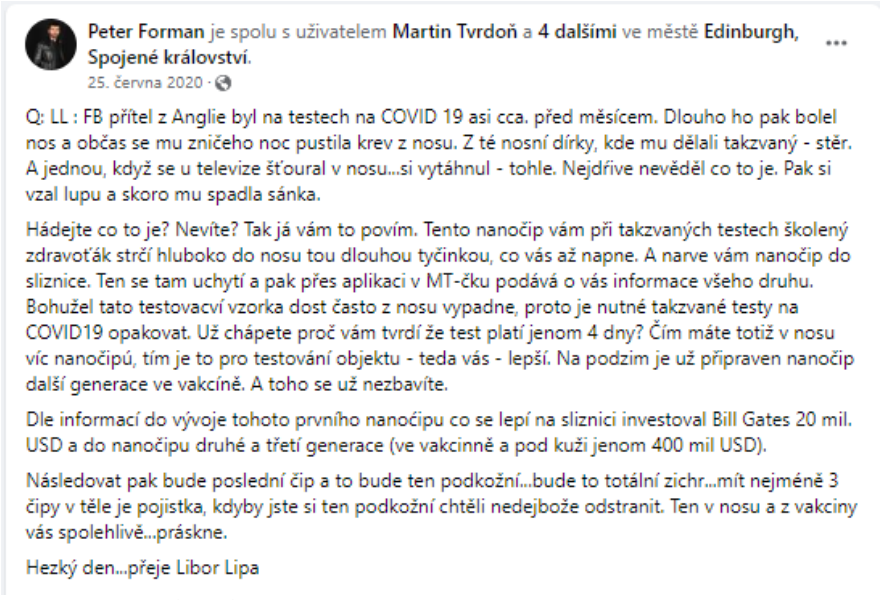
[14] The sample can be seen at https://perma.cc/6NE7-G5P3?type=image.

[15] Vaccines contain water, salts, lipids, proteins, and chemicals to maintain pH.

vaccination (Wade 2021).

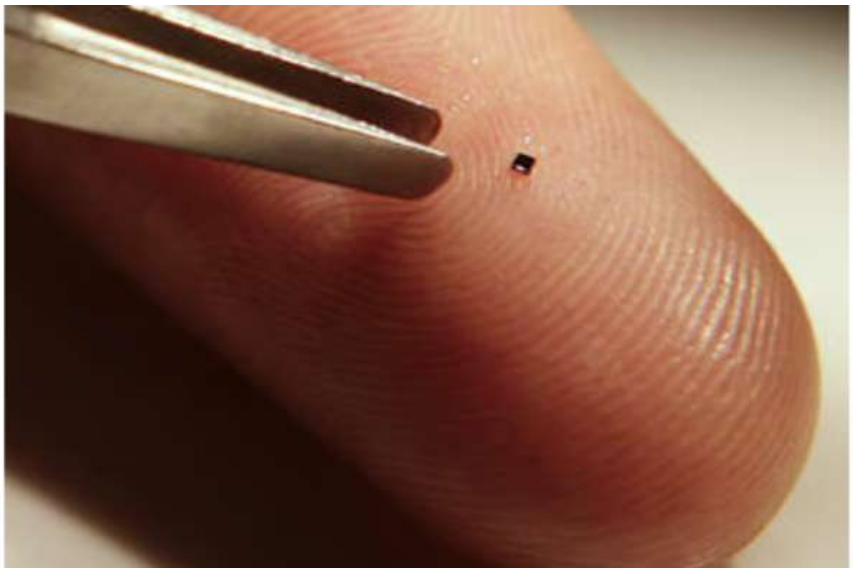
The last hoax that we will analyse in connection with the microchips or nanochips is a post from social networks that refers to a personal experience (see Figure 2). Hoax in the form of Facebook post works with the introductory information presented at the beginning of this chapter, that the microchips, resp. nanochips are implanted in the body during smears and that Bill Gates has an eminent interest in chipping the people, and that je invests millions of dollars in the production of such microchips, resp. nanochips. The main protagonist of this content is a friend of Libor Lipa living in England, who allegedly had a nose pain for several weeks and later the installed microchip allegedly popped out when he started bleeding out of the nose. As evidence he posted the photo of the microchip as part of his post (see Figure 3).[16]

FIGURE 2: FACEBOOK POST



Source: Forman (2020).

FIGURE 3: ALLEGED CHIP EXPOSED AFTER SMEARS



Source: Löwer (2009).

[16] Here, Facebook's algorithms worked again, and the image was evaluated as displaying false information and currently cannot be displayed together with the post.

With this hoax, we encounter several false information and manipulative levels. If we leave aside the lie associated with poking the nose and the above-mentioned, repeatedly appearing hoaxes linked here, the message is primarily persuasively supplemented with an image that has nothing to do with the information provided in the post, except for the fact that there is indeed a chip in the photo. When using any fact checking application focused on identification of photos, we immediately find out that the photo shows a chip with the smallest Bible in the world. The photo dates to 2009 and was presented by the German magazine *Handelsblatt* (Löwer 2009). However, the purpose of this post is to serve as evidence and add credibility to the false message. The last two hoaxes introduced above also dominated the chain e-mails that were about microchips in the vaccines. The one about blowing the microchip out of the nose was at the top of the charts of the most intensively spread messages regarding the alleged harmfulness of vaccines for several months and, unfortunately, found several fans and supporters.

6 CONSPIRACY THEORY 2: "VACCINATION CAUSES CHANGES OF THE DNA AND INFERTILITY"

The second presented category of conspiracy theories shows us how much disinformation has become a powerful and dangerous tool in influencing society. The hoax works with the information that the Covid 19 vaccine causes a change in DNA. There are several versions that have been circulating in Facebook groups. Sometimes we encounter the fact that only selected types of vaccines cause a change, for others the rule applies broadly for all vaccines in general.

However, the origin of the hoax itself can be traced in the preprint of the later revised and published article "Reverse-transcribed SARS-CoV-2 RNA can integrate into the genome of cultured human cells and can be expressed in patient-derived tissues" (Zhang 2021). Disinformers chose a certain suitable part of the mentioned article for manipulation, reformulated it and published on social media. The original article itself states that under certain circumstances, some genetic remnants of the SARS-CoV-2 virus can integrate into our DNA and remain for a very long time after the infection.[17] And it was exactly this information that became a tool for the opponents of vaccination to spread the fear and the threat of vaccines, even though it was a laboratory experiment and it is not clear that this effect also occurs in a living human organism.

Although vaccines and their effects were not even part of the presented research, the article served to create several rumours and hoaxes. Whether it is in the form of the fact that people who have experienced Covid 19 are infectious forever, or the just-mentioned fact that vaccines change human DNA. The hoax resonated so much in society that even on the website of the Government of the Czech Republic, videos were published that refuted the said inaccuracies.

If we give an example of a specific form of this disinformation about the change in the DNA of vaccinated people, we can watch the widely shared and liked video that was spread across the mentioned Facebook groups. It was created by the well-known disinformer, conspirator and healer Michal Shark Hašek. The author

[17] The study has received strong criticism from expert circles, especially for the lack of data and the threat of causing unwarranted panic. However, a similar phenomenon has already been observed in other viruses.

has been sharing several false claims regarding the Covid 19 for a long time and has built a strong community of like-minded supporters. In this particular video,[18] he focused on Astra Zeneca's vaccine, specifically on the package of this vaccine and the term "ChAdOx1 nCoV-19 recombinant," which is on the package and which we don't seem to understand and are too lazy to decipher. With the help of Wikipedia, in the video he defines the meaning of the word recombinant and explains that recombinant DNA molecules (rDNA) are DNA molecules created by laboratory methods of genetic recombination such as molecular cloning. From this, he deduces that extraneous DNA molecules are part of the vaccine, while here he creates conspiracy theories, when he concludes that extraneously cloned molecules can be not only human or animal, but also of some extra-terrestrial species (Mojevideo 2020).[19]

A similar message was spread as fake news both on the Internet and in chain e-mails that dominated at the end of 2020. The headline of these messages read *"The Swiss hurried and banned the COVID vaccine. What about the other nations of Europe, will they allow to get vaccinated in the biggest socio-biological experiment of all time? The Swiss want to completely bypass general practitioners, vaccinations will be given in other places. It is not talked about much in the mainstream, but the reason for nervousness here is that m-RNAs are the first vaccines that interfere directly with the genetic material and change it."* (Čeští elfové 2021). Here, the disinformation scene operated with twisted information from the Swiss environment. The report originally only stated that the Swiss had not yet approved the AstraZeneca vaccine, but at that time they had already vaccinated with the other two vaccines and 75 % of the Swiss population had already been vaccinated. Subsequently, the already known report on DNA change was used.

The mentioned chain e-mails continued to spread another false message, namely that there are many as-yet-undetermined risks associated with the m-RNA vaccines. *"There is speculation about both local and new systemic inflammatory reactions that can trigger autoimmune disease, cancer, chronic organ damage, and other problems. Another cause for concern is the misuse of m-RNA vaccines to TARGETEDLY DAMAGE SOME FUNCTIONS OF THE BODY, SUCH AS CELL RENEWAL, FERTILITY AND FUNCTIONING OF THE NERVOUS SYSTEM."* (Čeští elfové 2021).

And that brings us to the last part of the analysed hoax, which also appeared in a separate version. It is a claim that vaccines cause infertility or, in the words of some of the fake news, even sterilization. A disinformation article from the cz24.news website was shared many times in several Facebook groups, which literally read: *"There is a serious suspicion that vaccines against Covid 19 will cause sterilization of women, and at the same time possibly significantly worsen the course of the Covid infection."* (cz24.news 2020). The report is based on the assertion of the head of research at Pfizer that the protein contained in the Covid 19 vaccines destroys the protein needed for the formation of the placenta (cz24.news 2020).

[18] Source: https://www.mojevideo.sk/video/3391c/michal_shark_a_je_to_tu.html?fbclid=IwAR21VGrCz4nh4Esc-FEr_XZx3yyK-gw_AF0C5WfAysu36ZnfAqzFmA-DAkI.

[19] The vaccine does not carry any DNA molecules, the word recombinant only refers to the fact that it is a recombinant RNA virus vaccine.

7 CONSPIRACY THEORY 3: "FAKE COVID 19 TEST RESULTS"

Throughout the most intensive part of the Covid 19 period (circa 2020–2022) we have witnessed attempts to spread the false results of Covid tests. This issue represents very specific case in our chapter, as it originally started as a hoax, however, later turned out to be true. Well, the fact that fake messages were spread, turned out to be true, not the content of the fake messages. These messages with fake Covid 19 test results have been sent to the people's cell phones allegedly by the testing centres themselves. At least they appeared so. However, the senders were none of the approved medical or administrative staff members, but hackers that compromised the information system of some of the testing centres, incl. the ones located at the major medical institutions in the country (e.g. General University Hospital in Prague). Messages reporting the results of Covid 19 tests were sent both to the people who were tested and awaited the results, as well as to the people who were not tested at all (Všeobecná fakultní nemocnice 2020). The information that people were receiving messages with fake test results had been for some time considered a hoax that was spread to undermine confidence in the health care system, and in Covid 19 testing. Facebook and other widely accessible social media with high potential for fast spread of the information had been used for posting messages reading "my friend went for testing, but did not want to wait in line, so left the testing centre without getting tested, despite that he received message that he had been positive" (Žabka 2020a). However, when posting such messages, nobody presented any proof that such a situation happened. Only later was it reported by several medical centres that their patients are receiving "results" of testing, even if they have not been tested at all. It can be understood that what was originally a hoax about non-existing issue became ground for creating "reality", i.e. the hackers interfering with the information services of testing centres and send the alleged results to the people's phones (Žabka 2020b).

8 CONCLUSION

It was not possible to cover and analyse all the disinformation that appeared in the mentioned groups on Facebook during Covid 19 pandemics. In some cases, it was difficult, if not impossible to trace back the shared conspiracies, hoaxes, disinformation and fake news to their original source(s) and / or original author(s). It was mainly due to Facebook's algorithms to fight disinformation, because of which certain posts, incl. images and / or videos, as well as certain users were blocked.

Nevertheless, even the few recovered and traced examples of some of the most frequent Covid 19 conspiracy theories spread in the Czech online space during pandemic, provided evidence we can use to find and make generalizing conclusions. Conspiracy theories, hoaxes and / or disinformation about Covid 19 that circulated across Facebook groups were often of a dangerous nature and had a strong influence on the formation of public opinion beyond the scope of selected groups. Their artful use by disinformers often harmed rational social discussion and, unfortunately, the reaction of government officials and other public authorities often came late.

We believe that society needs to be aware of the dangerousness of conspiracy theories and disinformation before they take root in social consciousness, therefore timely and preventive information is necessary. It is important to

identify risks in the digital media environment early on and to gain an understanding of how information circulates among different audiences and how it is misused for disinformation. Similarly, it is essential to clarify which groups have an interest in sharing such misinformation. Once misinformation reaches the subconscious of individual segments of society, it is already very difficult to reverse the given thinking. Whereas if there was an early refutation and clarification of the given conspiracies and disinformation, even in the form of widespread government marketing campaigns or well-placed strategic communications, the degree of influence would be smaller, at least in terms of the number of affected individuals.

However, it must be stated objectively that the space for the creation and sharing of conspiracy theories, hoaxes and / or disinformation was often caused by politicians or representatives of the state administration themselves. The government's response to such unprecedented crisis as was Covid 19 pandemics had not always been systemic – both in terms of imposed measures and restrictions, as well as in the way and form of how these were communicated to the general public. Sometimes the information provided by different governmental and public service institutions, agencies or even the Cabinet ministers themselves contradicted each other, thus bringing even more confusion into the issue. The level of trust and confidence in government and its bodies decreased and in such an environment the conspiracy theories, hoaxes and / or disinformation found suitable grounds to be rooted in and grow from. As a result of it, even the people who do not identify themselves as hardliners belonging to the core of disinformation circles but can be rather described as soft or mild supporters of fake news, lost confidence in the system represented by the governmental agencies as well as by the mainstream media (Pika 2023).

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[20] "One lady was talking" (in original "Jedna paní povídala") is a Czech metaphorical expression referring to the spread of unverified information. The term "gossip" would probably be the closest simple (one word) synonymous expression. Example of the use of such expression in Czech language: "Je to pravda nebo je to informace typu jedna paní povídala?" (in English: "Is it true or is it one-lady-was-talking type of information?")

»V NAŠA TELESA ŽELIJO VGRADITI ČIPE«: TEORIJE ZAROT O COVID 19 IN NJIHOV VPLIV NA ČEŠKO DRUŽBO

Skupaj z nezadovoljstvom državljanov v povezavi s pandemijo covida-19, usmerjenim predvsem proti omejitvam in ukrepom, ki so jih uvedle oblasti, se je po (ne zgolj) češki družbi začela širiti cela vrsta lažnih novic, dezinformacij, potegavščin in teorij zarot, kar je še dodatno spodkopalo družbene odnose, razpoloženja, pa tudi skupne vrednote družbe. Vzpon različnih teorij zarot (zlasti v okolju spletnih družbenih omrežij) je bil takrat opažen v kontekstu omejitev, povezanih s cepljenjem proti covidu-19. Cilj prispevka je z vidika komunikacijskih študij prikazati te različne napačne informacije in potegavščine, ki so se v zadnjih letih razširile v komunikacijskem prostoru češke družbe, natančneje na družbeni platformi Facebook, in ki v izbranih skupinah odmevajo še danes, ter s tem vplivajo na politična stališča in obnašanje državljanov. Cilj prispevka je ne samo opozoriti na stereotipne težnje in argumentativne strategije, uporabljene v dani komunikaciji, temveč tudi pojasniti in razložiti informacije, na katerih temeljijo novonastale dezinformacije.

Ključne besede: Češka Republika; teorije zarot; dezinformacije; lažne novice; prevare; covid-19; Facebook; spletna družbena omrežja.

THE GOLDEN VISA: HOW CAN ONE ACCESS THE EU AND FOR WHAT PRICE?

Markéta PITROVÁ and Caroline BINDAČOVÁ[1]

The offer of a golden visa, also known as a residence by investment (RBI) programme, is a way for EU member states to attract foreign investment, yet there are also economic, political and security risks, which is why EU institutions are critical of the practice. This study compares the costs of all the RBI regimes in the EU-27 and categorizes their models. Since 2018, when the European parliament published an extensive study of the issue, some countries have limited or abolished their programmes. However, despite the pressure, RBI programmes are still offered by 14 EU countries as of 2023. The text outlines the current conditions for obtaining a golden visa in the EU and identifies the countries with the lowest investment requirements. With the exception of Cyprus, all of the options are from countries in the Schengen area, which highlights the risks associated with free movement of investors.

Key words: golden visa; EU countries; residence by investment programmes; investment migration.

1 INTRODUCTION

The phenomenon of the so-called "golden visa", or giving residence permits to investors (residence by investment programmes, RBI) is often discussed in connection with the promotion of European values, but it is above all a security risk, as the new resident's entry into one country allows them to move to others within the Schengen Area, to which all but two EU countries belong. European legislation does not regulate RBI and the arrangements by which it is offered are within the competence of member states. The granting of golden visas is insufficiently coordinated, the checks set up in the Schengen system are often circumvented, and the information about the process – including rejected applicants – is not shared. This ultimately encourages visa tourism. Although a third-country citizen's application for a visa and their investment may be

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legitimate, connecting investment with the offer of a residence permit increases opportunities for money laundering, tax evasion, and corruption. According to a European Commission report, most applications may be by individuals, but organized crime is also involved, penetrating the EU from outside (EC 2019).

The war in Ukraine has given a new impulse to the effort to resolve the RBI issue, with the European Parliament (EP) calling on member states "to stop operating their CBI (citizenship by investment) and RBI schemes for all Russian applicants with immediate effect" and subsequently to adopt a proposed "regulation of various aspects of RBI schemes" (EP 2022a). Another reason for establishing RBI rules is future EU enlargement, planned in the Balkans and potentially the post-Soviet republics. By opportunely timing their golden visa application in a candidate country, RBI residents, after enlargement, would gain residency within the whole EU.

This analysis of the RBIs on offer in the EU in 2023 was inspired by a study by the European Parliamentary Research Service (Scherrer and Thirion 2018), which aimed to identify schemes that minimized the demands on applicants and maximized the rights they obtained in terms of mobility and tax advantages. The EPRS study did not aim directly to identify the financially most accessible offer but sought to make a comprehensive assessment of attractiveness to investors, including the possibility of gaining a golden passport. The study listed the following eight countries as having the most accessible RBIs in 2018: Bulgaria, Cyprus, Estonia, Ireland, Italy, Latvia, Malta and Portugal.[2]

The empirical analysis presented here is based on the premise that the risks connected with visa holders increase with their entry into the Schengen Area. The study, therefore, does not consider the naturalization of visa holders or other aspects linked with obtaining a golden passport. Nor does it investigate other procedures for awarding visas, which may also involve risks. Rather, it investigates the costs of every RBI regime in the EU-27 and reviews the positions of European institutions concerned with the issue. The paper analyses how RBI is set up in the various countries that offer it. It then categorizes the models and documents the level of investment required by the various regimes. It does not consider the administrative fees for legal transactions, which may differ according to the applicant's place of origin and the number of people applying (e.g., if family members are involved). Data come from primary sources, typically the websites of state authorities, in particular of ministries (most often the ministries of the interior, migration, asylum, or foreign affairs), as well as immigration authorities and agencies authorized by the state. In some cases, the initial data were obtained from direct communication with embassies and by reviewing immigration legislation.

The text answers the following questions: What are the current conditions for obtaining RBI in the EU, and which countries demand the lowest investment and in which category? Which of the current offers provides a guarantee of movement in the Schengen Area and, as such, offers the biggest advantages in terms of mobility?

The search for answers to these questions faces many limitations. First of all, this area is very opaque, as has been discovered not just by academic researchers but

[2] Greece's strategy is much discussed. The country is not mentioned in the EPRS study because it does not offer tax advantages. However, the study does confirm that it offers one of the "cheapest" RBI programmes (Scherrer and Thirion 2018, 16).

also by European institutions (EC 2019, 20). A study going beyond analysis of the basic national legal set-ups is nearly impossible because many countries do not publish their procedures or the numbers of applicants and rejected investors. The agenda is also subject to rapid developments, not just due to pressures exerted by international events but also the positions of various national and European actors. The field can be chaotic, with a state offering multiple RBI forms concurrently, or investment programmes may be withdrawn and new ones launched, often differing only in name or with minor changes to the conditions (Surak 2022, 9).

Initially, we will define the relevant terms, exploring their evolution and significance. We will delve into the golden visa phenomenon, which is closely linked to the golden passport, highlighting their similarities and differences. Additionally, we will outline the risks associated with this phenomenon, which have prompted the EU to take action. We will also touch upon the changes in state-level strategies that have occurred. The central focus is on the situation in the EU-27 in 2023. We categorize the various options available and detail the required investment thresholds. Finally, we provide a clear and concise overview of the most viable programmes in each category.

2 FROM GOLDEN PASSPORTS TO GOLDEN VISAS

As a research topic, golden visas were long overshadowed by the more serious phenomenon of the sale of golden passports, also described as citizenship by investment programmes (Brink 2017, 1). The awarding of citizenship is seen by states as "a core element of sovereignty" (Maas 2016, 533), and they have traditionally taken various approaches to the subject. States may also have special procedures.[3] Such diversity was not a subject of dispute until the "talent for citizenship" model was transformed into the "money for citizenship" model (Brink 2017, 3). CBI was introduced in Malta in 2014, and its programme received more attention than those of Cyprus and Bulgaria due to Malta's regular Schengen member status (Carerra 2014; Parker 2017, 339; Maas 2016).

The Maastricht Treaty, signed in 1992, defined European citizenship in Article B of the Treaty on EU and Article 8 of the Treaty on EC as a set of rights, but not obligations (Kochenov 2014). It also left untouched the citizenship strategies of individual member countries in its Declaration no. 2, which no longer granted only national, but now, automatically, also European citizenship. Applying for a golden passport was no longer an attempt to "obtain the privileges and shoulder the burdens of that country, but instead to secure the economic benefits of EU citizenship" (Moritz 2015, 232). Džankić aptly illustrates the character of EU citizenship applicants, noting that after 1993 the term "stakeholder" (Bauböck 2007) was replaced by "stockholder" (Magni Berton 2014). Unlike a stakeholder, who has "a genuine interest in the future well-being and prosperity of the community" (Džankić 2015, 20), for the stockholder, citizenship is merely a means "to the materialization of their personal interest" (ibid., 4). The meaning of citizenship, which became a type of "insurance policy" (Moritz 2015, 260), was

[3] There are two fundamental principles: *jus soli* and *jus sanguinis*. Originally, citizenship was linked with a person's place of birth (*jus soli*) or parentage (*jus sanguinis*). Obviously either of these principles is incompatible with a second citizenship (Moritz 2015, 236-237). States may often apply non-transparent specific discretionary procedures and award citizenship to foreigners on a case-by-case basis if it is a matter of "national interest", e.g., for merits in culture, science or sports, or even the economy (EC 2019, 3).

also strongly influenced by the phenomenon of dual citizenship. The legal possibility of dual citizenship can play the role of CBI accelerator, or, by contrast, shift applicants' attention to RBI.[4] In the EU, this implied a shift from the free movement of workers to the universal free movement of people (ibid., 245).

In 1997 the Treaty of Amsterdam anchored the so-called fundamental values of the EU in Article 6 of the Treaty on EU, which refers to "liberty, democracy, respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms, and the rule of law, principles which are common to the Member States". The risks associated with RBI and CBI, detailed below, primarily affect the value of the rule of law and the principle of non-discrimination. As part of the communitization process, the treaty transferred the intergovernmental agenda of the Schengen system under Title IV of the Treaty on EC with a transitional period of five years. Article 34 of the Treaty on EU introduced the principle of consultation and cooperation, including "collaboration between the relevant departments of their administrations" in building an area of freedom, security, and justice.

Following the European Council summit in Tampere in 1999, the status of legally resident third-country nationals in the EU was strengthened, making the product more attractive (Brink 2017, 12-13; EC Tampere 1999). Council Directive 2003/109/EC, concerning the status of third-country nationals who are long-term residents, furthered the development of residents' rights (Council 2003). Directive 2004/38/EC of the European Parliament and of the Council on the right of citizens of the Union and their family members to move and reside freely within the member states included family reunification (EP and Council 2004). With this shift, the making of visa policy lost its original independence at the member state level after 2004 and introduced mutual interdependence between states and EU institutions in this area.

The golden passport was first introduced in the EU by Bulgaria in 2005, Cyprus in 2007, and finally Malta in 2014. The programmes were based on investment by third-country nationals as a new form of fast track to naturalization from EUR 1 million in Bulgaria and EUR 2 million together with property ownership in Cyprus. In Malta, a sum of EUR 650,000 must be paid into a national investment fund together with an additive investment of EUR 150,000 and property investment in Malta (EC 2019, 3). In 2018 a discussion about CBI in Bulgaria was launched. In March 2022, the parliament approved amendments to the Citizenship Act that abolished "golden passports" – citizenship in return for investment. The State Agency for National Security is responsible for checking and eventually revoking any recently granted citizenships (Sofia Globe 2022).

After the Lisbon Treaty entered into force in 2009, we can observe incompatibility of such national laws with the principle of sincere cooperation among member states under Article 4(3) of the Treaty on EU, referring to the necessity of compliance with citizenship Article 20 of the Treaty on Functioning of EU (EC 2021, 23). The infringement raises the question of security risks and threatens the cohesion of the single market (Fernandes et al. 2021, 20). These

[4] Originally rejected, dual citizenship was definitively confirmed by the signing of the European Convention on Nationality in 1997 (Moritz 2015, 237-240). Even when dual citizenship is formally possible, people pursue various strategies to obtain it. For example, Macedonians have been known to seek Bulgarian passports while emphasizing their independence from Bulgaria (Paskalev 2014). By contrast, in China, where dual citizenship is banned, applications for investment visas are popular (Brink 2017, 9).

arguments were part of an infringement procedure against Malta and, subsequently, Cyprus over golden passports (EC 2022a).

Golden passports and golden visas are often discussed together, because of the common risks stemming from the free movement of holders. As the European Economic and Social Committee noted, "although the consequences of being granted a passport or a visa differ significantly in terms of the rights they grant, both types of scheme bear the same level of security risk" (EESC 2020).

We can distinguish fundamental differences between the two. When a member State decides to grant citizenship by investment, it automatically bestows certain rights upon the individual that also extend to other EU states. This is due to the fact that anyone who becomes a national of a Member State is also a citizen of the Union, entitling them to new privileges such as free movement and access to the internal market, political rights (such as the right to vote in local and European elections), and protection (such as consular and ombudsman support). For third-country nationals, the most desirable aspect of such programmes is the ability to travel freely within the Schengen area.

As for golden visas, member states grant them to third-country nationals through country-specific processes and, in an expedited procedure, "only" allow the holder to travel freely in the Schengen Area for 90 days in any 180-day period. RBIs may, but do not necessarily, result in obtaining citizenship; they are not permanent in character. The difference between the two regimes may also depend on what is on offer: some investment opportunities may be open only to citizens and inaccessible to golden visa holders (Surak 2021a, 169).

EU countries started to offer residency by investment after the global economic crisis, i.e., in 2007-2009 (Transparency International and Global Witness 2018, 8).[5] In 2010, four EU countries offered RBI and the number was growing (Surak 2020, 151). Investors' motivations are directly linked to the stability of law and financial legislation in the EU, not to mention access to the single market (Brink 2017, 10). The choice of a particular country is not always determined by the conditions of its programme – other incentives may play a role. According to Surak's study (2021a), obtaining mobility is a crucial consideration for applicants, so they tend to choose countries that are members of Schengen.[6]

Investment can take the form of real-estate purchase, philanthropic giving, or contributions to science and research or the arts. It can also be directed to the country's budget by requiring the applicant to buy government bonds, or deposit money in a bank account in the target country. Other examples include making a financial contribution to a company in which the activity and physical presence of the investor in the country is expected. Often, these deals are conditional on spurring innovation or the use of technologies in a certain region or maintaining employment (Surak 2020, 151-152). The rules do not necessarily require

[5] The first option to obtain a residence permit in exchange for a monetary transaction was offered in 1984 by Saint Kitts and Nevis. This was followed by schemes in Canada (1986) and the USA (1990).

[6] In a study of how people obtain CBI in 11 countries (including Cyprus and Malta), Kristin Surak observed mobility as the fundamental motivation for the richest group of respondents. For medium-rich applicants, it was a commercial opportunity, and geopolitical factors were important for both groups (2021a). In general, however, Surak notes that investors tend to act as "tourists and profit-oriented businesspeople, rather than as settlement-oriented immigrants" (2021b).

applicants to spend time in the country where the investment is made (Scherrer and Thirion 2018, 11-12).

2.1 The risks and impacts of granting golden visas

RBIs have been analysed from multiple viewpoints, not just from the perspective of economic benefit for countries. Those who hold RBIs have the opportunity obtain visa-free access to a greater number of countries, which can stimulate global mobility. Investors can also access better healthcare, education, and social services. Investing in RBI countries allows individuals to diversify their assets and protect themselves against political or economic instability in their home country. For states, the primary benefit is significant financial investment that can stimulate economic growth, create jobs, and improve infrastructure. States seek new revenue to help the country to get out of recession, for instance. We know that investment programmes bring nearly €3.5 billion into the Union annually (Surak and Tsuzuki 2021, 3384-3385). Only in Latvia and Portugal are the financial investments big enough to make a significant contribution to foreign direct investment (ca. 10 %) (Ibid., 3384-3385). However, in no EU country does investment income represent a substantial part of GDP (at most around 0.3 %). RBIs are not powerful enough to stabilize a state's macro-economy or provide significant help in an economic downturn (Surak 2021b).

Investors mostly prefer the property sector (Surak and Tsuzuki 2021, 3385), but this does not necessarily have the expected positive effect, as in their effort to comply with the required level of investment investors may pay above market value (Scherrer and Thirion 2018, 42). The increased demand for real estate may have negative impacts on the property market and cause a housing crisis (Council of Europe 2020, 1).[7] Likewise, investment in companies may not be beneficial if the enterprises chosen do not prosper, or if the requirements concerning job creation are dysfunctional (Surak and Tsuzuki 2021, 3380).

The practice of investment migration is gaining attention due to the potential risks it may pose. In this view, the concerns of many international institutions converge. The EP has called it "state-facilitated and mediated corruption and money laundering" (EP 2018) and the Council of Europe mentioned it as a source of funding for terrorism (Council of Europe 2020, 1). Transparency International warns of RBI being used by oligarchs (TI 2022) who in their home countries face prosecution or seek to launder illegal profits and protect themselves from funds being frozen or seized (Pavlidis 2021, 172). Proving the origin of the money invested (Council of Europe 2020, 2-3) is hampered by a lack of comprehensive risk assessment, limited control mechanisms, lack of financial resources to conduct efficient in-depth checks and in some cases also deliberate laxness by visa officials (Pavlidis 2021, 172; Fernandes et al. 2021, 30). The fifth EU Anti-Money Laundering Directive of 2018 was expected to help with the vetting of the origin of investors' money and described applicants as high risk, calling for enhanced due diligence. A fundamental shortcoming was found to be that due diligence checks are carried out only on economic entities and not governmental organizations, offices, or agencies. The immigration authorities are, therefore,

[7] An example of the impact of foreign investment is downtown Lisbon, where affordable real estate has been pushed out of reach of Portuguese households and part of the city centre is owned by foreigners (Fernandes et al. 2021, 38). Similarly, negative impacts are discussed in Greece, where the programme accounts for a third of property transactions and has destabilized the market (Surak and Tsuzuki 2021, 3369, 3385).

not bound by the directive and not obliged to carry out in-depth checks of applicants (EC 2019, 15).[8]

Lack of transparency in RBIs could provide an opportunity for corrupt practices to spread in the offices of the national authorities, for example, that vet applicants (Pavlidis 2021, 173). The problem concerns not just state institutions and officials, but also policymakers. Politicians involved in the legislative process are criticized for being influenced by private interests that lobby in favour of RBI. The Council of Europe noted risks to the rule of law and democratic stability from this practice (Council of Europe 2020, 2). This is accompanied by conflicts of interest, as politicians, their staffers or family members may conduct business transactions or have other private dealings with applicants (Pavlidis 2021, 173).

As mentioned above, RBI may serve as a flexible strategy for investors who seek to diversify their wealth and gain a foothold outside their home country (Surak 2021a). Tax evasion is, therefore, another possible RBI risk. States seeking to attract as much financial capital as possible often offer a broad range of tax advantages. A specific investment may disrupt the exchange of information between the tax authorities of the home and target countries, and this could lead to tax evasion (EC 2019, 17; Pavlidis 2021, 173; Scherrer and Thirion 2018, 41).[9]

The security risk posed by RBI could result from the free movement of people across the Schengen Area, which includes most EU countries, except for Cyprus and Ireland in 2024. Applicants are often subjected to insufficient background checks and immigration officials are pressured to be lenient or not thorough in vetting applicants. Although the granting of RBI does not give applicants the permanent free movement and political rights citizenship does, applicants, who may have criminal intentions, could misuse it to gain a safe haven to conduct potential criminal activities in the receiving country (Scherrer and Thirion 2018, 44) and may threaten the security of another country (EP 2018).[10]

The social risks with potential political impact tend to be discussed more often as consequences of awarding golden passports, but many overlap with RBI. There is, for example, the issue of discrimination against external actors, or privileged access for the rich. While the overwhelming majority of third-country nationals who want to reside in an EU member state face limitations on the labour market and, since 2010, stricter requirements, a minority of rich foreigners in exchange for investment are offered the right of residence in the EU, and often their family members as well (Scherrer and Thirion 2018, 20-21; Fernandes et al. 2021, 26). Internal discrimination includes the already-mentioned tax advantages and tax breaks that apply only to residence permit holders and not to the country's own citizens. These advantages include tax-free foreign property ownership and income, a lump-sum tax on foreign income and

[8] Concerning money laundering, in 2021 the EC proposed that national authorities should have access to information in centralized registers. In 2023, the Council accepted a mandate to negotiate an EU legal regulation on finances originating from criminal activities.

[9] Fundamental for fighting tax evasion is the 1988 Convention on Mutual Administrative Assistance in Tax Matters which was developed by the Council of Europe and OECD. It has been signed by 147 states including Russia and China, whose citizens account for over 75 % of golden visa holders (Surak 2020, 162-163; OECD 2023).

[10] The EC notes incompatibility with the principle of sincere cooperation among member states under Article 4(3) of the Treaty on EU and refers to the necessity of compliance with citizenship under Article 20 of the TFEU (EC 2021, 23). The infringement of the principle is a question of security risks and threatens the cohesion of the single market (Fernandes et al. 2021, 20) These arguments form part of the infringement procedure against Malta and subsequently Cyprus over golden passports (EC 2022a).

lower tax rates on pensions remitted to the country of origin (EP 2019). Both RBI and CBI processes emphasize economic over human capital and are "seen as corrupting democracy by breaking down the barrier that separates the spheres of money and power" (Scherrer and Thirion 2018, 46). The process is insufficiently transparent and this may lead to weakening public and political trust in the state. This often occurs when scandals are uncovered in the awarding of RBI and CBI (ibid., 45).

2.2 European institutions wake up

European institutions have responded in a phased approach. Initially, they began a discussion by rejecting golden passports and later shifted their focus to golden visas. In the third phase, they took definitive action against golden passport schemes, including legal proceedings. The fourth phase, which is ongoing, aims to affect persistent golden visa programmes and extract benefits to the EU budget. The EP has been at the forefront of this process, having initiated the response to Malta's CBI in 2014. The EP expressed concern that national regimes allowed the "direct or indirect sale of Union citizenship for cash", undermining the idea of European citizenship (EP 2014), and asked the EC to assess this problem from the viewpoint of European values and EU legislation. In a plenary discussion, the EC agreed to do this and through European Commissioner for Justice, Fundamental Rights and Citizenship Viviane Reding asked "whether EU citizenship rights should merely depend on the size of someone's wallet or bank account" (Reding 2014). The EP and subsequently the EC then concentrated on citizenship. In 2018, the EP broadened its scope to encompass RBI (EP 2018). In a January 2019 report (EC 2019), the Commission listed not just the three countries mentioned but 20 countries that offered various forms of RBI. The European Economic and Social Committee, following a consultation, responded to this document and fully supported the EP appeals (EESC 2020).

In 2020, the EP increased its pressure "to phase out all existing citizenship by investment (CBI) or residency by investment (RBI) schemes as soon as possible" (EP 2020). In the same year, the President of the European Commission included the issue in her state of the Union address, in which she said: "be it about the primacy of European law, the freedom of the press, the independence of the judiciary or the sale of golden passports, European values are not for sale" (von der Leyen 2020).[11]

In 2022, the EP not only used its indirect right to initiate legislation according to Article 225 TFEU, but also directly quoted the commitment of EC President von der Leyen in the Political Guidelines of the Commission for 2019-2024, in which she promised to respond to EP proposals with a legislative act (von der Leyen 2019, 20). In a March 2022 resolution, the EP asked the Commission, before its mandate ran out, to propose a regulation on RBI regime conditions in the EU to

[11] In 2020, infringement procedures were launched against Cyprus and Malta concerning their CBIs. Cyprus then announced that it would end its programme. This was accelerated by the release of the Cyprus Papers. In August 2020, it was revealed that up to 1,400 people and their family members bought Cypriot citizenship including, allegedly, at least 30 people who had been prosecuted or sentenced, as well as 40 politically exposed people (TI 2020; EC 2020). In March 2022, Bulgaria announced that it was ceasing to issue golden passports and launched an investigation (TI 2023; Euronews 2022). Thus the only CBI regime to remain was in Malta. In March 2023, the EC brought action against this CBI (Case C-181/23).

limit risks and increase transparency.[12] According to the EP, this should involve a review of legislation on fighting money laundering and funding of terrorism and the long-term residence directive. The impact on visa-free travel should also be assessed. Considering that the risks of the golden schemes are shared by all member states but the gains are individual, the EP responded by proposing the establishment of a new category of the Union's own resources according to Article 311 of the Treaty on Functioning of EU "that would place a levy of a meaningful percentage on the investments made in member states as part of CBI/RBI schemes" (EP 2022a). This would demonstrate "solidarity between the member states" (Ibid.).

The attention of the European authorities intensified, with the Commission urging member states to introduce strict background checks before residence permits based on investment (EC 2022b) were issued. Although this was primarily motivated by the desire to prevent Russians and Belarusians from entering the EU, it was significant progress concerning RBI generally.

2.3 Impact of the EU pressure

The EP 2018 study was particularly critical of RBI regimes with passive investment and evaluated the golden visas in Bulgaria, Cyprus, Estonia, Ireland, Italy, Latvia, Malta and Portugal as particularly accessible. This was in consideration of other motivations offered to investors. The creation of a "naming and shaming" list, together with the pressure exerted by European institutions, had the potential to make these visas less accessible over five years. Ireland abolished its RBI programme in 2023. Did the process cause the remaining seven countries to change their arrangements, to reform their demands, leave them as they were, or even make golden visas more accessible? Only Bulgaria and Estonia responded at least partially in line with the expectations of European institutions. A simplified overview of the changes in prices is given in Table 1.

The seven countries may be divided into three groups according to the development of their visa price level: (1) The price for RBI decreased. These countries reduced the cost of investment after 2018: Italy and Cyprus. For investment in start-ups, Italy halved the requirement to €250,000. Cyprus removed the accompanying payments in its real estate model, thus decreasing the price to €300,000; (2) Little or no change: Latvia, Malta and Portugal. Latvia simplified its RBI list but left the low-cost category unchanged. Malta did something similar with its real estate visa. Portugal removed the real estate investment-based visa from its offer, but left the cheapest special visa (for €250,000) unchanged; (3) More expensive RBI: these countries responded in accordance with the expectations of "naming and shaming", restricting their most accessible offers and thereby increasing RBI price levels. This includes Bulgaria, which abolished its real estate programme and thereby increased the minimum level of investment to €500,000, and Estonia, which reduced its offer and kept the model with a higher investment of €1 million.

[12] The EP believes that the legislative rationale for an EC initiative including regulation could be found in, for example, Article 79(2) and Articles 80, 82, 87 and 114 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the EU (EP 2022a).

TABLE 1: CHANGES TO THE LOWEST OFFER IN THE MOST ACCESSIBLE RBI PROGRAMMES – ORDERED ACCORDING TO MINIMUM INVESTMENT LEVEL

Country	RBI offer in 2018	RBI offer in 2023	Change assessment	RBI from (€)
Latvia	€250,000 investment in property (+ 5 % of the value of immovable property into the national budget); OR an investment of €50,000 or €100,000 (depending on the number of employees in the company) invested in equity capital of a Latvian company; + €10,000 to the national budget; OR €280,000 of subordinated liabilities with a Latvian credit institution + €25,000 into the national budget; OR €250,000 investment in interest-free state securities dedicated to a specific purpose + €38,000 into the national budget.	Only investment in companies according to size, levels remained the same.	**Little change.** Offer simplified by decreasing options, removing passive models. The lowest threshold has no accompanying conditions and remained at a low level of investment.	60,000
Malta	Investment of €220,000 in property in the south of Malta OR €250,000 in Gozo OR €275,000 elsewhere in Malta OR rent property at minimum €9,600/year (€8,750 in the south of Malta and Gozo). Contribution of €1.15 million (consisting of €0.65 million in net contribution + €0.35 million in property purchases; and €0.15 million in investment in state bonds or projects).	Models reduced, second investment programme removed. Level for real estate programme remained same.	**Little change.** The offer was simplified, but the minimal threshold is the same.	220,000
Portugal	Requires one of the following: a capital transfer of minimum €1 million; OR the creation of at least 10 jobs; OR property purchased for at least €500,000. Other options include investments between €250,000 and €350,000 in capitalization of small/medium enterprises, buying real estate in an urban regeneration area, research activities, or artistic production or natural heritage.	Removal of real estate visa, change of levels for special visa, required investment in companies increased, new demands on job creation.	**Little change.** Special visa remains at the same low price level.	250,000
Italy	€2,000,000 investment in government bonds; OR €1,000,000 investment in limited companies or philanthropic donations; OR €500,000 investment in innovative start-ups.	Models preserved, threshold for start-ups reduced to €250,000.	**Price decrease.** Level of the smallest investment lowered.	250,000
Cyprus	€300,000 in property + deposit of €30,000 in a Cypriot bank + income of at least €30,000 a year.	Real estate model simplified by reducing other payments; offer expanded with investment into company.	**Price decrease.** Real estate model reduced, new option of investing in a company.	300,000
Bulgaria	Investment of minimum BGN600,000 (approx. €300,000) in real estate or company shares; OR investment of BGN250,000 (approx. €127,000) in poorer regions with the creation of at least 5 new jobs for Bulgarian citizens. Investment of BGN1,000,000 (approx. €510,000) in shares in Bulgarian companies traded on a Bulgarian regulated market; OR investments in treasury bonds; OR holding or shares in public companies; OR investment in Bulgarian intellectual property/patent protected inventions; OR investment in a licensed credit institution in Bulgaria under a trust management agreement. Other options include investment of BGN600,000 (approx. €300,000) in a Bulgarian company whose shares are not traded on a regulated market.	Multiple options preserved, real estate model removed. All options are more expensive.	**Price increase.** Low-cost RBI variants abolished, thus increasing minimum level of investment.	500,000
Estonia	Requires an investment of €65,000 in business activity in Estonia. Applicants are required to be the sole proprietor of the enterprise and must have a business plan. Requires a direct investment of at least €1,000,000 in a company on the Estonian Business Register.	Sole model with €1 million and no other obligations preserved.	**Price increase.** Decrease in the number of programmes and historically the most expensive model preserved.	1 million

Source: authors after Scherrer and Thirion (2018) and current data as of November 2023.

3 WHAT IS ON OFFER IN THE UNION IN 2023?

States adopt various RBI strategies. Richer countries set a higher minimum amount to be invested to achieve a greater effect on their GDP (Džankić 2018, 77). However, a higher price for a visa may attract less interest from applicants (Surak and Tsuzuki 2021, 3370). Some countries never accepted the idea of RBI; others which had a scheme have abolished it. Ireland announced the end of its programme in February 2023, and the Netherlands by 2024 (Ireland 2023; IND 2023). States that do not offer RBI include Austria, Belgium, Croatia, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Hungary, Poland, Slovenia and Sweden. There is a decreasing availability of RBI schemes, but they continue to be offered by Bulgaria, Czechia, Cyprus, Estonia, Greece, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Malta, Portugal, Romania, Slovakia and Spain. Currently there is discussion about

modifying or even abolishing RBI in Spain, and in February 2023 the Más País party introduced a bill to abolish the Spanish RBI programme or make it more expensive (Euronews 2023; Rodriguez 2023).

3.1 Types of golden visa schemes

In line with the approach taken by Surak and Tsuzuki, we categorize golden visas according to the measure of activity associated with the investment made by the applicant (Surak and Tsuzuki 2021, 3368). The passive category includes investment in real estate, funds deposited in a bank account, and purchase of government bonds and investment funds. By contrast, we count investment in companies, where there may be additional conditions, as active. Special kinds of investment constitute a specific category. The distribution of the types across countries is shown in Table 2. Investors have the privilege of choosing the offer that best aligns with their preferences. There are three countries that provide all three types of RBI programmes, making them an attractive option for clients interested in real estate, business investments, or philanthropy. Meanwhile, five states offer two categories, and the others typically only offer the active investment choice. After making an investment decision, there may be more specific options available depending on the location or nature of the business plan.

TABLE 2: TYPES OF RBI OFFERED BY COUNTRY (ORDERED ACCORDING TO OCCURRENCE AND ALPHABETICALLY)

Country	Passive investment	Active investment	Special investment
Bulgaria	x	x	x
Italy	x	x	x
Portugal	x	x	x
Cyprus	x	x	
Estonia	x	x	
Greece	x	x	
Luxembourg	x	x	
Spain	x	x	
Malta	x		
Czechia		x	
Latvia		x	
Lithuania		x	
Romania		x	
Slovakia		x	

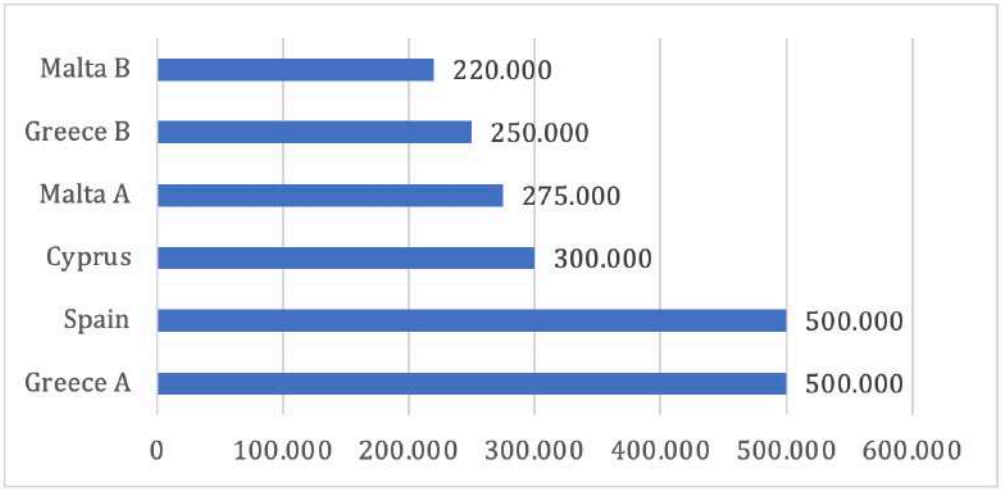
Source: authors, as of November 2023.

3.1.1 Passive investment visas

We categorize the various options for passive investments into four distinct categories. The best-known type of passive investment is the purchase of property, an option offered by Cyprus, Greece, Malta and Spain. The levels of investment required can be seen in Figure 1. In Greece and Malta we observe efforts to support the development of lagging regions by lowering the level of investment required in those places. A specific option in these two countries is rental, which must meet a time test and a minimum value of investment.[13]

[13] Depending on the location, Malta requires a rental agreement for one year (or more) and annual rent of at least €8,750 (€9,600 in the main part of the island) (Malta 2020, 5). If the tenancy is not locked in for a longer period, it constitutes the cheapest option of all, and, importantly, would be of no significant financial importance for Malta. Because the tenancy length could not be verified in official sources, rental will not be part of the final assessment. In Greece, rental must take the form of a lease of accommodation for tourists, for at least 10 years duration and at a value of at least €250,000 (€500,000 in more attractive localities). A license granted by the National Tourism Organization is also required (Greece 2023).

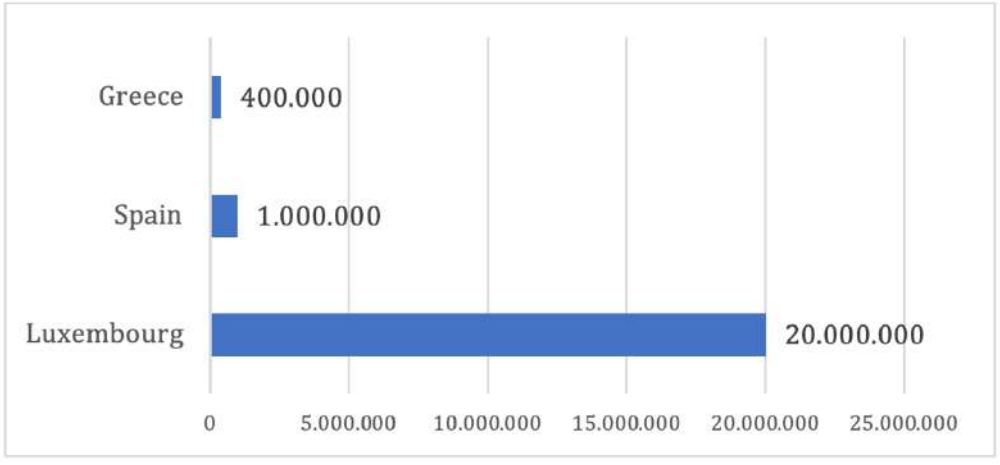
FIGURE 1: INVESTMENT IN REAL ESTATE (€)



Source: authors, as of November 2023.

Category A in Malta corresponds to a standard investment of €275,000. To incentivize investment in less prosperous regions in the south of Malta and on Gozo island, the minimum real estate investment is lowered to €220,000 (Malta B) (Malta 2020, 4-5). Greece has adopted a similar system, doubling the minimum required (to €500,000) for investments since August 2023 in Central and South Athens regional units in Attica, on the islands Mykonos and Santorini and in Thessaloniki (Greece A) (Rodriguez 2022). In other areas, the original threshold of €250,000 continues to apply (Greece B) (Greece 2023). Cyprus and Spain do not make territorial or other distinctions (Cyprus 2021; Spain 2023). Another way to invest passively is to deposit funds in a bank in the country. The levels of such investment required by Greece, Spain and Luxembourg are shown in Figure 2 (Spain 2023; Enterprise Greece 2023). In Greece and Luxembourg, there is the additional condition of the deposit remaining in the account for a stipulated period of time (Luxembourg 2023).

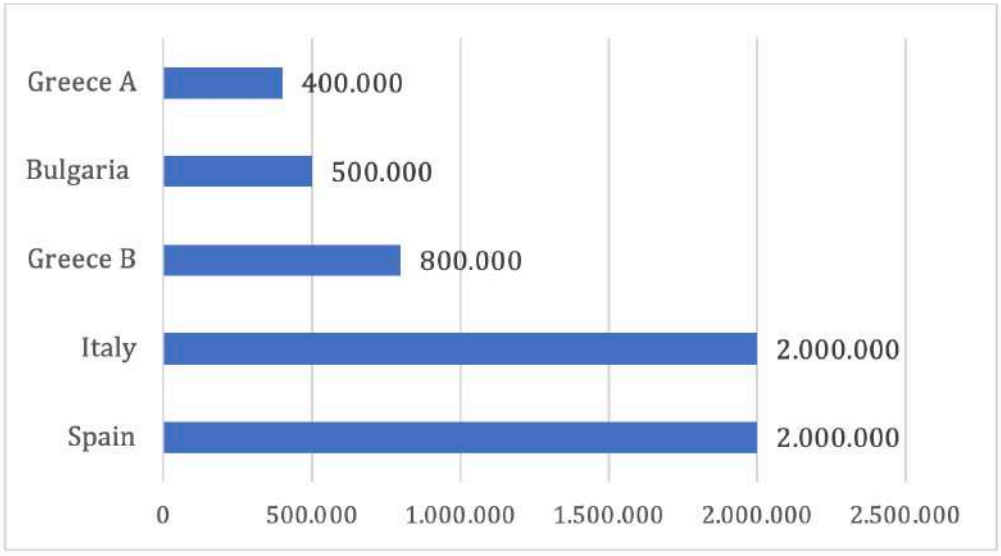
FIGURE 2: INVESTING BY DEPOSITING FUNDS IN A BANK ACCOUNT (€)



Source: authors, as of November 2023.

Spain, Italy, Bulgaria and Greece offer the option of purchasing government bonds. The required investment into the national budget is shown in Figure 3 (Italy 2023; Spain 2023; Bulgaria 2023, 6; Enterprise Greece 2023).

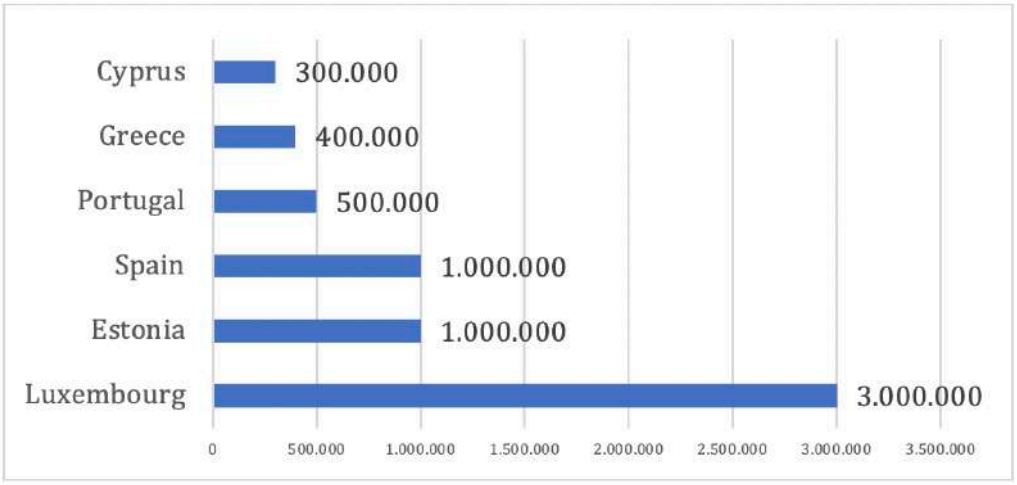
FIGURE 3: INVESTING IN GOVERNMENT BONDS (€)



Source: authors, as of November 2023.

The final passive investment option, displayed in Figure 4, involves investing in investment funds run by companies headquartered or operating in the target country (Cyprus 2021; Spain 2023; Estonia 2023; Luxembourg 2023; SEF 2023; Enterprise Greece 2023). The condition of a residual duration of three years applies to Greece A, but there is no time limit for B.

FIGURE 4: INVESTING IN INVESTMENT FUNDS (€)



Source: authors, as of November 2023.

3.1.2 Active investment visas

Investment in companies, in particular in shares or debentures, is a RBI model offered by some EU countries. Beyond the investment itself, there may be conditions such as a requirement to support innovation, job creation or a company development plan. It's worth considering whether an investor's role is truly active if their sole contribution is financial support. Without accompanying conditions, they may simply participate as a financial partner and not be involved in company growth. However, it's reasonable to assume that there is a closer relationship between the investor and the company than in passive investment in real estate. An overview of all types, including the main criteria and specific requirements as well as the company's investment sans conditions, is provided in Table 3. If job creation is required – the most common condition – the number

of new jobs is indicated. Latvia, Italy, Greece, Bulgaria, Estonia and Spain only stipulate the minimum level of investment and impose no other conditions.

TABLE 3: OVERVIEW OF CONDITIONS FOR INVESTING IN COMPANIES BY MINIMUM INVESTMENT SIZE

Country	Minimum level of investment (€)	Accompanying conditions?	Job creation	Focus and special requirements
Latvia A	50,000	NO	–	Small company + €10,000 into national budget
Romania A	70,000	YES	10	Limited company + business plan
Romania B	100,000	YES	15	Joint-stock company + business plan
Latvia B	100,000	NO	–	+ €10,000 into national budget
Italy A	250,000	NO	–	Start up
Cyprus	300,000	YES	5	Physical presence required
Greece A	400,000	YES	–	Shares have to increase capital stock and bonds refer to a new bond loan
Luxembourg	500,000	YES	5 (within three years) and selection of employees in cooperation with the National Employment Agency	Investment duration five years or start-up
Italy B	500,000	NO	–	Established company
Bulgaria	500,000	NO	–	Joint-stock companies, or enterprises with at least 50 % state or municipal ownership
Portugal*	500,000	YES	5	Jobs required if a start-up; if a company, creating or maintaining jobs for at least three years
Greece B	800,000	NO	–	
Spain**	1,000,000	NO	–	
Estonia	1,000,000	NO	–	Investment in a company listed in the Estonian business register, which invests mainly in the Estonian economy. The investor does not have to be domiciled in Estonia.
Lithuania A	1,448,000	YES	Unspecified	Requirements concerning employee salaries and company turnover
Czechia	3,000,000	YES	20	Business plan; if partner, must own at least 30 % share
Lithuania B	20,000,000	YES	150	Specific industries
Slovakia A	30,000,000	YES	50	Strategic territory, public interest, environment
Lithuania (Vilnius)	30,000,000	YES	200	Specific industries
Slovakia B	100,000,000	YES	–	Strategic territory, public interest, environment

* Portugal also offers an option when at least 10 jobs are created (if investing in low-density populated areas or low-GDP areas the requirement can be lowered by 20 %). In this case there is no minimum investment stipulated and individual contracts signed by employees prove that the requirement has been met.
** Spain does not stipulate a minimum amount if the business project creates jobs, has positive socio-economic impacts or benefits technology and innovation.
Source: authors, as of November 2023.

Leaving aside the Spanish and Portuguese models (described in the notes to Table 3 above) that do not require a particular size of investment, the lowest level is required by Latvia at €50,000. This investment (Latvia A) must be linked to a small company with up to 50 employees and an annual turnover under €10 million. An additional payment of €10,000 directly into the Latvian national budget is also required. The second model (Latvia B) is for larger companies, and the number of employees and turnover of subsidiaries is included in the total (Latvia 2022). The legal form of the company may also influence the size of the required investment. In Romania, there is a distinction between investing in limited companies (Romania A) and joint-stock companies (Romania B) (Romania 2023). In many countries, RBI is intended to support innovation. In Italy, the required investment in a start-up included on an official list (Italy A) is

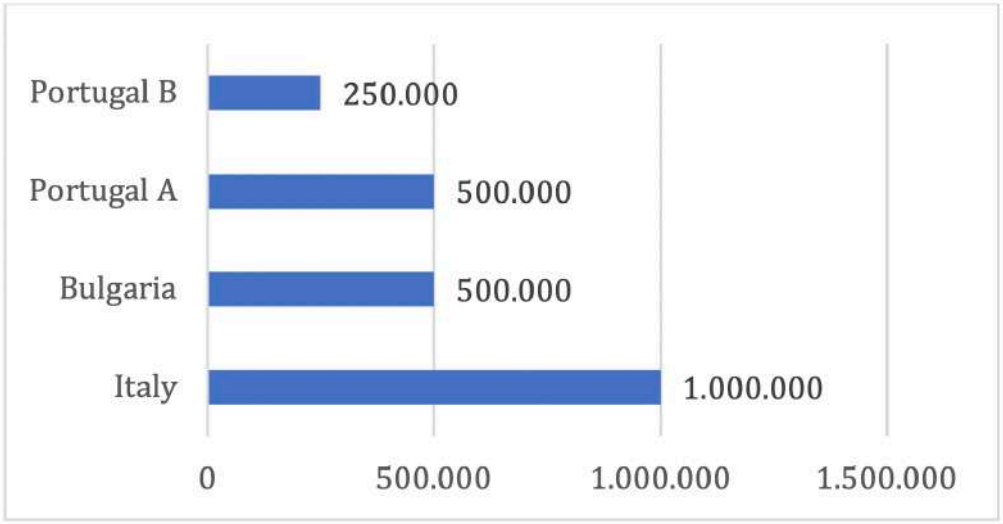
lower than that for an established company (Italy B) (Italy 2023). In Lithuania, all programmes are based on the principle of a contract between the investor and the government or an agency authorized by the government. In the low-priced model (Lithuania A), the applicant pledges to create new jobs, the number of which is not stipulated, but the salaries need to be at least 1.5 times the average monthly salary in the region where the investment is made. Another condition is a turnover of at least €2.5 million annually over the previous three years for enterprises of which the investor is the controlling entity (Migris Litva 2023a). The second and third Lithuanian programmes (Lithuania B and Lithuania (Vilnius)) are large investment schemes with impacts on employment; they apply a geographical criterion. "Large projects" are understood to mean direct investment in data processing, web servers (hosting) and related activities, or manufacturing (Migris Litva 2023b).

In Slovakia, third-country nationals may obtain a residence permit if they represent or work for a significant foreign investor, i.e., a legal entity based in Slovakia certified by the Ministry of the Economy. A significant investment according to the law (Slovakia 2021) is an investment in a project in a strategic territory (not specified further) with at least €30 million expended on the implementation of the project, 50 new jobs created in connection with the project, compliance with certain environmental regulations and confirmation from the government that the project is in the public interest (Slovakia A). In the second model (Slovakia B), the jobs requirement is replaced by a larger required investment. In both cases, the minimum investment can be halved if the investment is in so-called less-developed districts (Slovakia 2023).

3.1.3 Special investment visas

The size of the investment required for a special investment visa in the countries that offer such an option is indicated in Figure 5.

FIGURE 5: SPECIAL INVESTMENT (€)



Source: authors, as of November 2023.

This includes intellectual property investment in Bulgaria, such as articles protected by copyright, patented inventions, industrial designs or trademarks. The other option is acquisition of rights under concession contracts in Bulgaria. Both types of investment must be of around €500,000 (specified in the national currency; Bulgaria 2023, 6). A specific RBI option in Italy is investing in philanthropy. A contribution of €1 million must be directed to support a public

interest project in culture, education, migration management, scientific research or the protection of cultural or natural heritage (Italy 2023). Portugal also offers RBI in exchange for supporting research activities (Portugal A) and cultural heritage or philanthropy (Portugal B) (SEF 2023).

4 CONCLUSION: THE MOST FINANCIALLY ATTRACTIVE GOLDEN GATE

This article analyses the RBIs on offer as of 2023 and categorizes them across the EU. We note that, in 2023, 14 countries offered an RBI regime, and the conditions for obtaining visas were set at the lowest threshold (up to €500,000) in Latvia, Malta, Cyprus, Greece, and Portugal. An overview of the most accessible visas for each category of investment is provided in Table 4. Investors have the freedom to choose not only their preferred country, but also the investment programme that suits their economic potential and programme focus. This means they can choose to purchase real estate or to make a bank deposit without any additional conditions or to invest in a specific company or area, for example. Particularly critical in terms of the security risks cited earlier is the intersection of the high financial accessibility of golden visas and investor passivity or lack of accompanying conditions. From this point of view, the passive and special programmes are most risky. They require nothing but money to be realized. Specifically, they start at an amount between €200,000 and €300,000. The most accessible passive investment RBI in real estate is offered by Malta, followed by investment funds in Cyprus etc. Of the special type of investment, the most affordable option is offered by Portugal. We can expect that member states will judge the benefit of the application on its merits. Of the broad gamut of active investment models, Latvia offers the most accessible golden visa. The programme is split according to the size of the company invested in, but there are no accompanying conditions and it is the cheapest programme in the EU overall. Romania is in second place, requiring an investment of €70,000 and a business plan. This additional requirement could result in a greater focus on activities within the target country and could be assumed to serve as a positive boost for economic development.

TABLE 4: SUMMARY OF THE MOST ACCESSIBLE VISAS BY INVESTMENT CATEGORY

Investment visa type	Specification	Most accessible (by country)	Size of investment (€)
Passive	Real estate	Malta	220,000
	Investment funds	Cyprus	300,000
	Government bonds	Greece	400,000
	Bank deposit	Greece	400,000
Active	Company	Latvia	50,000 (+ 10,000)
Special	Cultural heritage and philanthropy	Portugal	250,000
	Intellectual property	Bulgaria	500,000
	Concession contract	Bulgaria	500,000
	Research	Portugal	500,000
	Philanthropy	Italy	1,000,000

Source: authors, as of November 2023.

We know that mobility appears to be as important a motivation for applicants as other incentives. How attractive is the offer if it includes guaranteed movement within the Schengen Area? Of the fourteenth countries offering RBI programmes, only Cyprus is not a Schengen member and, therefore, may be less attractive to investors. However, Cyprus is already involved in the Schengen Information System. The membership of Bulgaria and Romania has been much discussed, and

both the EP and EC supported them joining Schengen (EP 2022b; EC 2022c). The Council, in a unanimous decision, confirmed both countries as new Schengen area members for persons crossing internal air and sea borders. Controls at the internal land borders of both countries are expected to be lifted soon (EC 2023).

The expansion of the Schengen area has made the free movement factor less limiting than one might expect. The most important factor is the accessibility of the RBI programme. Therefore, Latvia remains the most financially attractive and affordable option, and Malta is the easiest in terms of acquiring real estate. These two countries require the lowest level of investment with no special conditions. Both countries offer the opportunity to travel freely throughout the EU and this might make these two countries more attractive to investors.

Although recently the shift in RBI policy has been very noticeable throughout the EU, half of the member states still offer such programmes. The pressure – created by the EP analysis and then the EC rhetoric – has met with very limited success in discouraging RBI. As described, given the potential risks and benefits of RBI, it is evident that the conditions states attach to awarding visas and the measures of activity they require of applicants are crucial. Also essential is how thorough the background checks on applicants are and the origin of the invested funds. Further research in this area is limited by data inaccessibility, although that may not necessarily be the case for analysis of EU institutions and the regulations and pressure they are placing on member states. This is a fundamental influence which may bring further developments and may manifest in a decrease in the risks that a state awarding golden visas exposes other member states to – particularly in an era of security threats posed by Russia, and other potential risks arising from conflicts that stimulate migration.

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ZLATI VIZUM: KAKO IN ZA KAKŠNO CENO LAHKO VSTOPAMO V EU?

Ponudba zlatega vizuma, znanega tudi kot program prebivanja z naložbo (RBI), je način, s katerim države članice EU privabljajo tuje investicije, vendar na drugi strani obstajajo tudi gospodarska, politična in varnostna tveganja, zato so institucije EU pogosto kritične do tovrstne prakse. Prispevek primerja stroške vseh režimov RBI v EU-27 in kategorizira njihove modele. Od leta 2018, ko je Evropski parlament objavil obsežno študijo o tem vprašanju, so nekatere države tovrstne programe omejile ali povsem ukinile. Toda kljub omenjenim pritiskom leta 2023 programe RBI še vedno ponuja kar 14 držav EU. Prispevek opisuje trenutne pogoje za pridobitev zlatega vizuma v Uniji in opredeljuje države z najnižjimi naložbenimi zahtevami. Z izjemo Cipra so vse druge ponudbe iz držav schengenskega območja, kar poudarja tveganja, povezana s prostim pretokom vlagateljev.

Ključne besede: zlata viza; države EU; program prebivanja z naložbo; investicijske migracije.

INNOVATION AS A PUBLIC INTEREST OF A DEMOCRATIC STATE: A COMPARATIVE STATISTICAL ANALYSIS OF THE EU MEMBER STATES

Simona KUSTEC and Ana ZALOKAR[1]

Today we are living in the so-called 6th wave of innovation, which is focused on the development of digital innovation, artificial intelligence and robotics. The role of the state in its fundamental function of looking after the public interest and safeguarding values in this process is of paramount importance, not only to support its success, but also because of the immeasurable consequences that these new innovative solutions have for society. Based on this background, the purpose of this paper is twofold: 1) firstly, through a descriptive summary of the review of existing literature and research, to highlight the arguments in favour of the need for the state's presence in innovation activities, through the support of different types governmental policy measures; and 2) to empirically verify which of those measures in force in EU member states are positivelly associated with the innovation success of countries. The analysis is based on the European Commission's Innovation Index Scorecard database, V-Dem Democracy and the Corruption Perception Index, and is statistically analysed using correlation tests and linear regression. The results show a clear political-geographical distribution of countries in terms of innovation performance along the lines of the development of democracies and democratic practices between 1) Western and 2) post-socialist democracies of Central and Baltic Europe and 3) Eastern Europe. The statistical analysis confirms a strong positive correlation between the high innovation performance of countries and an overall high perception of democracy, the rule of law and a low

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perception of corruption. The analysis also shows a correlation between the innovation index and variables measuring entrepreneurial education and research policies, while financial policy measures show moderate effects.

Key words: democracy; innovation; policy measures; entrepreneurial knowledge; correlation.

1 INTRODUCTION

In today's world, driven by a wave of artificial intelligence, virtual social media and virtual reality, the creation of related technological innovations is supposed to be closely linked to the ability to create and transform relevant support that enables the successful use of these innovations for real, everyday needs. Innovation is usually defined as new creations of economic and social importance, either or both of: 1) product innovation (i.e.: new – or improved – material goods as well as new intangible services as a matter of what is produced) and/or: 2) process innovation (i.e.: new ways of producing goods and services; a matter of how things are technologically or organisationally produced). If these innovations are guided or supported by government or international organisations that influence innovation processes by the use of various policy measures or instruments as tools to influence innovation processes we are beginning to talk about the existence of a specific innovation policy and the recognition of innovation as part of the public interest of the state (Borrás and Edquist 2013).

To the stated end, a number of traditional, mostly 'hard' regulation and economic policy measures, such as the share of GDP devoted to innovation incentives; as well as various 'soft' ones, aimed at the support and promotion of education and research, and campaign awarness by the state, should be applied and implemented in order to enable a public interest and value-based support of innovation. In this context, not only concrete policy measures, predominantly targeting science and technology have been applied (Borrás and Edquist 2013; Schot and Steinmüller 2018), but in successful and mature innovation cases, a broader political system support for innovation has been ensured through the 'culture of the entrepreneurial state' (Klein Woolthuis, Lankhuizen and Gilsing 2005; Mazzucato 2015; Maggor 2021). In this understanding, nation states or international organisations formulate new policies or adapt existing policies in response to changing circumstances, emerging issues or identified needs to address societal challenges, improve public services or achieve specific policy objectives to promote further growth and development through innovation, which is commonly known and defined as (innovation) policy (Radosevic 2012).

Based on such an understanding, the central aim of the paper is to examine the extent and potential strenghth the above-mentioned generally 'proverbial' state policy measures can leave on EU member states index of innovation growth in current times.[2] In doing so, we predict that there will be a strong support and consequently link between a state's innovation performance and its support for

[2] For a detailed and diverse measurement of national innovation performance, see also Iking (2009), Grupp and Schubert (2010), Adam (2014), Onea (2020).

various types of policy measures in supporting its innovation opportunities disclosed and as such also state's public interest towards innovations confirmed. In so doing various empirical data of the European Union (EU) countries will be applied to conduct the following:

- a description and classification of the current map of innovation development in and within the EU Member States and in relation to innovation in the world
- to examine and compare the strength and correlation of different types of policy measures to support innovation performance across EU Member States.

The main purpose of the paper will be to identify and assess how countries, through the use of different types of policy measures contribute to the development of new innovations, and thus to see how the states in EU understand the so-called public interest and values of innovation in their territory. We assume that it is possible to identify patterns of similarity between the development of innovation and government focus on the use of different policy measures to foster innovation. In the conclusion of the paper we will reflect on the existing typology of the EU member states innovation scale, with a special commentary on the types of governmental measures that, through a statistical analysis, prove to be strong supporters of innovation success.

2 ON THE ENTREPRENEURIAL STATE AND INNOVATION

The concept of the entrepreneurial state has been developed by advocates of a strong public sector that, through appropriate and well-designed public policy measures, promote innovative entrepreneurial private and public initiatives to foster innovation to ensure the conditions for an inclusive economic and social development power of the state (Lundvall 1992; Nelson 1993; Freeman 1995; Mazzucato 2015; Mazzucato 2016; Mazzucato 2018; Magor 2021).

Before unpacking the various policy measures that proponents of the entrepreneurial state cite to promote entrepreneurship and thus innovation through the state, it is necessary to say a few words about entrepreneurship in relation to innovation itself, while it is almost commonplace in various communities today to claim that innovation ecosystems emerge through the co-evolution of entrepreneurial activities and policy initiatives and related policy measures or instruments (Gifford, McKelvey and Saemundsson 2021).

Entrepreneurship ecosystems (EE) is often referred to as a 'new buzzword' among researchers and managers (Spigel and Harrison 2018), and can therefore be defined so broadly that what it really addresses is often left undefined (Duane and Webb 2007; Brown and Mason 2017).[3] Nevertheless, it is generally agreed that entrepreneurship here is mainly used to speak in the name of constant innovation (Sánchez 2011). Thus assessed, entrepreneurship brings benefits both at the macro or system level of innovation development and at the micro

[3] Historically, the term entrepreneur first appeared in Cantillon's Essai Sur la Nature du Commerce en Général (1755) to describe a person who buys products at known prices in order to resell them on the market at unknown prices. Later, the differences between the entrepreneur and the investor in terms of their expectations and the related evolutionary processes of their actions were pointed out. Schumpeter (1965) identified entrepreneurs as "creative destroyers" who break tight market cycles by introducing an innovation that allows them to set a price high above the cost of the resources used in production. Therefore, what really distinguishes the entrepreneur is a development process characterised by constant innovation (Sánchez 2011).

level of personal achievement and satisfaction, providing benefits of social and economic growth and development by being seen as the seedbed of new industries, renewal of industrial employment and wealth creation, and thus also social adjustment, class, race and gender barriers, as well as a source of satisfying individual satisfaction, fulfilment and achievement (Jack and Anderson 2002). Due to the wider public interest potential of entrepreneurship, governments also recognise it as an important part of their responsibility care and thus introduce special entrepreneurship policies and policy measures (Andersson et all 2012).

In the framework described, a so-called top-down exploration of innovation, as approached by policy makers through various institutional, financial and regulatory instruments of the state, is central, but as emphasised by Gifford, McKelvey and Saemundsson (2020), a bottom-up knowledge-intensive entrepreneurial activity and knowledge-related policies, implemented by various knowledge-based approaches and communities, can be a crucial point of ultimate success in order to progress towards sustainable development as well.

3 PUBLIC POLICY MEASURES AND TOOLS FOR ENTREPRENEURSHIP AND INNOVATION

Public poliy measures and tools refer to a set of different strategies, instruments and mechanisms that governments and public authorities use to implement and thus achieve policy goals and promote the public interest as defined by their own decision-making, executive or legislative institutions. Talking about different definitions of possible types of public policy measures and instruments (Howlett 1991; Vedung 1998; Hood and Margetts 2007), we can distinguish between the following sets, which serve either to restrict or to promote our activities by the state: a) institutional; b) legislative or regulatory; c) financial; c) education and research ones; d) information and campaigning. Thus, through institutional tools or measures, the state establishes its own set of institutions through the work of which it manages to tackle the set of its administrative and also public control and/or support objectives. With the adoption of legislative and other obligatory regulatory acts, documents and policies the state institutions define and manage the fields and issues of the state concern, while with financial tools they financially support certain fields and issues in a positive (like with a dedicated share of the state budget, provision of subsidies, offered to help) or negative (like taxes, tariffs, taken for state services) way. In addition to the above-mentioned instruments, which often have a direct and immediate impact, there are other types of policy instruments or measures, such as education, research, information and campaigns, which serve as a kind of soft aid provided by the state and which do not necessarily have an immediate impact. The latter types of policy instruments are mostly used to promote changes in attitudes, skills and values towards issues and topics of common interest and value systems of the wider society (e.g. public interest of the state).

Governments support for innovation includes a set of traditional regulation, institutional and financial offers (Freeman 1995; Mazzucato 2015, Piketty 2020; Gifford, McKelvey, Saemundsson, 2020), as well as specific public policy measures, especially in the area of entrepreneurial knowledge, education and research (Leitão and Baptista 2020).

As summarised by Borrás and Edquist (2013), governments and public agencies in different countries and at different times have used different types of policy

instrument (e.g. measure) mixes, including those that are highly political or purely instrumental in nature, in relation to the formulation and further implementation of innovation policy (Klein Woolthuis, Lankhuizen and Gilsing 2005; Schot and Steinmüller 2018; Maggor 2021).

4 GENERAL FACTS ABOUT (NOT)SUCCESSFUL POLICY MEASURES AND DEMOCRATIC EXPERIENCE

Although it seems that most of the time all the policy measures adopted by the states with the aim of positively supporting and stimulating the development and growth of entrepreneurial activities that promote innovation count, many scholars and researchers confirm through their studies that this is not always necessarily the case. It was Marianne Mazzucato, in her work on the Entrepreneurial State (2015), who, when advocating the existence of the public sector in the promotion of entrepreneurial activities and innovations, warned against six myths or false expectations about the state-supported drivers of innovation.[4] She analytically confirmed that the state's financial policy measures that support research for innovation, knowledge economy that promotes only patents, low taxation on business investment and the state's reserved attitude towards venture capital have negative rather than positive results for the successful development and growth of innovations and effective innovation policies in this regard (ibid., 101-123).[5]

Further, government educational policy measures initially linked with support for special curicular programs or courses on entrepreneurship knowledge through various educational ladders from compulsory to lifelong learning education cycles turn out to have positive impact on innovation success (Galvão, Marques and Ferreira 2020). This leads to the development of specific courses, being known as Entrepreneurial Education and Training (ETT), which represents academic education or formal training interventions that share the broad aim of equipping individuals with the entrepreneurial mindsets and skills to support their participation and performance in a range of entrepreneurial activities, including mindsets and socio-emotional skills such as self-confidence, leadership, creativity, risk-taking, motivation, resilience and self-efficacy; general awareness and perceptions of entrepreneurship as necessary skills for innovation success (Eurydice 2012; Valerio, Parton and Robb 2014).[6]

Last but not least, it is also a temporal and political-geographical moment that we need to respect when assessing the success of various public policy measures to achieve and promote certain files and issues of public interest. Undoubtedly, there has been a scientific voice of support for various entrepreneurial activities to promote greater innovation success for many years, but the nature of

[4] Mazzucato (2015, 83-112) identifies the following 6 myths about drivers of innovation and ineffective innovation policy: Myth 1: Innovation is about R&D; Myth 2: Small is Beautiful; Myth 3: Venture Capital is Risk Loving; Myth 4: We Live in a Knowledge Economy – Just Look at all the Patents!; Myth 5: Europe's Problem is all about Commercialization; Myth 6: Business Investment Requires 'Less Tax and Red Tape'.

[5] Interestingly, all the stated resonate with a worldwide survey conducted by 'real-life' entrepreneurs, who cite that in-adavnced skilled mindset and knowledge can often be a potential barrier to their entrepreneurial opportunity and success (GEM 2023).

[6] Even in the context of debates about whether entrepreneurship can be learned, there is a growing global interest in EET, as evidenced by the increase in course offerings in educational institutions (Kuratko 2005) and its inclusion in international agendas and programmes, such as the European Commission's Oslo Agenda and the Global Entrepreneurship Monitor.

innovation, the nature of public problems, as well as also political conditions have been changing all the time. Every era in which we live is full of more or less unpredictable natural and human, and therefore also political trials and tribulations faced by economically and politically stable and strong countries around the world, as well as much more fragile ones. Including in Europe, where due to their previous authoritarian political history, the post-communist democracies of Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) and the Baltic states face a very different situation from the older Western European democracies by Huntington's first wave of democratisation (Huntington 1991). In this context, fair and regular elections, the rule of law, human rights, including personal, social and economic freedoms, equality, tolerance, transparency and accountability are considered to be the fundamental foundations of democracy and preceding democratisation processes (Huntington 1991; Weingast 1997; Held 2006; Ágh 2022), and a direct negative correlation between economic freedom, entrepreneurship and innovation potential and weak state regulatory frameworks and corruption as the main cause of (also) economic inequality and non-transparency a case (Nwabuzor 2005; Uslaner 2009).

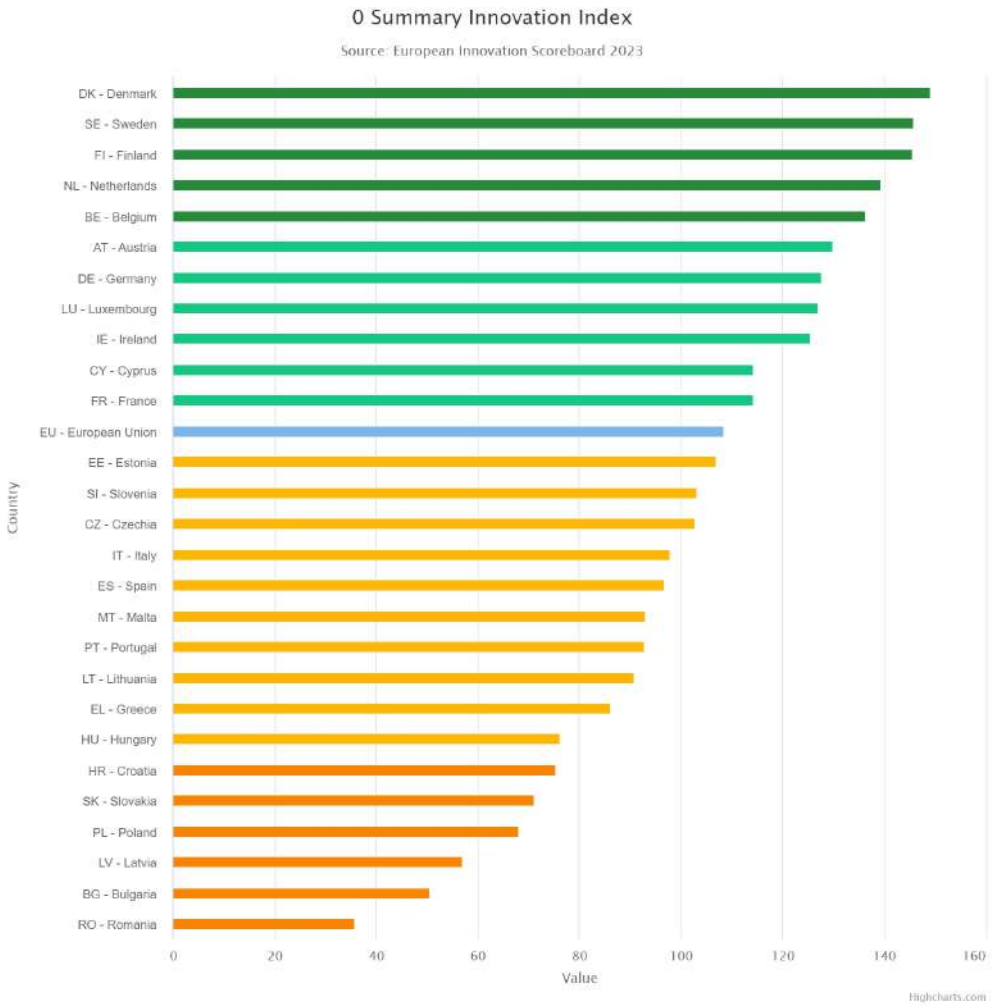
5 EU AND GLOBAL INNOVATION MAP

EU member states can be divided into 4 prevailing groups of country innovators according to the EU Innovation Scoreboard (2023), as monitored by the European Commission: 1) innovation leaders; 2) strong innovators, 3) moderate innovators and 4) emerging innovators.[7] As can be seen for the last year monitored in 2023 (Figure 1), the north- and west-centric old European demoracies are present in either the first or second group of innovation leaders or strong innovators (coloured dark and light green in Figure 1), while the southern European Member States and the post-socialist CEE and Baltic countries are all close to or below the EU average innovation score, either represented in a group of moderate innovator countries (Estonia, Slovenia, Czech Republic, Lithuania, Hungary, coloured dark orange in Figure 1) or emerging ones (Croatia, Slovakia, Poland, Latvia, Bulgaria and Romania, coloured dark orange in Figure 1). Hungary, coloured yellow-orange in Figure 1) or emerging innovators (Croatia, Slovakia, Poland, Latvia, Bulgaria and Romania, coloured dark orange in Figure 1).[8] See Table 1 in the Appendix for details.

[7] The following classification scheme is used to determine performance group membership (ibid): 1) Innovation Leaders are all countries with a relative performance in 2023 above 125% of the EU average in 2023; 2) Strong Innovators are all countries with a relative performance in 2023 between 100% and 125% of the EU average in 2023; 3) Moderate Innovators are all countries with a relative performance in 2023 between 70% and 100% of the EU average in 2023; 4) Emerging Innovators are all countries with a relative performance in 2023 below 70% of the EU average in 2023.

[8] The time series data between 2016 and 2022 show a similar picture, but with an interesting performance growth over time in some of the CEE countries. Positive growth over time can be observed in Estonia, Lithuania and Croatia, while Bulgaria even shows a decline in the innovation growth index. In Slovenia, Slovakia and Latvia there is no visible progress and in Romania, Poland, Hungary and the Czech Republic very little (EC 2023).

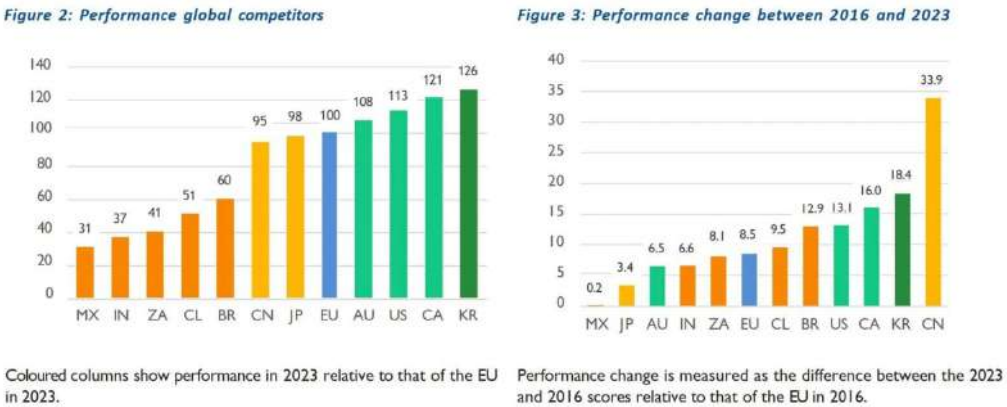
FIGURE 1: EU SUMMARY INNOVATION INDEX 2023



Source: EU Innovation Scoreboard (EC 2023).

Placing the current innovation performance of the EU Member States in a wider global innovation system (Figure 2), we can see that the EU is close to or slightly behind the best innovating countries from North America, Australia and the leading Asian countries of South Korea, China and Japan, as well as Brazil (ibid., 34-47).

FIGURE 2: PERFORMANCE OF EU MEMBER STATES IN THE GLOBAL INNOVATION SYSTEM ENVIRONMENT IN 2023 AND IN THE LAST SEVEN YEARS (2016-2023)



Source: EU Innovation Scoreboard (EC 2023, 6).

6 EMPIRICAL ANALYSIS

Methodological notes
The main motive of the empirical part of the paper is to use the database of the EU Innovation Scoreboard Index (2023) to test the described theoretical assumptions about the (dis)links between the innovation maturity of a country and its pursuit of regulatory and financial policy measures and more specific entrepreneurial and educational ones to achieve innovation success in the current period in the EU Member States. Thus, on the basis of the empirical background described in the empirical part of the paper, we assume that a higher level of support of a country through a variety of measures to promote business ideas and knowledge is reflected in a higher level of innovation maturity of a country, which is reflected through general regulatory measures to ensure a stable liberal democratic environment respecting the rule of law and democratic principles of transparency (e. e.g. the perception of a low level of corruption in a country), as well as support for financial, entrepreneurial and educational policy measures, but not necessarily (judging by the results of the literature review) also public financial support for R&D or related financial policy measures.

We have used the correlation test for the aims to test the below stated hypothesis, using the data provided on the website data.europa.eu in the European Innovation Scoreboard (2023), where the performance of EU national innovation systems is measured by the Summary Innovation Index (SII), which is a composite indicator obtained by taking an unweighted average of the 32 indicators (the underlined indicators in the Appendix to Table 2) (ibid).

H1: Correlation between selected policy regulatory mechanisms of democracy, such as the perception of the rule of law, the corruption perception index and thus the liberal democracy index, and the SII exists.

H2: There is no correlation between selected financial policy measures, such as the annual GDP growth, total entreprenurial activity, government procurement of advanced technology products and SII.

H3: Correlation between educational policy measures, such as the entrepreneurial and training scholl courses, employment in knowledge-intensive services and SII exists.

All the results will also provide an up-to-date picture of the so-called entrepreneurial state in the case of the EU Member States, with their different histories of democratic and state-centred practices, also in terms of the state's attitude towards either more liberal private or state-regulated monopolistic support for entrepreneurship and innovation.

7 RESULTS

In all of the following results, the correlation between two numerical variables has been examined.

From a statistical point of view, the following hypothesis was used as the null hypothesis in the correlation test: There is no correlation between the two numerical variables, and

Null hypothesis: there is no correlation between the two numerical variables (the correlation coefficient is zero).

Alternative hypothesis: there is a correlation between the two numerical variables (the correlation coefficient is not equal to zero).

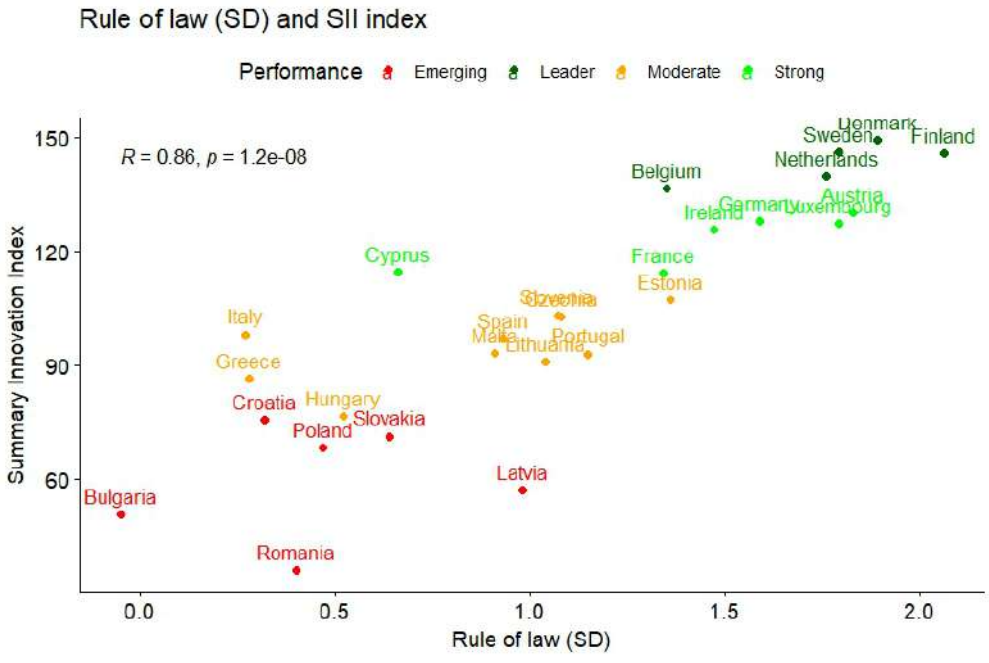
If the calculated p-value in the test is less than the 0.05 significance level, the results are statistically significant and the correlation is confirmed. If the calculated p-value is greater than the significance level, the results are not statistically significant and the correlation cannot be confirmed.

7.1 Strong positive impacts between regulatory policy measures of democracy and innovation

The first variable we are interested in is the Rule of Law. Trust is important for creating a business environment for undertaking risky innovative activities. Measures of the rule of law capture differences in the extent to which people have confidence in and abide by the rules of society. The Rule of law Index measures differences in the quality of contract enforcement, property rights, the police, the judicial system, as well as the prevalence of crime and violence (European Innovation Scoreboard 2023).

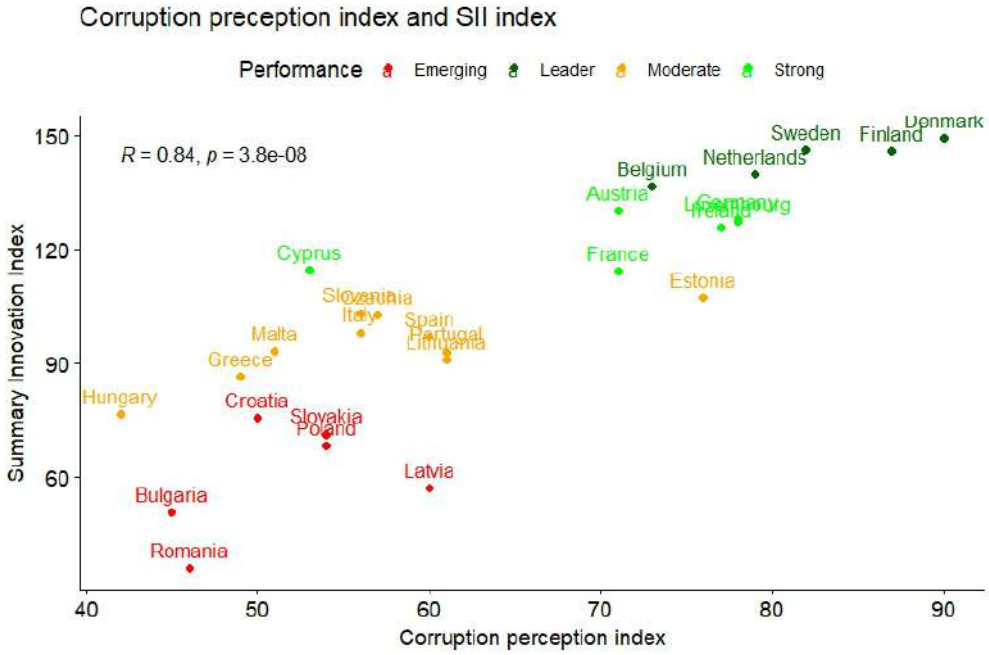
The Rule of Law can take values from -2.5 to 2.5. We have used the Spearman correlation test, while the data do not necessarily come from a bivariate normal distribution. The p-value of the test was 0.000000012 and the.computed measure of association is 0.86, which shows strong positive correlation. On Figure 3 can be observed that Latvia is the country that stands out with relatively high value for Rule of Law 0.98, but low value of Summary Innovation Index of 56.967. Also Romania has the Rule of Law value at 0.40 and the SII Index 35.852. This is quite low compared to Croatia, Poland and Hungary which have similar Rule of Law scores but significantely higher SII Index.

FIGURE 3: CORRELATION BETWEEN RULE OF LAW AND SII INDEX



A linear regression model was also used in the statistical evaluation of the comparison between the Rule of Law Index and the SII Index. When testing the linear relationship with the null hypothesis that there is no relationship and the alternative hypothesis that there is a linear relationship, the calculated p-value is 1.74e-08 at the 0.05 level of significance, which confirms the alternative hypothesis. The estimated regression line would be SII = 54.526 + 44.597*(Rule of Law).

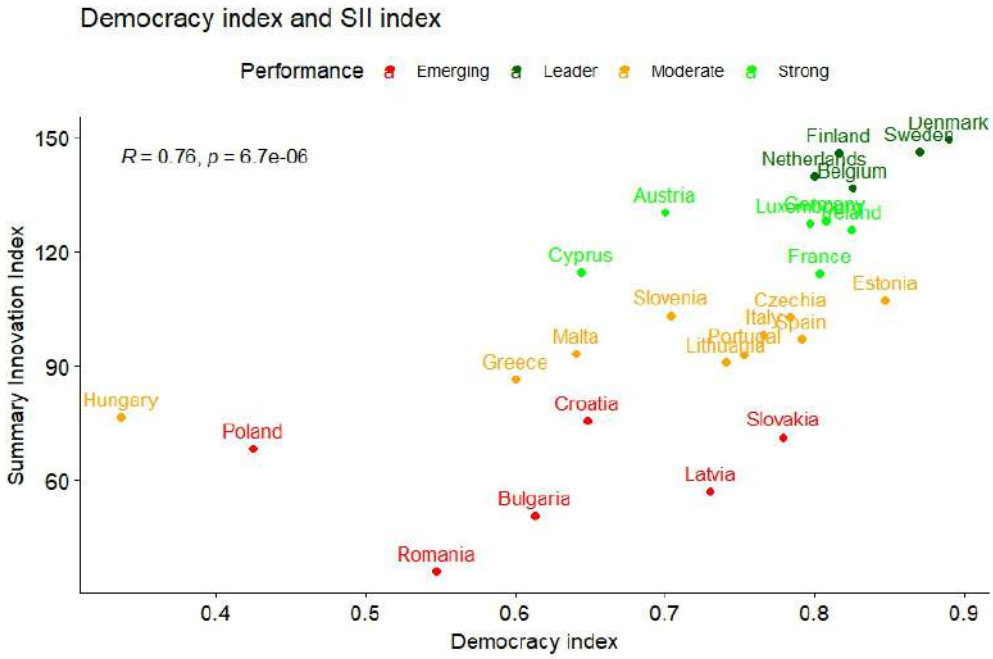
FIGURE 4: CORRELATION FOR CORRUPTION PRECEPTION AND SUMMARY INNOVATION INDEX



The next variable of interest was the Corruption Prevention Index. Transparency International published the 2023 Corruption Preception Index for 180 countries and territories around the world, using scores ranging from 0 for highly corrupt to 100 for very clean. We have used the data for 27 EU countries and examined whether there is any correlation between the Corruption Preception variable and the SII Index. The results show that the calculated p-value is 0.000000038 and the calculated correlation coefficient is 0.84, which means that there is a strong positive correlation. The results are presented in Figure 4.

Based on the results of the first two regulatory policy measures, the correlation test for the variables Liberal Democracy Index and Summary Innovation Index was also carried out. The Liberal Democracy Index, taken from the Democracy Report of the V-Dem Institute (2023) for the year 2022, is scored from 0 to 1, with 1 being the most liberal. The correlation between the Liberal Democracy Index and the SII can be confirmed, while the p-value for the Spearman test is 0.0000067 and the rate of association is high at 0.76. Upon further attention, the CEE countries, especially Hungary and Poland on the extreme low and Slovakia on the high scale of liberal democracy, appeared of special additional interest (Figure 5).

FIGURE 5: CORRELATION BETWEEN LIBERAL DEMOCRACY INDEX AND SUMMARY INNOVATION INDEX

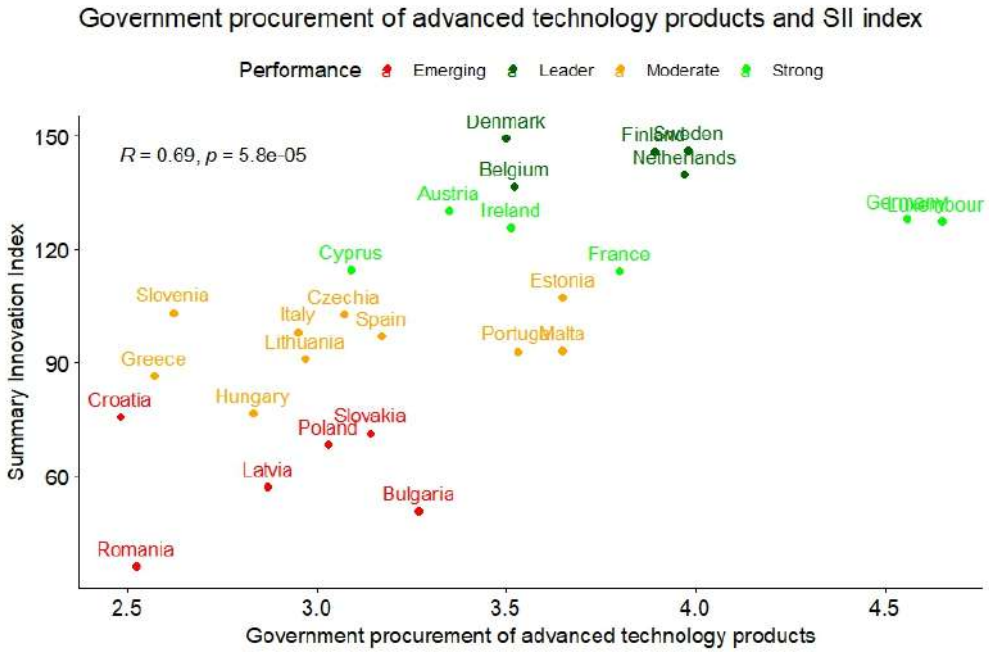


From the tests presented above, we can conclude that there is a strong association between the observed regulatory measures of democracy and innovation, while the Rule of Law, Corruption Perception and, as the icing on the cake, the Liberal Democracy Index are all positively correlated with the Summary Innovation Index. Hypothesis H1 is confirmed.

7.2 Intermediate effects of financial policy measures and innovation

R&D expenditure in the public sector and R&D expenditure in the business sector are two of the 32 indicators included in the average that make up the Summary Innovation Index, which shows the overall importance of investment in R&D as recognised by the European Commission (2023). For this reason, these two variables cannot be included in our research. Therefore, for the research purposes of considering the financial impact associated with innovation, we have considered the variables Annual GDP Growth, Total Entrepreneurial Activity and Government Procurement of Advanced Technology Products from the given data. The data for the Annual GDP Growth variable did not confirm the correlation with the SII Index. The calculated p-value for the Pearson correlation test was 0.08, indicating that the results are not statistically significant. Similarly, the data for the variable total business activity did not confirm the correlation with the SII, while the computed p-value for the Spearman correlation test was 0.47. The variable government procurement of high technology products (from 1 to 7 best) was considered next. The p-value for the correlation test was 0.000058 and the calculated associated rate was 0.69, confirming the positive correlation between the variables. The scatter plot for the given data is shown in Figure 6.

FIGURE 6: CORRELATION BETWEEN GOVERNMENT PROCUREMENT OF HIGH-TECH PRODUCTS AND THE SII INDEX

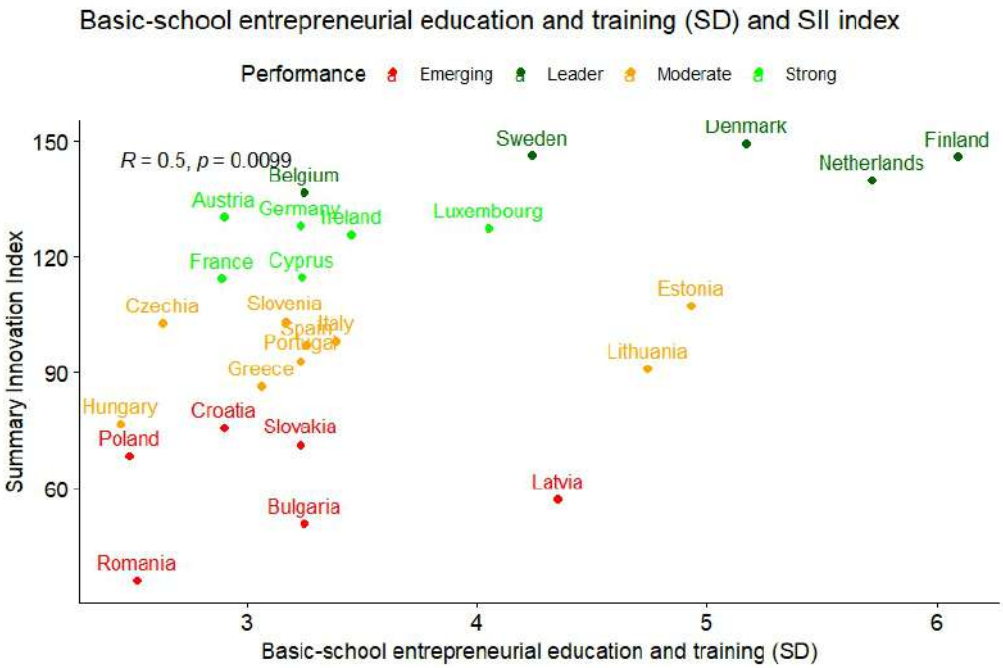


Hypothesis H2 cannot be confirmed, although we found some correlation between the variables Government procurement of advanced technology products, but however we did not confirm the association between Annual GPD Growth and Total Entreprenurial Activity to the SII Index.

7.3 Education policy meassures count for innovation

Given the importance of educationl policy tools and innovations, we analysed whether there is a correlation between the Basic-school entrepreneurial and training and SII Index exists. Basic-school entrepreneurial education and training measures the extent to which training in creating or managing SMEs is incorporated within the education and training system at primary and secondary levels (European Innovation Scoreboard 2023), the bigger value the better the incomporation. Note that there are 27 data included in the statistical test, while data for Basic-school entrepreneurial and training for Malta is missing. We used the Spearman correlation test, where the computed p-value is 0.0099 and computed correlation coefficient R being 0.5, confirmed correlation is moderate. Figure 7 shows that there are some extreme or interesting data. Such a case is Latvia, where the SII index is quite low at 56.967, while the Basic School Entrepreneurial Education and Training is quite high at 4.35.

FIGURE 7: CORRELATION BETWEEN BASIC-SCHOOL ENTREPRENEURIAL AND TRAINING AND THE SII INDEX



The next variable we were interested in was comparing the Employment share in Knowledge-intensive services, but given that this variable is one of the 32 indicators included in the SII Index, the statistical analysis would not be valid. However, it is of a great importance that the European Comission recognises the inclusion of Employment in Knowledge-intensive activities as a part of the Summary Innovation Index. Hypothesis H3 can be confirmed, while basic-school entrepreneurial and training are correlated with the SII Index. Also Employment share in Knowledge-intensive servises is in the direct correlation to the SII, while it is a part of the index.

8 CONCLUDING REMARKS AND COMMENTS

Just as decades ago political scientists classified the maturity of democracies according to the age of their countries' experience of the democratisation process in the first, second and third waves, an identical classification can be applied in the case of their innovation maturity - the countries of the first, second and third innovation growth groups correspond to their historical development of democratic processes as of the first, second and third group of democracies. Thus, the most important and powerful finding of the study is the recognition that democracy and innovation go hand in hand in today's EU Member States. Highly innovative EU Member States are those that, while taking a top-down approach with their own policy designs to stimulate support for innovation by providing a predictable, stable and transparent democratic and legal environment, also recognise the bottom-up importance of fostering knowledge focused on entrepreneurial behaviour and innovation skills of the relevant expert and innovation communities. As in several studies that preceded this analysis, it appears that the long-term success of a country is not based solely on its money, but even more on the trust, security and regulatory predictability of its functioning.

All these findings provide further motivation to study the impact of existing and potentially new smart regulation and related policy measures to serve future innovation growth, as well as also various 'soft' campaign and promotion policy measures to raise public awareness of the importance of innovation for the further development and growth of society, together with the innovation governance modes of succesful bottom-up triggers.

Finally, it is also worth noting that the findings presented in this paper apply to the case of EU Member States, but have not been tested for the rest of the world (Figure 2), especially for those countries that perform even better than the EU and its most mature innovation members.

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APPENDIX

TABLE 1: INNOVATION ENVIRONMENT WITH A FOCUS ON CEE AND THE BALTIC STATES

	Innovation index in 2023[2]	Patents granted by EPO in 2022[3]	GDP growth (%) in 2022[1]	GDP for R&D in 2020[1]	GDP for education in 2021[1]	Rule of law[4]	Corruption perception Index in 2023 (CPI)[5]	Entrepren. norms[6]
Romania	33,1	16	4,8	0,47	3,7	8,3	46	3,61
Bulgaria	46,7	22	3,4	0,85	4	7,5	45	n.a.
Latvia	52,5	9	2	0,71	6	8,5	60	5,83
Poland	62,8	188	4,9	1,39	5,3	7,8	54	4,23
Slovakia	65,6	17	1,7	0,91	4,6	8,3	54	n.a.
Croatia	69,6	13	6,3	1,25	5,5	7,3	50	3,38
CEE and Baltics	70,3	43,9	4	1,31	5,1	8,3	54,6	n.a.
Hungary	70,4	54	4,6	1,61	4,8	6,3	42	4,09
Lithuania	83,8	20	1,9	1,16	4	9,8	61	6,41
Italy	90,3	2637	3,7	1,53	4,3	n.a.	56	4,43
Czech Republik	94,7	85	2,5	1,99	5,1	9	57	n.a.
Slovenia	95,1	46	5,4	2,15	5,8	8,5	56	3,88
Estonia	98,6	13	-1,3	1,79	6,6	10	76	n.a.
EU	100	30546	3,5	2,32	5,1	n.a.	65	n.a.
Germany	117,8	12563	1,8	3,14	4,7	n.a.	78	4,65
Austria	119,9	1151	5	3,2	5,1	n.a.	71	3,86
OECD	n.a.	n.a.	2,8	2,96	5,3	n.a.	n.a.	n.a.
World	n.a.	81754	3,1	2,63	4,3	n.a.	n.a.	n.a.

Sources: [1]World Bank Data (2023), [2]European Commission (2023), [3]EPO (2023)[9], [4]Bertelsmann Transformation Index (2023)[10], [5]Transparency International (2023)[11], [6]GEM (2023)[12].

[9] The European Patent Office (EPO) examines European patent applications, enabling inventors, researchers and companies from around the world to obtain protection for their inventions in up to 45 countries through a centralised and uniform procedure that requires just one application. It provides EPO Data Hub containing data covering the last five years for European patent applications and granted patents at global and country levels. For more see EPO (2023), available at https://www.epo.org/en/about-us/statistics.

[10] The Bertelsmann Stiftung's Transformation Index (BTI) analyses transformation process towards democracy and market economy in younger democracies, like CEE countries are. For more see: BTI (2023) at https://bti-project.org/en/?&cb=00000.

[11] The CPI ranks 180 countries and territories around the globe by their perceived levels of public sector corruption, scoring on a scale of 0 (highly corrupt) to 100 (very clean). CPI is provided by Transparency Intrenational. For more see CPI (2023), available at https://www.transparency.org/en/cpi/2023.

[12] Global Entrepreneurship Monitor (GEM) carries out survey-based research on entrepreneurship and entrepreneurship ecosystems around the world. It is a networked consortium of national country teams primarily associated with top academic institutions, collecting data on entrepreneurship directly from individual entrepreneurs. The GEM entreprenurial norms data in the table covers the extent to which social and cultural norms encourage or allow actions leading to new business methods or activities. For more see GEM (2023), available at https://www.gemconsortium.org/data.

TABLE 2: 32 INDICATORS WHICH COMBINE THE SUMMARY INNOVATION INDEX (UNDERLINED)

1.1 Human resources
1.1.1 New doctorate graduates
1.1.2 Population with tertiary education
1.1.3 Population involved in lifelong learning
1.2 Attractive research systems
1.2.1 International scientific co-publications
1.2.2 Scientific publications among the top 10% most cited
1.2.3 Foreign doctorate students as a % of all doctorate students
1.3 Digitalisation
1.3.1 Broadband penetration
1.3.2 Individuals with above basic overall digital skills
2.1 Finance and support
2.1.1 R&D expenditure in the public sector
2.1.2 Venture capital expenditures
2.1.3 Direct and indirect government support of business R&D
2.2 Firm investments
2.2.1 R&D expenditure in the business sector
2.2.2 Non-R&D innovation expenditures
2.2.3 Innovation expenditures per person employed
2.3 Use of information technologies
2.3.1 Enterprises providing ICT training
2.3.2 Employed ICT specialists
3.1 Innovators
3.1.1 SMEs introducing product innovations
3.1.2 SMEs introducing business process innovations
3.2 Linkages
3.2.1 Innovative SMEs collaborating with others
3.2.2 Public-private co-publications
3.2.3 Job-to-job mobility of HRST
3.3 Intellectual assets
3.3.1 PCT patent applications
3.3.2 Trademark applications
3.3.3 Design applications
4.1 Employment impacts
4.1.1 Employment in knowledge-intensive activities
4.1.2 Employment in innovative enterprises
4.2 Sales impacts
4.2.1 Exports of medium and high technology products
4.2.2 Knowledge-intensive services exports
4.2.3 Sales of new-to-market and new-to-firm innovations
4.3 Environmental sustainability
4.3.1 Resource productivity
4.3.2 Air emissions by fine particulates
4.3.3 Environment-related technologies

INOVACIJE KOT JAVNI INTERES DEMOKRATIČNE DRŽAVE: PRIMERJALNA STATISTIČNA ANALIZA DRŽAV ČLANIC EU

Danes živimo v tako imenovanem šestem inovacijskem valu, ki se osredotoča na razvoj digitalnih inovacij, umetne inteligence in robotike. Vloga države v njeni temeljni funkciji skrbi za javni interes in varovanje vrednot v tem procesu je izrednega pomena. Država podpira uspešni inovacijski razvoj, hkrati s tem pa tudi raznolike posledice, ki jih imajo te nove inovativne rešitve za družbo. Namen tega prispevka je dvojen: 1) najprej z deskriptivno metodo pregleda obstoječe literature in raziskav izpostaviti argumente v prid potrebi po prisotnosti države v inovacijskih dejavnostih, ki mora biti v primeru javnega interesa in družbenih vrednot najprej usmerjena na temeljno sistemsko raven, predvsem skozi podpiranje različnih vrst javnopolitičnih ukrepov; in 2) empirično preveriti, kateri vladni javnopolitični ukrepi v državah članicah EU so pozitivno povezani z njihovo inovacijsko uspešnostjo. Empirične podatke za preverjanje bomo pridobili iz podatkovnih zbirk Innovation Index Scorecard Evropske komisije ter V-Dem Democracy in Corruption Perception Indexa ter jih statistično analizirali z uporabo korelacijskih testov in linearne regresije. Dobljeni rezultati pokažejo jasno politično-geografsko porazdelitev držav glede na inovacijsko uspešnost v skladu z razvojem demokracij in demokratičnih praks med 1) zahodnimi in 2) postsocialističnimi demokracijami srednje in baltske Evrope ter 3) vzhodno Evropo. Statistična analiza potrjuje močno pozitivno korelacijo med visoko inovacijsko zrelostjo držav in splošno visoko zaznavo demokracije, pravne države in nizko zaznavo korupcije. Analiza pokaže tudi povezavo med inovacijskim indeksom in spremenljivkami, ki merijo javnopolitične ukrepe držav, povezane s podporo podjetniškemu izobraževanju in raziskovalnimi politikami, medtem ko neposredni finančni ukrepi kažejo zmerne učinke. Zaključki članka nesporno pokažejo na pomembno pozitivno povezanost med predvidljivo in stabilno državno oporo inovacijam ter dejansko inovacijsko uspešnostjo demokratično razvitih držav. Takšne države inovacije prepoznavajo kot eno od pomembnih nalog v skrbi za splošni razvoj ne zgolj ozko posamičnih inovacij, temveč tudi širšega družbenega, gospodarskega, pa tudi političnega razvoja, utemeljenega na predvidljivih ter transparentnih pravilih in inovacijske kulture, oprte na vrednotah znanja.

Ključne besede: demokracija; inovacije; javnopolitični ukrepi; podjetniško znanje; korelacija.

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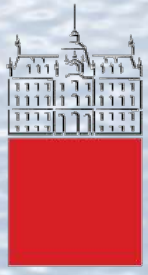

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