

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

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*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 (Bierwiazzonek, 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. Bierwiazzonek, 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 Cichočka (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:<sup>2</sup> 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

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<sup>2</sup> 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 backlash 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.<sup>3</sup>

#### 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.

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<sup>3</sup> 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 starting 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 Cichočka (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 nedemokratskih 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; politično zaupanje; informacije; ustanove; Slovenija.