



# **Conspiracy theories in Bosnia and Herzegovina**

a psychological study of conspiracy theory  
beliefs in a post-conflict society

Vladimir Turjačanin :: Srđan Puhalo :: Duška Šain

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## **Foreword by the editor**

Societal and institutional trust are essential elements and preconditions for any functioning and vital democracy. Yet, these dimensions of trust are not very pronounced in transition societies in South East Europe in general and in Bosnia and Herzegovina in particular. Indeed, the image of politics in Bosnia and Herzegovina rather seems to be perceived as toxic with people neither trusting institutions nor politicians. Such preconditions provide fertile ground for political mobilization by means of spreading fear and further mistrust – this feeds conspiracy theories and helps them flourish.

While there will be few people contesting the claim that conspiracy theories are very much present in Bosnia and Herzegovina, a more in-depth understanding of the patterns of conspiracy theories in this society is lacking. Therefore, this contribution of scientists from the University of Banja Luka to an empirics-based regional research project is very relevant. It provides one of the most important ingredients for an antidote against the dangerous societal and political consequences of conspiracy theories: a rigid, fact-based analysis.

The Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung Bosnia and Herzegovina gladly supported this important research and hopes that it will contribute to more awareness and understanding of the phenomenon of conspiracy theories and provide impulses for further research in Bosnia and Herzegovina as well as in the region.

Marius Müller-Hennig

December 2018



## Preface

The text before you is the result of an empirical study in which we investigated the phenomenon of belief in conspiracy theories, primarily from a psychological point of view. The english version of the text is the short and condensed version of the full text published in Bosnia and Herzegovina in local languages. Although the subject we are dealing with is not new, it has not been studied much in our country and represents a pioneering research in the postconflict context. The text is written mostly in an academic manner, where an overview of the previous theoretical and empirical knowledge of the conspiracy theories is presented, followed by analysis of empirical data from the field. Finally, at the end we present discussion of findings and recommendations. Despite this academic style of writing, we tried to make the text readable to those who are not completely familiar with the social sciences.

We must keep in mind, while reading this text, that our research is only an overview of the current social and political context of Bosnia and Herzegovina. The fieldwork was carried out during the summer of 2018, when political passions in the year of general elections were heightened. Such an atmosphere, clearly, can leave the consequences of any sociopsychological research, and especially the "hot" topic of the conspiracy theories. Bearing this in mind, but also knowing it is a fresh study of a current social phenomenon, we hope that the manuscript will represent a valuable contribution to knowledge in the field of social and psychological sciences.

We would like to thank Iris Žeželj from the University of Belgrade, Faculty of Philosophy, and Nebojša Blanuša from the University of Zagreb, Faculty of Political Sciences, who first read the working version of the manuscript and made their suggestions to guide us into the final version of the text. Also, we would like to thank Marius Müller-Hennig and Tanja Topić, the members of the Friedrich Ebert Stiftung B&H office, for their support and useful guidelines in conducting the study.

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## Abstract

Conspiracy theories in Bosnia and Herzegovina: a psychological study of conspiracy theory beliefs in a post-conflict society

The main aim of this research study is to identify what beliefs in conspiracy theories are held by citizens of Bosnia & Herzegovina, how prevalent these beliefs are, and what other determining factors are at work in the holding of such convictions. A conspiracy theory can be broadly defined as a set of oversimplified and in many cases false beliefs in omnipresent and nefarious groups, that are driven by harmful and evil aims, and that coordinate the activities that they organise.

The design of the study is descriptive-correlational, based on quantitative surveys. Participation in the study was anonymous and voluntary. In a random sample of citizens of Bosnia & Herzegovina, during June 2018, direct surveys of 1,046 respondents were carried out (53% of which were women). The predominant age of respondents was 25 years (the median age being 42 years). The ethnic structure of the sample: 14% Croats, around 42% Bosniaks, around 31% Serbs, 11% Bosnians, and around 2% of respondents declared themselves as Other. Our focal variable was *Belief in conspiracy theories*, and was assessed on a scale containing 24 statements that express particular conspiracy theories. Half of these items related to locally specific conspiracy theories, and the other half represented contemporary global conspiracy theories. The other measurements used in the study included personality traits, importance of identification with social groups, social cynicism, authoritarianism, perception of injustice, intergroup emotions, political and social participation, nationalism, social conservatism, trust in institutions and political orientation.

The results show that around 96% of respondents are convinced by at least one conspiracy theory out of the 24 that were listed. With regard to the prevalence of the type of the conspiracy theories in the overall sample, two thirds of the respondents believe that privatization is the result of collaboration between the mafia and state institutions and that large corporations aim at destroying small market interests throughout the world.

A slightly smaller number of respondents think that large multinational pharmaceutical companies spread diseases deliberately in order to boost their sales. Next in rank order is the conviction that the fate of nations in the Balkans has always been shaped by imperial forces working behind the scenes, and that the aim of the dissolution of former Yugoslavia was to destroy the socialist state and to impose a capitalist system. The most frequent narrative encountered attempts to explain the poor social and economic situation through conspiracies carried out by influential foreign actors. Further, different socio-economic classes of respondents differ in the strength of their conviction in conspiracy theories, insofar as respondents in lower social classes are more likely to accept conspiracy narratives. The largest differentiation, by socio-demographic traits, is demonstrated between members of different ethnic groups. Respondents of different ethnicities differ mostly in their conviction in conspiracy theory claims that are related to inter-ethnic relations resulting from the conflicts of the 1990s.

As anticipated, conviction in conspiracy theories generally correlates positively with the "warm" emotions towards one's own ethnic group and with the "cold" emotions towards other ethnic groups. Conviction in Western conspiracy theories correlates most consistently with emotions towards other groups. The stronger the conviction in Western conspiracy theories, the more positive the feelings towards one's own ethnic group and the more negative towards other groups.

Also, the study demonstrates that most conspiracy theories correlates positively with ethnic, religious, and entity identifications. Further, conviction in Western conspiracy theories correlates negatively with the state and Europe identifications. The data shows that respondents who are convinced of conspiratorial narratives are mostly on the conservative wing of the political spectrum: they lean towards authoritarianism, nationalism, conservatism, and religiosity.

The personal and collective anxiety variables correlate positively with conviction in conspiracy theories, but the correlation between anxieties related to one's own nation and the strength of conviction in conspiracy theories is somewhat stronger than in the case of feelings of personal threat.

Correlations between trust in social institutions and levels of conviction in conspiracy theories proved to be very weak, but they do exist. The study has

demonstrated that the general conspiratorial factor positively correlates with levels of trust in the RS President, RS police, and religious communities to which the respondents belong, while it correlates negatively with levels of trust in the FBiH President. On the other hand, strength of conviction in Western conspiracy theories correlates more firmly with trust in the RS President, RS police, and RS government. Further, conviction in Imperialist conspiracy theories shows the strongest negative correlation with trust in the FBiH President, BiH Presidency, BiH Council of Ministers, and the OHR.

With regard to correlation between the perceptions of personal and social injustice, cynicism, and political and social participation, the study shows the general factor correlates with all variables except that which concerns social participation. The total sample of respondents exhibits positive correlation between conspiratorial thinking and political participation. On the other hand, respondents who are more likely to be convinced of conspiratorial narratives self-report weaker participation in social actions, such as fundraising, volunteering, and environmental activism.

In the conclusions of the study we propose the recommendations regarding what government and society can do to counter conspiracy theories. The first general recommendation, as common sense would have it and as the results of this study demonstrate, is that social and political institutions should be open and transparent. The second general recommendation, which may be even more general than the first and which requires a long-term approach, is to shape the education system in such a way as to focus more on the development of critical thinking and research skills in young people. The third recommendation would be that civil society institutions, i.e. NGOs, media and the public will have to work together to counter conspiracy theories. Lastly, the public as a whole should be sensitized in relation to conspiracy theories, especially those which are rooted in ideological conflict. Again, excellence in education must be emphasised which has the potential to create powerful foundations for critical thinking and the critical evaluation of information.

At the very end of the paper we discuss the issues and limitations of the study and the ideas of possible improvements of the research design.

## **Conspiracy theories**

The September 11 attacks will be remembered as one of the most traumatic events for the American public in recent history. Four American passenger airliners were hijacked and crashed as part of suicide attacks in several locations in the USA. The most tragic consequences of these attacks were the crashes of two planes into the Twin Towers of the World Trade Centre in New York. A total of 2,749 people were killed, and several thousand people were hurt, in these combined attacks. The American Administration immediately issued an official statement blaming Al-Qaeda, the network of Islamic extremist terrorists, for the attacks. Al-Qaeda subsequently claimed responsibility for the attacks. Following the attacks, the American public and the public internationally was and continues to be flooded with a range of alternative interpretations of the causes of and the actors involved in the attacks. One of these beliefs was that individuals belonging to the American secret services were behind the attacks, because they wanted to benefit from the impact of the attacks through increasing the influence that they would be able to exert on American society and politics. A different interpretation claimed that the Israeli intelligence agency, Mossad, played the key role with the aim of gaining the support of the American public for the fight against Islamic Middle Eastern countries. Other theories circulated holding the Saudi ruling family and the Bush family responsible, on the grounds of their shared economic interests. Further, these alternative explanations go so far as to ascribe the attacks to the activities of extra-terrestrial beings, conspiring to possess and control influential people in world politics, thus working against humanity (McConnachie & Tudge, 2013).

The Socialist Federative Republic of Yugoslavia (the SFRJ) collapsed in a series of events in 1991 and 1992 when some of the republics of this federal state seceded from the SFRJ through referenda. Unresolved questions during the collapse of the federal state caused several bloody armed conflicts between ethnic groups during the 1990s. The collapse of the SFRJ coincided with the global historical events of the dissolution of the “Eastern bloc” by the end of the 1980s and in early 1990s, and various interpretations about the collapse of this state still circulate today. For the majority of the Serb population, the responsibility for the collapse of the state lies in the joint actions by Germany,

the Vatican, Slovenia, and Croatia, the latter two of which seceded in order to escape the majority Serb influence in the joint state. The majority Croat interpretation holds that the culprits for the collapse of the state are the Serbs, whose plan for the establishment of a Greater Serbia resulted in the heightened feeling of endangerment of other nationalities, and subsequently led to the collapse of the federal state (Karabeg, 2015).

By the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the manuscript, written by an anonymous author, and entitled “The Protocols of the Elders of Zion”, appeared in Russia. The content of the manuscript comprises transcripts of an alleged series of meetings in which Jewish leaders outlined their revolutionary conspiracy to bring about global Jewish domination. The text contains a description of the Machiavellian methods to be used in the shaping of societies with the aim of bringing about a socialist revolution, to be carried out by the Jews. This plan was forged in secret congresses of influential Jewish people. Echoes of this publication are to be found in several theories concerning Zionist, Jewish and banking conspiracies, all of which aim at world domination. Although the origins of the manuscript were unclear at first, it was subsequently revealed that the manuscript was mostly plagiarised from a 1864 text by Maurice Joly entitled “Dialogue in Hell Between Machiavelli and Montesquieu”, (Joly, 1997). Most historians concur that the text is a forgery, created by Matvei Golovinski, an anti-Semitic agent of the Tsarist Russian secret police, the Okhrana, and first published in Russia in 1903. (McConnachie & Tudge, 2013). This manuscript would not have had the impact that it did had it not found fertile ground in Germany at the peak of the Nazi propagandizing effort, which published it as an authentic text and circulated it - in 1935 alone - in a print run of 120,000 copies, the consequence of which publication was a devastating rise in anti-Semitism. (Cohn, 2005).

What connects these spatially and temporally separate social events? One common thread is the narrative of conspiracy theories. These theories explain important social events as the clandestine activities of influential and frequently malevolent social actors. For instance, over half of Americans believe that Lee Harvey Oswald was only one of many participants in the assassination of John F. Kennedy (“Democrats and Republicans differ on conspiracy theory beliefs,” 2013). Such interpretations of events very often depend on conditioning contextual factors such as social instability, or specific socio-

psychological factors, such as the personal beliefs, attitudes and personality traits of citizens. The sources of such interpretations of social events may be more or less identifiable. At times, they result from media manipulation by political elites who are aiming to gain political popularity, and at other times they can be fostered by spontaneous rumours. In the context of Bosnia & Herzegovina and the region, we witness on a daily basis the emergence of different conspiracy theories related to concrete political phenomena. In the past few months, we have witnessed a number of these contextually specific examples of such theories. One example was the narrative of destabilization of the current government of the Republika Srpska (the RS): "Plans to destabilize the RS carried out by foreigners in the RS, aided by the opposition members of the Savez za promjene – SDS, PDP, and NDP, are led by the MI6 operative Anthony Moncton and his collaborators, who are being assisted by the American embassy in Sarajevo with logistics and personnel." (SRNA, 2017). These theories even bring together completely disconnected events. For example, some media outlets interpreted the fight between football fans during a recent game played in Belgrade as: "Croats declare war during local derby match! Foreign secret services aimed for unrest in the streets of Belgrade – THE AIM WAS TO TOPPLE VUČIĆ!" (Informer, 2017). Even though these kind of reports can be characterised as unchecked or fake news, such 'news' has the potential to become the basis for conspiracy theories. In all these cases, the main conspiracy actors, working behind the scenes, are either international groups or individuals plotting against the governing political elites, and thus, by implication, plotting indirectly against the public.

What follows are just some examples of recent and locally specific conspiracy theories, plus some others that are being spread internationally, such as the theory on the origin of the HIV. Further, conspiracy theories, per se, may or may not be detrimental to human relations. For example, the belief that the Earth is flat and that this is hidden from the public by the scientific community, may not influence human relations significantly, nor have a significant impact on society. However, the belief that the Jews have a plan to govern the world through financial manipulation may enable the legitimization of prejudice towards an entire people. In the past few years, there has been an increased number of Social Science research projects examining conspiracy theories, their causes and effects. People are drawn to conspiracy theories because, through them, they are able to satisfy a range of motives. These range from the

need to understand the world around them; to gain a sense of control and safety; or to preserve a positive image of oneself and one's social group (Douglas, Sutton, & Cichocka, 2017). Conspiracy theory beliefs often have a negative impact on social processes because they undermine trust in social institutions and may also be used for political manipulation. When politicized, these conspiracy theories may result in negative pressure being brought to bear against the members of political or social minorities.

Working on minimizing such beliefs is far from easy because it requires wider social action. However, such work is crucial because these beliefs often put entire populations in danger. For instance, anti-vaccine conspiracy theories may lead to new epidemics of diseases that have been all but eradicated long ago. Fuelled by political and media manipulation, other conspiracy theories may result in the delegitimization of certain political actors, thus widening societal divisions and control of these detrimental effects may not fully be achieved. Nevertheless, attempts to control the spread of detrimental conspiracy theories use various techniques that range from prohibitions, through counter-information, to open ridicule.

Social science research efforts into conspiracy theories have been on the increase in the past decade. Although the majority of the literature dealing with this topic has been published in the West, one should not assume that conspiracy theories are solely a Western phenomenon. Most frequently, such theories are reactions against the processes of globalization, the spread of capitalism, and the influence of the USA in the military, political and economic spheres of life. (Byford, 2014). The most prominent anti-Western conspiracy theories, found in Eastern Europe, are based on the notion of the West's malevolent intentions against local cultures and traditions. Throughout the Islamic world, conspiracy theories revolve around the Jews, whilst in Africa what dominates are the conspiracy theories on the origin of the HIV, which have the impact, throughout that continent, of significantly undermining health campaigns in the fight against AIDS. (Byford, 2014; Sunstein & Vermeule, 2009; Swami, 2012).



## **What are conspiracy theories?**

The term ‘conspiracy’ is often defined as the organised and secret planning of a malevolent action that is designed to inflict harm on other persons. It also has a negative connotation and is often considered to be a way of organising criminal activities. Adding the word “theory” to this term significantly changes its meaning. In the widest possible sense, ‘conspiracy theory’ is a factual or speculative explanation of an event, attributing to it nefarious intentions. (Keeley, 1999). Such a wide definition does not fully reflect the narrower meaning it can have that tends to be used in everyday speech. Often, when I say that somebody has ‘got it in for me’, I will not be characterised as a “conspiracy theorist”, but as a person in danger (at best) or as paranoid (at worst). Even those who are inclined to believe in conspiracy theories, as well as those who are sceptical, consider the hard-core group of conspiracy theorists to be irrational. On the other hand, belief in the existence of conspiracy theories is considered to be a feature of those ‘who know something that others don’t’.

Conspiracy theories entail the explanation of social, rather than individual events, and most frequently those on a global scale - such as pharmaceutical or banking conspiracies – the aim of which are to achieve economic domination. Conspiracy theories also entail narratives which assume nefarious intentions that have the potential to affect larger groups of people, for instance humankind as a whole, or certain classes of a population. Further, when the term ‘conspiracy theory’ is used in everyday speech, the ‘theory’ part of this term does not refer to an attribution considered to be true, but quite the opposite—it is always an unofficial interpretation. More specifically, conspiracy theory has a pejorative connotation, and performatively, it is the type of explanation that is based on the absence of evidence or on logical inconsistencies (Byford, 2011). Usually, when the aim is to dismiss somebody’s explanations, or judge them to be trivial, or even childish, one would call that person a ‘conspiracy theorist’ – meaning that s/he holds an unwarranted belief in conspiracy theories. On the other hand, conspiracies are an objective daily occurrence. Political organisations, secret services and other state agencies often plan their activities aimed, malevolently, at certain groups, or other states, which can be characterised as conspiracies. For instance, activities organised by the former USA President, Richard Nixon, and his aides, to the detriment of the Democratic

party politicians in the Watergate scandal in the early 1970s, does not fall in the category of a conspiracy theory but has been proven, with evidence, to be a real conspiracy. However, there is an alternative explanation, which can be characterised as a 'conspiracy theory', which holds that Nixon was "set up" by Henry Kissinger in order to have him removed from the presidency. (Abraham, 1985).

Epistemologically, it is difficult to draw the line between real and invented conspiracies. What is taken to be an obvious truth by some is considered to be a complete delusion by others. Conspiracy theories are sometimes used to discredit others even when it comes to the sciences. In his excellent overview of academic debates on the nature of conspiracy theories, Jovan Byford discusses how, on occasion, even established academics, such as Noam Chomsky, are characterised as conspiracy theorists for critiquing the politics of the USA and identifying it as the main culprit for militarization, environmental pollution and exploitative capitalism (Byford, 2011). In his responses to these accusations, Chomsky claims that there are huge differences between the scientific approach, based on thorough analysis of historically documented facts, and the speculative suppositions which are at the root of conspiracy theories (Chomsky, 2006). Where the aim is to discredit, the rhetorical role of the 'conspiracy theory' label is not reserved solely for academic disputes, but is more frequently heard in public political discussions. When politicians qualify an assertion as a "conspiracy theory", they aim to discredit the person behind the assertion as making the assertion up, whereas when they discuss "real conspiracies", this is considered to be a term signifying the use of proportionate political caution, which is used unquestioningly in public discourse. When a politician who holds office is accused of hiding something, such an idea is often rejected using the explanation that a "conspiracy theory" lies behind such an accusation.<sup>1</sup> On the other hand, when high political officials label something as a 'conspiracy', this is not additionally labelled as a 'theory'.<sup>2</sup> It is paradoxical that research shows how labelling something as a "conspiracy theory" does not

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<sup>1</sup> For example, when the British Prime Minister rejects accusations of phone hacking: "Stop hunting for feeble conspiracy theories and start rising to events!" (Helm & Boffey, 2011)

<sup>2</sup> For example, when the RS President justifies his claims that the British government has sent dozens of intelligence operatives to Bosnia & Herzegovina: "I myself don't believe in conspiracy theories but I believe in conspiracies." (CPHA, 2018)

decrease belief in its veracity. In his experiment, Wood (2016) established that there are no significant differences among his respondents in accepting the same claims containing conspiratorial narratives when they are labelled as conspiracy theories as opposed to situations when they were labelled as 'ideas'. Further, there was little variation between the same respondents when they were asked to accept the same claims – this time, labelled as 'accusations of corruption' as opposed to being labelled as 'conspiracy theories'. He therefore concludes that the term 'conspiracy theory' has less powerful rhetorical potential than it has previously been believed to have. One possible reason for this lowering of the rhetorical potential can be related to the romanticizing narratives of some conspiracy theories in popular culture<sup>3</sup> (Uscinski & Parent, 2014). One strong seductive factor of such content is that it shows the world in a simplified way, as a potentially idyllic place, which is being endangered by the nefarious activities of actors of conspiracy.

When attempts are made to separate real conspiracies from the narratives of conspiracy theories, researchers have identified certain important characteristics to explain conspiracy theories. One important characteristic of the narratives of conspiracy theorists is that their worldview holds the belief that all conspiracies are interrelated and that they set all world events in motion. They are not believed to be mutually opposing or mutually exclusive (Keeley, 1999; Popper, 1972). Another important characteristic is the fact that, as a rule, conspiracy theorists do not trust the data published by official institutions and consider them to be conspiratorially manipulated (Olmsted, 2009). In other words, for conspiracy theorists, the conspiracies that reach visibility and gain some exposure are a mere screen for the behind-the-scene "real" conspiracies that lie at the core of world events. These characteristics lead to one of the key features of conspiracy theories and that is that they are unfalsifiable and cannot be refuted (Byford, 2011; Keeley, 1999).

For conspiracy theorists, each new piece of evidence against them is paradoxically construed as evidence in favour of their worldview, when they

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<sup>3</sup> Some characteristic examples from popular literature and culture that are based on conspiratorial narratives, combining real events with pseudo-historical claims, are the novels by the American writer Dan Brown such as "The Da Vinci Code". Another example is the popular and long-running American TV series "The X Files" that deals with attempts to debunk the conspiracy at the heart of the USA government, which is hiding facts about extra-terrestrial contacts.

claim that attempts are being made to hide data that supports their position. This is the case because those who accept conspiracy theories usually consider the conspirators to be so powerful that they are able to manipulate and control all sources and channels of information: media outlets, universities and scientific sources. Thus, it is believed that because of their omnipotence and desire to hide their activities, conspirators implant false information that may hide the real sources of conspiracies. In this type of thinking, a person bases her or his world view on closed and unchangeable constructions.

In his attempt to distinguish conceptually between conspiracy theories and conspiratorial politics, Bale (Bale, 2007) outlines several key features related to conspiracy theorists:

1. They consider the alleged conspiratorial groups not as mere individuals, with interests that they want to achieve, but as *evil incarnate*, that is, as intrinsically bad. Conspirators are not viewed as persons who are intent on pursuing their own political or financial gains, but as persons who are attempting to subvert and destroy everything that is 'decent' and 'worth preserving' in the existing world. This Manichean reasoning, in which the world is divided into good versus evil, is one of the core characteristics of classic conspiracy theorists.

2. They perceive the conspiratorial groups as both monolithic and unwavering in the pursuit of their goals, with precise plans of coordinated actions. These groups are believed to be unwavering to such an extent that it is difficult to unmask them. Even in cases when the conspiratorial activities are believed to involve large numbers of people, such groups are considered to be so homogenous and hermetically sealed that no piece of evidence could be found that could expose them.

3. They believe conspiratorial groups to be *omnipresent*, global in their spatial reach and that they have a lengthy history. Conspiratorial groups are believed to be capable of operating everywhere, over long periods, so that many events can 'plausibly' be attributed to them.

4. They believe conspiratorial groups to be *omnipotent*. These groups direct all major global events that are of historical significance. One way to

counter the impact of these groups is to accept and act upon the warnings of conspiracy theorists.

Even though it is difficult to make an exhaustive overview of conspiracy theories and conspiracy theorists<sup>4</sup>, in the light of the discussion above, a conspiracy theory can be broadly defined as a set of oversimplified and in many cases false beliefs in omnipresent and nefarious groups, that are driven by harmful and evil aims, and that coordinate the activities that they organise. (Bale, 2007; Swami & Furnham, 2014).

## **Research questions**

Research into conspiracy theories has been on the rise in Social Sciences research over the past decade. As previously discussed, the likely reason for this is not that there are more conspiracy theories circulating than previously, but that they reach a larger number of people through more advanced media networks and particularly through social media. Overall, there has been a significant increase in the number of research studies in the Social Sciences than was previously the case. Conspiracy theories refer to social beliefs that seek to explain important social events as directed and carried out via the clandestine work of influential and sinister conspirators. Some conspiracy theories are wide spread, whilst others circulate within small and obscure social groups. In the USA, for several decades, the majority of the population has believed that a group of conspirators stood behind the publicly proclaimed perpetrator of the assassination of John F. Kennedy (“Democrats and Republicans differ on conspiracy theory beliefs,” 2013). In our society, and in the wider regional context, there are context-specific conspiracy theories, whilst many new conspiracy theories emerge on a daily basis. In the past few months, we have witnessed news reports in the media in which the authorities in Bosnia & Herzegovina suggest the existence of conspiracy theories. Although most of this news is unreliable and ‘fake’, and can quickly and easily be forgotten, it has the potential to be explained as evidence of

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<sup>4</sup> The term ‘conspiracy theorist’ will be used in this text to refer to a person who willingly accepts conspiracy theory narratives rather than referring to a person or people who conduct research into conspiracy theories.

conspiracy theories themselves. In all such cases, the main conspirators, who, it is believed, control events behind the scenes, are either international groups or individuals who plot against the ruling political establishment, and by extension, against the public. Such conspiracy beliefs come about mostly as a result of conducive contexts such as social crises, or when they interact with specific socio-psychological factors, such as personal beliefs and personality traits.

The main aim of this research study is to identify, in the context of Bosnia & Herzegovina, what beliefs in conspiracy theories are held by citizens of Bosnia & Herzegovina, how prevalent these beliefs are, and what other determining factors are at work in the holding of such convictions.

The research questions are:

- What is the historical background of conspiracy theories?
- How do the Social Sciences approach research into conspiracy theories?
- Which conspiracy theories dominate in our society?
- How do such conspiracy theories compare regionally and internationally?
- How widespread are such conspiracy theories in different demographics within the population?
- What are the social and psychological correlates for the acceptance of conspiracy theories?
- What is the psychological structure of beliefs in conspiracy theory?
- What are the ways of countering the impact of harmful conspiracy theories?

Given that this kind of research has never been done in the context of Bosnia & Herzegovina, this study will contribute significantly, not only to psychological insights into this phenomenon, but will also lead to new sociological insights into the context in which we live as well as shedding light on the overall level of advancement of the Social Sciences therein. The aims of our research are both theoretical, insofar as it contributes to research into conspiracy theories, and practical, because the dissemination of the results of this study will demystify certain beliefs that are not based on evidence.

## **Research methods**

The design of the study is descriptive-correlational, based on quantitative surveys. Researching social phenomena in Bosnia & Herzegovina poses many challenges for researchers. The conclusions that have been identified as a result of this research are closely connected with the nature of the sample of respondents. It remains questionable as to how possible it is to draw generalised conclusions that would be valid for the whole population. Bosnia & Herzegovina is territorially and politically very complex. It comprises three politico-administrative units: two entities (the Federation of Bosnia & Herzegovina and the Republika Srpska) and the Brčko District. The Federation of Bosnia & Herzegovina comprises 10 regions (known as cantons); the Republika Srpska is divided into municipalities; and the Brčko District comprises the city of Brčko. The rising levels of authority proceed from cantons, to entities and ultimately to the state, each level having its own administrative structure. The political system is based on the principle of constitutive three major ethnic groups: the Bosniaks, the Croats, and the Serbs. Such a socio-political organisation creates a particular framework that shapes not only political structures but also socio-psychological constructs and interpersonal relations. When it comes to social attitudes, the data analysis and general conclusions pose questions as to whether the population of Bosnia & Herzegovina can be viewed either as homogenous, or as a society divided into ethnic subsets, or as citizens of territorial entities, living their social lives in different political and social frameworks. In this study, we positioned ourselves as researchers with no prior preconceptions, and we carried out our exploratory analysis based on data collected in the field.

## **Respondents**

Participation in the study was anonymous and voluntary. In a random sample of citizens of Bosnia & Herzegovina, during June 2018, direct surveys of over 1,000 respondents were carried out. After removing the non-responses from the data, the final total of our sample was 1,046 respondents (53% of which were women). The predominant age of respondents was 25 years (the median

age being 42 years). A total of 68.5% of respondents was from the Federation of Bosnia & Herzegovina, 29.5% from the Republika Srpska, and 2% from the Brčko District. Around 20% of respondents reside in major cities; around 9% of respondents reside in large cities; 19% in smaller cities; and 51% of respondents live in villages. The ethnic structure of the sample is as follows: 14% of respondents declared themselves as Croat, around 42% of respondents declared themselves as Bosniaks, around 31% of respondents declared themselves as Serbs, 11% of respondents declared themselves as Bosnians, around 2% of respondents declared themselves as Other. Out of the total sample, 31% of respondents declared themselves as Orthodox; 15% of respondents declared themselves as Catholic; 47% declared themselves as Muslim; 5% of respondents declare; themselves as non-religious; and 2% of respondents declared themselves as belonging to Other religious denominations. Concerning the level of education of respondents, the largest percentage have completed 4 years of high school (45%); further education college completion (32%); vocational training completion (16%); elementary school completion (8%).

## **Measurement**

Based on the theoretical discussion and the research questions, this is an exploratory study of a phenomenon about which there is a complete absence of research in our country. Accordingly, there are a larger number of variables that are theoretically and empirically related to the levels of acceptance of conspiracy theories.

*Belief in conspiracy theories* was assessed on a scale containing 24 statements that express particular conspiracy theories. Half of these items related to locally specific conspiracy theories, containing claims such as: “The aim of the dissolution of former Yugoslavia was to destroy the socialist state and to impose a capitalist system.” The other half represented contemporary global conspiracy theories, such as: “Large multinational pharmaceutical companies deliberately spread diseases in order to boost the sales of their medical products.” Scoring used a 5-point Likert-type response scale—a score of 1 for “I completely disagree” through to a score of 5 for “I completely agree”. The list of conspiracy



theories was formed on the basis of previous research carried out in Croatia (Blanuša, 2011), Serbia (Gligorić, Većkalov, & Žeželj, 2018) and other European countries (Imhoff & Lamberty, 2018).<sup>5</sup>

*Personality traits*, based on the Big Five model, were measured using a shorter scale, with the original scale being reduced to 3 items for each personality trait (Soto & John, 2017). Personality traits in the original model are: Extraversion, Agreeableness, Conscientiousness, Neuroticism, and Openness to experience.

*Importance of identification with social groups* was examined through a list of 5 target groups. The respondents were supposed to self-judge the importance they ascribe to belonging to any particular social group. The target groups were: one's own ethnic group; one's own religious group; the entity in which respondents live; the state of Bosnia & Herzegovina; and Europe.

*Social cynicism* was measured on a short scale containing 3 items measuring the level of cynicism in the respondent's world view. An example of one statement to be scored on the 3 item scale is as follows: "However hard she or he tries, a person cannot influence important events in society". The scale was developed for the purposes of this research.

*Authoritarianism* was measured using a short scale containing 3 items, based on the idea of a right-wing authoritarianism scale and its components of obedience and respect for authority, authoritarian aggression, and conventionalism (Altemeyer, 2004; Sibley & Duckitt, 2008).

The individual statements examined the following concepts: *personal experience of injustice*; *perception of social injustice*; *concern for one's own future*; and *concern for the future of one's own people*. Examples of claims through which these variables were measured are: "I have personally experienced much injustice in my life"; "The society in which I live is unjust"; "I am concerned for my own future"; "I am concerned for the future of my people".

*The emotional relation to own's own ethnic group and toward other ethnic groups* was measured using the so-called 'feeling thermometer'. Groups for which we measured the feelings included: Serbs, Croats, Bosniaks, Roma, and Jews.

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<sup>5</sup> Our research was carried out as part of a larger European network for the study of conspiracy theories - COST 15101 action: "Comparative analyses of conspiracy theories".

*Political participation* was measured using two items that focus on the frequency of voting in elections and active participation and involvement in political party work.

*Social participation* was also measured using two items through which respondents scored their participation in social actions such as collecting donations for endangered social categories or participation in voluntary environmental actions.

*Nationalism* was measured through a scale containing 8 statements of claims expressing preferences for nationalist positions by idealizing own's own group and rejecting other ethnic groups (Puhalo, 2008). An example of one such statement is: "One should not mix with members of other nationalities through ethnically mixed marriages".

*Social conservatism* was measured through a scale containing 7 items focusing on conservative social beliefs (Puhalo, 2008). An example of one such claim is: "One should return to tradition and core values of one's own nationality."

*Trust in social institutions* was measured through a list of political and social institutions of the state of Bosnia & Herzegovina; the entities: the Republika Srpska and the Federation of Bosnia & Herzegovina; as well as other social institutions. Specific political institutions were listed, pertaining to the state of Bosnia & Herzegovina and the entities the Republika Srpska and the Federation of Bosnia & Herzegovina, general institutions (judiciary, political parties, media outlets, religious communities), and the OHR.

*Political orientation* was measured using a statement through which respondents evaluate their own political orientation on a 5-point Likert-type response scale ranging from "left", through neutral "centre" to "right". Lesser scores on the scale show the tendency towards a leftist orientation, whilst higher scores point towards a rightist orientation.

The survey also contained questions related to socio-demographic characteristics of respondents such as: sex, place of residence, education level, employment, financial status, national/ethnic identity. During data collection, respondents were informed that the survey was anonymous and were provided with contact details for the lead researcher.

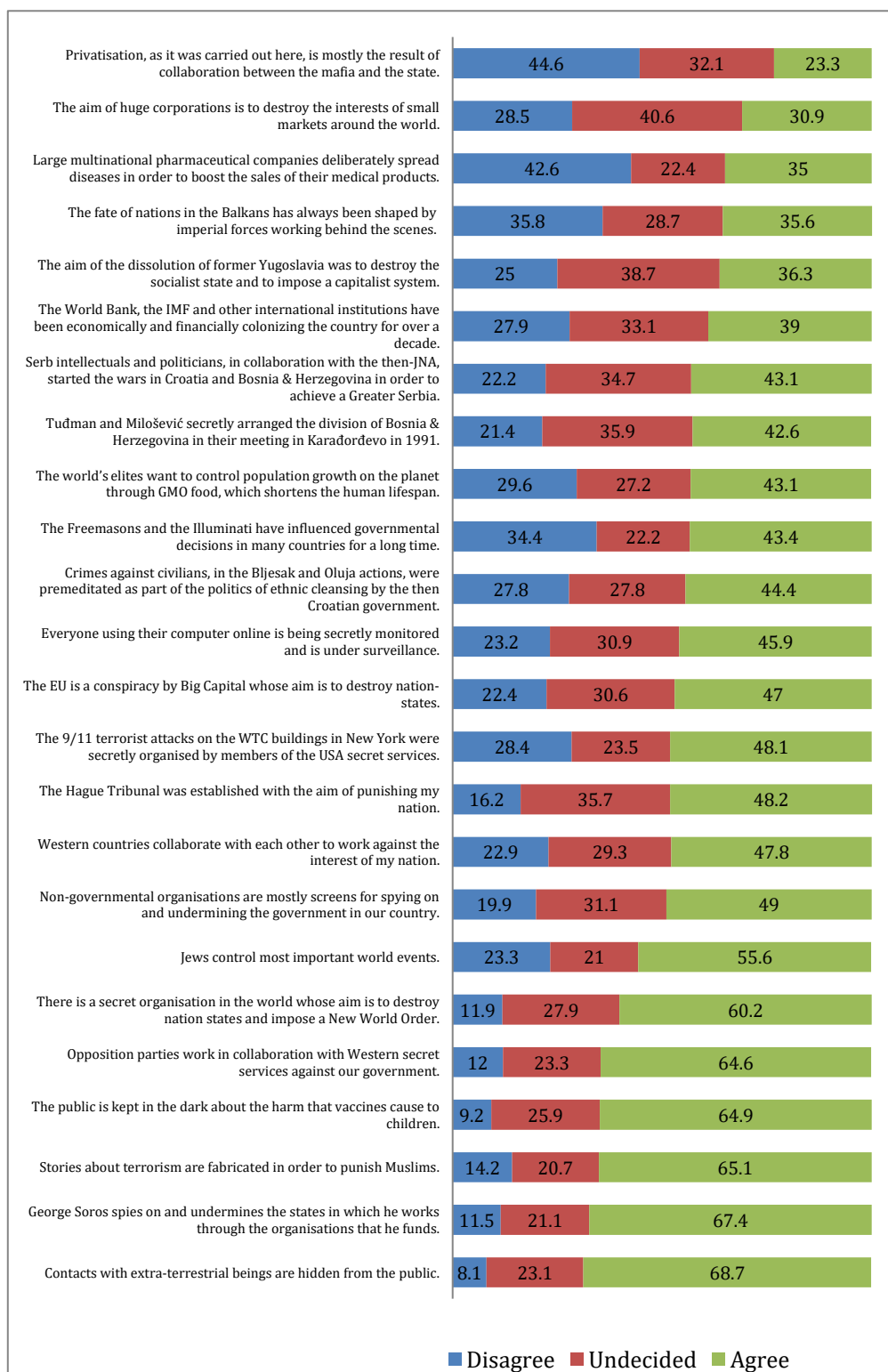
## **The prevalence of conviction in conspiracy theories and its socio-demographic correlates**

This research will: show the overall prevalence of conspiracy theories; compare the likelihood of the acceptance of different individual and clustered conspiracy theories in relation to sex, age, education level, ethnic identity, place of residence, and monthly income. At the outset, we will examine the extent to which the citizens of Bosnia & Herzegovina believe in individual conspiracy theories and then we will move on to discuss any differences, in relation to a number of categories of conspiracy theories, which were identified through factor analysis.

What are the conspiracy theories in which citizens of Bosnia & Herzegovina have most conviction?

Graph 1 shows the results of the responses to individual statements, giving an overview of positive responses ("I fully agree" and "I mostly agree") and negative responses ("I completely disagree" and "I mostly disagree"). This graph shows the extent to which the citizens of Bosnia & Herzegovina do and do not accept individual conspiracy theories. At least one conspiracy theory is accepted by 96.3% of respondents. The conspiracy statements that elicit the most powerful evidence of conviction are those that relate to the economy, the harsh side of capitalism, and the dissolution of Yugoslavia. Over two thirds of respondents believe that: "Privatisation, as it was carried out here, is mostly the result of collaboration between the mafia and the state" (68.7% of respondents); "The aim of huge corporations is to destroy the interests of small markets around the world" (67.4% of respondents); "Large multinational pharmaceutical companies deliberately spread diseases in order to boost the sales of their medical products" (65.1% of respondents). "The fate of nations in the Balkans has always been shaped by imperial forces working behind the scenes" (64.9% of respondents); "The aim of the dissolution of former Yugoslavia was to destroy the socialist state and to impose a capitalist system" (64.6% of respondents); "The World Bank, the IMF and other international institutions have been economically and financially colonizing the country for over a decade" (60.2% of respondents); "Serb intellectuals and politicians, in collaboration with the then-JNA, started the wars in Croatia and Bosnia & Herzegovina in order to achieve a Greater Serbia" (55.6% of respondents); "Tuđman and Milošević secretly arranged the division of Bosnia & Herzegovina in their meeting in Karađorđevo in 1991." (49.0% of respondents).

**Graph 1: the distribution of conspiracy theories**



Although the scoring is still high, the conspiracy theories in which the respondents have the least conviction are as follows: "Opposition parties work in collaboration with Western secret services against our government" (36.3% of respondents are convinced of this); "The public is kept in the dark about the harm that vaccines cause to children" (35.6% of respondents are convinced of this). "Stories about terrorism are fabricated in order to punish Muslims" (35.0%, i.e. one third of the respondents, are convinced of this); "George Soros spies on and undermines the states in which he works through the organisations that he funds" (30.9% of respondents are convinced of this); "Contacts with extra-terrestrial beings are hidden from the public" (23.3% of the respondents are convinced of this).

When it comes to the percentage of undecided responses, the greatest number related to theories that are very prevalent in Bosnia & Herzegovina today such as: "George Soros spies on and undermines the states in which he works through the organisations that he funds" (40.6% of respondents); "Opposition parties work in collaboration with Western secret services against our government" (38.7% of respondents); "Non-governmental organisations are mostly screens for spying on and undermining the government in our country" (35.9% of respondents); "The Freemasons and the Illuminati have influenced governmental decisions in many countries for a long time." (35.7% of respondents); "Jews control most important world events" (34.7% of respondents); and "There is a secret organisation in the world whose aim is to destroy nation states and impose a New World Order" (33.1% of respondents).

Do citizens of Bosnia & Herzegovina differ with regard to their conviction in the categories of conspiracy theories ?

As discussed previously, we offered the respondents twenty four statements setting out a range of conspiracy theories, and for efficiency, we decided to divide these theories into four categories which were

grouped by using factor analysis.<sup>6</sup> The mean results regarding these factors are presented in factorial scores in which the global arithmetic mean equals zero, with scores ranging from -3.6 to +2.4. Greater arithmetic mean (M) marks the greater level of agreement with any given factor (conspiracy theory category). We entitled the categories of conspiracy theories as follows: Imperial conspiracy theories; New World Order conspiracy theories; Western conspiracy theories; and Pharmaceutical conspiracy theories. The Imperial conspiracy theories category is focused more on content that is local, whilst the other categories of conspiracy theories are of global character.

The differentiation of respondents by sex shows that men and women demonstrate significant statistical difference in the levels of conviction in conspiracy theories based on the general factor ( $t(1044)=2.470$ ,  $p=.014$ ). The category of New World Order conspiracy theories is ranked as follows ( $t(1044)=3.000$ ,  $p=.003$ ); and the Pharmaceutical conspiracy theories score ( $t(1044)=2.251$ ;  $p=.025$ ). This shows that men are more likely to be convinced by these theories than women.

The differentiation of respondents by age shows there is a significant statistical difference in the levels of conviction in conspiracy theories based on the general factor in respondents within different age groups ( $F(3, 1041)=6.979$ ,  $p=.000$ ). The category of New World Order conspiracy theories is ranked as follows ( $F(3, 1041)=8.093$ ,  $p=.000$ ); Western conspiracy theories category ( $F(3, 1041)=4.747$ ,  $p=.003$ ); and Pharmaceutical conspiracy theories ( $F(3, 1041)=4.179$ ,  $p=.006$ ). The data shows that, when considering statements in the Imperial conspiracy theories category, the older the age of the respondent, the greater the likelihood of belief in the statements.

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<sup>6</sup> When factor scores were computed, we eliminated statements that referred solely to multiethnic relations, such as "Serb intellectuals and politicians, in collaboration with the then-JNA, started the wars in Croatia and Bosnia & Herzegovina in order to achieve a Greater Serbia"; "Crimes against civilians, in the Bljesak and Oluja actions, were premeditated as part of the politics of ethnic cleansing by the then Croatian government"; "Tuđman and Milošević secretly arranged the division of Bosnia & Herzegovina in their meeting in Karadžević in 1991"; "Stories about terrorism are fabricated in order to punish Muslims." This was done because correlational and factor analyses on the overall sample showed more logical results without these statements.

The study also examined the relationship between the level of education achieved by respondents and their level of conviction in conspiracy theories. There exists a differentiation between respondents with different levels of educational achievement when it comes to their conviction in all categories of conspiracy theories. The difference is as follows: the general factor of conspiracy theories ( $F(3, 1041)=8.194, p=.000$ ); Imperial conspiracy theories category ( $F(3, 1041)=5.419, p=.000$ ); New World Order conspiracy theories category ( $F(3, 1041)=4.014, p=.007$ ); Western conspiracy theories category ( $F(3, 1041)=7.942, p=.000$ ); and lastly Pharmaceutical conspiracy theories category ( $F(3, 1041)=8.172, p=.000$ ). Regarding the general factor of conspiracy theories, the strongest level of conviction is exhibited by respondents who finished a vocational training and by those who only completed elementary school. The weakest level of conviction was exhibited by respondents with a university level education.

The study also analysed the differentiation in conviction regarding conspiracy theories between respondents with differing total monthly incomes. Statistically, there are considerable differences in the general factor ( $F(2, 1042)=14.187, p=.000$ ); Imperial conspiracy theories category ( $F(2, 1042)=5.787, p=.003$ ); New World Order conspiracy theories category ( $F(2, 1042)=10.642, p=.000$ ); Pharmaceutical conspiracy theories category ( $F(2, 1042)=4.608, p=.010$ ); and lastly Western conspiracy theories category ( $F(2, 1042)=11.923, p=.000$ ). Citizens with a total monthly income up to 500 KM are most likely to be convinced by conspiracy theories; slightly less likely to be convinced are the respondents with a total monthly income of over 1,000 KM; whilst the respondents whose total monthly income ranges between 500KM and 1,000 KM are least likely to be convinced by conspiracy theories.

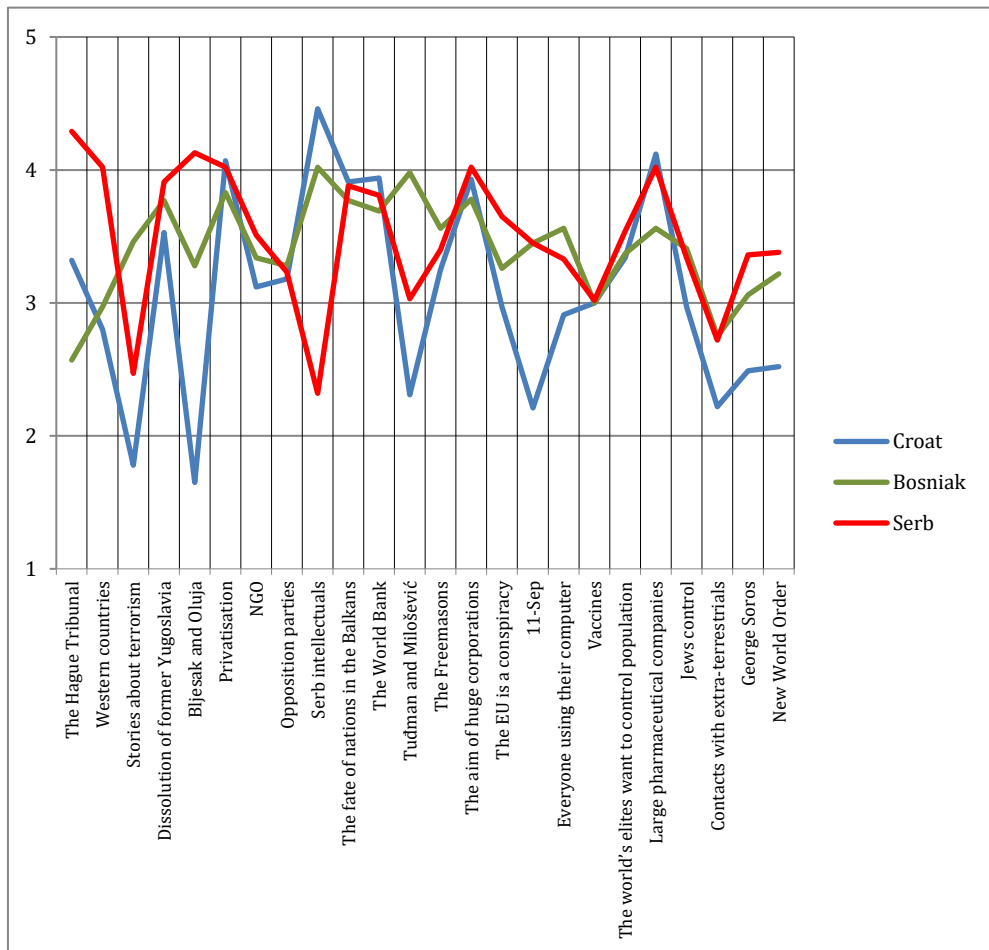
**Table 1: Levels of conviction in different categories of conspiracy theories and the ethnic identity of respondents**

		N	M	SD	SE	df	F	p
Imperial	Croats	144	-.030	1.147	.095			
	Bosniaks	436	-.011	1.009	.048	2	1.995	.137
	Serbs	326	.116	.797	.044			
New World Order	Croats	144	-.666	1.001	.083			
	Bosniaks	436	.151	.963	.046	2	45.842	.000
	Serbs	326	.159	.888	.049			
Western	Croats	144	-.092	.821	.068			
	Bosniaks	436	-.194	.976	.046	2	88.969	.000
	Serbs	326	.633	.735	.040			
Pharmaceutical	Croats	144	.064	.887	.073			
	Bosniaks	436	-.056	1.044	.050	2	4.323	.014
	Serbs	326	.148	.863	.047			
General Factor	Croats	144	-.272	.937	.078			
	Bosniaks	436	-.011	1.004	.048	2	21.908	.000
	Serbs	326	.311	.850	.047			

Table 1 shows the difference between Bosniaks, Croats, and Serbs in the level of conviction they state concerning the individual categories of conspiracy theories. The clearest differentiation is displayed in the general factor ( $F(2, 1042)=21.908, p=.000$ ); New World Order conspiracy theories group ( $F(2, 1042)=45.842, p=.000$ ); Western conspiracy theories group ( $F(2, 1042)=88.969, p=.000$ ); Pharmaceutical conspiracy theories group ( $F(2, 1042)=4.323, p=.014$ ).



**Graph 2: Differences between ethnic groups regarding levels of conviction in individual conspiracy theories**



Graph 2 shows differences between ethnic groups in the strength of their conviction concerning individual conspiracy theories. The greatest variation between groups concerns the claim that “Serb intellectuals and politicians, in collaboration with the then-JNA, started the wars in Croatia and Bosnia & Herzegovina in order to achieve a Greater Serbia”. Here, the greatest conviction is held by Croat respondents, and weakest conviction is held by the Serb respondents ( $F(2, 903)=277.551, p=.000$ ). The next most noticeable variation is in the claim that “Crimes against civilians, in the Bljesak and Oluja actions, were premeditated as part of the politics of

ethnic cleansing by the then Croatian government". Here, the weakest level of conviction is held by Croat respondents, and strongest conviction is held by Serb respondents ( $F(2, 903)=234.035, p=.000$ ). The next most noticeable variation lies in the claim that "The Hague Tribunal was established with the aim of punishing my nation", whereby the strongest conviction is held by Serb respondents and the weakest level of conviction by the Croat respondents ( $F(2, 903)=214.155, p=.000$ ). Large differences are also to be found in the claim "Tuđman and Milošević secretly arranged the division of Bosnia & Herzegovina in their meeting in Karađorđevo in 1991", whereby the strongest conviction is held by the Bosniak respondents, and the weakest level of conviction is espoused by the Croat respondents ( $F(2, 903)=145.484, p=.000$ ). The claim that "Stories about terrorism are fabricated in order to punish Muslims" also shows that the strongest conviction is held by the Bosniak respondents and the weakest level of conviction is espoused by the Croat respondents ( $F(2, 903)=122.942, p=.000$ ). Another significant difference can be found in relation to the claim that "Western countries collaborate with each other to work against the interest of my nation." Here, the weakest level of conviction is demonstrated by the Croat respondents, and the strongest conviction is held by the Serb respondents ( $F(2, 903)=99.895, p=.000$ ).

There are only few claims that show no significant differences: "Opposition parties work in collaboration with Western secret services against our government"; "The fate of nations in the Balkans has always been shaped by imperial forces working behind the scenes"; "The public is kept in the dark about the harm that vaccines cause to children"; and "The world's elites want to control population growth on the planet through GMO food, which shortens the human lifespan".

## **Conspiracy theories and inter-group relations**

Conspiracy theories may impact inter-group relations. As previously discussed, conspiracy theories not only harm individuals, but impact the entire class, group or demographic of people to which the targeted individuals belong. Very often, the content of conspiracy theories is based on an assumption of conspiratorial and nefarious action by a group which is perceived as being opposed to a particular ideological principle. These may include identifiable religious, ethnic, political or class groups. For instance, Jews ("they") conspire in order to achieve domination against Christians or Muslims ("us"). Or, the ruling elites ("they") conspire in order to manipulate and rule over people ("us"). Or, interest groups, such as Pharmaceutical companies ("they"), conspire in order to achieve economic gains at the expense of general population ("us").

The outcome of conviction in conspiracy theories gives rise to a range of different impacts on inter-group and intra-group relations. The impact at the inter-group level is a decrease in trust and increase in distancing between groups. The impact at the intra-group level is an increase in the homogeneity and convergence of group members. This explains why conspiracy theories sometimes occur spontaneously in smaller groups which are subjected to discrimination. However, this phenomenon may also occur as a result of social manipulation that is specifically aimed at increasing intra-group homogenization. (Hofstadter, 1965). In both inter-group and intra-group dynamics, conviction in conspiracy theories acts as a defence mechanism for the group.

The study explored the connections between conviction in conspiracy theories and group dynamics through two types of analysis: 1. Connections between social identifications and the depth of conviction in conspiracy theories; 2. Connections between inter-group emotions and the depth of conviction in conspiracy theories. This section uses component scores from component analysis as variables for the depth of conviction in conspiracy theories, whereby higher scores refer to greater degree of conviction in conspiracy theories. The variables concerning social identifications comprise the self-assessment of the respondents about the relative importance to them of belonging to certain social groups, starting with their ethnic group, through to a European identity (the higher the score awarded, the greater the importance placed on that particular identification). The variables of inter-group emotions concern positive feelings

towards members of certain ethnic groups (higher scores indicate a greater degree of intensity of the emotion under consideration). Authoritarianism, nationalism, and conservatism are scored on scales that are described in more detail in the section on research methods. Higher scores on these scales refer to more/less well developed traits.

## **Inter-group emotions and depth of conviction in conspiracy theories**

Table 2 shows the connection between the levels of inter-group emotions and depth of conviction in conspiracy theories. Data on the most negative emotions demonstrates that depth of conviction in conspiracy theories is likely to have an impact on affective distancing between ethnic groups.

**Table 2: Inter-correlation of inter-group emotions and depth of conviction in categories of conspiracy theories**

	Emotions towards Serbs	Emotions towards Croats	Emotions towards Bosniaks	Emotions towards Roma	Emotions towards Jews
Imperialist	-.018	-.090**	-.107**	.009	.006
New World Order	.064*	-.128**	.034	.034	-.024
Western	.088**	-.182**	-.232**	-.132**	-.042
Pharmaceutical	-.065*	-.111**	-.071*	-.075*	-.093**
General factor	.022	-.164**	-.114**	-.035	-.040

Note: \*\* statistically significant at level  $p < .01$ , \* statistically significant at level  $p < .05$

When it comes to the correlation between the general factor of conspiracy theories and emotions towards ethnic groups, we notice a significant negative relationship between the general factor and emotional warmth towards Croats ( $r=-.164$ ;  $p=.000$ ) and Bosniaks ( $r=-.114$ ,  $p=.000$ ), while other correlations are statistically insignificant. Belief in Western conspiracy theories has the weakest correlation with negative emotions towards the Bosniaks ( $r=-.232$ ,  $p=.000$ ), then the Croats ( $r=-.184$ ,  $p=.000$ ) followed by the Roma ( $r=-.132$ ,  $p=.000$ ). There is also a weak positive correlation of the acceptance of Western conspiracy theories with emotions towards the Serbs. All other categories of conspiracy theories show similar correlations.

In general, existing correlations are not strong, but they are mostly negative. The tendency is that conviction in Western conspiracy theories most consistently correlates with emotions towards other groups. Conviction in the narrative in which Western forces organise conspiracies against local nations is most frequently connected with negative emotions towards members of other ethnic groups.

### **Social identification and depth of conviction in categories of conspiracy theories**

Table 3 shows correlations between the levels of social identification of the respondents and their depth of conviction in categories of conspiracy theories. Most connections are positive, with few exceptions.

**Table 3: Inter-correlation of social identification and depth of conviction in categories of conspiracy theories**

	Ethnic belonging	Religious belonging	Entity belonging	BiH belonging	European belonging
Imperialist	.118**	.158**	.133**	.044	.016
New World Order	.090**	.095**	.152**	.119**	.040
Western	.255**	.250**	.271**	-.168**	-.183**
Pharmaceutical	.149**	.134**	.094**	-.011	-.010
General factor	.191**	.207**	.212**	.020	-.026

Note: \*\* statistically significant at level  $p < .01$ , \* statistically significant at level  $p < .05$ .

The correlations between the general factor of conspiracy theories and social identification show a similar measure of correlation between entity ( $r=.212$ ,  $p=.000$ ); religious ( $r=.207$ ,  $p=.000$ ); and ethnic ( $r=.191$ ,  $p=.000$ ) identifications and the general factor. Identifications with BiH and Europe show no significant correlation with this factor. When it comes to conspiracy theory categories, social identifications have the strongest correlation with Western conspiracy theories. In such theories, Western countries are charged with conspiratorial activities against the nation to which the respondents belong. Therefore, the acceptance of these theories positively correlates with ethnic ( $r=.255$ ,  $p=.000$ ), religious ( $r=.250$ ,  $p=.000$ ) and entity ( $r=.271$ ,  $p=.000$ ) identifications. In addition, this group of conspiracy theories negatively correlates with identifications with BiH ( $r=-.168$ ,  $p=.000$ ) and identifications with Europe ( $r=-.183$ ,  $p=.000$ ).

In sum, the general sample shows that most conspiracy theories perform a role in the homogenization of separate social identities in Bosnia & Herzegovina: ethnic, religious, and entity identifications. This is most pronounced in cases of Western conspiracy theories, which also perform the function of distancing respondents from a Bosnian state identity and from a European identity.

Authoritarianism, nationalism, conservatism, political orientation and acceptance of conspiracy theories

Table 4 shows the correlations between the variables of authoritarianism, nationalism, and conservatism and acceptance of conspiracy theories. The results show that all correlations are positive and statistically significant.

**Table 4: Inter-correlation of socio-psychological scale categories and depth of conviction in conspiracy theory categories**

	Authoritarianism	Nationalism	Conservatism	Political orientation	Religiousness
Imperial	.258**	.235**	.114**	-.011	.152**
New Order	.271**	.245**	.252**	.072	.045
Western	.319**	.489**	.302**	.223**	.268**
Pharmaceutical	.230**	.273**	.085**	.145**	.125**
General factor	.361**	.395**	.246**	.117**	.186**

Note: \*\* statistically significant at level  $p < .01$ , \* statistically significant at level  $p < .05$

The general factor demonstrates the strongest correlation with the scores of nationalism ( $r = .395$ ,  $p = .000$ ); authoritarianism ( $r = .361$ ,  $p = .000$ ); conservatism ( $r = .246$ ,  $p = .000$ ); religiousness ( $r = .186$ ,  $p = .000$ ); and a far-right political orientation ( $r = .117$ ,  $p = .004$ ). The results show that no conspiracy theory category is an exception. All conspiracy theory categories show tendencies towards the furthest right, conservative-nationalist orientation of social beliefs and attitudes. Respondents who believe in conspiracy theories of any kind are likely to be more prone to authoritarianism; they are likely to be more conservative; they lean towards nationalist attitudes; and they self-assess their political orientation to be towards the right.

As was the case in previous analyses, this section also shows that acceptance of the Western conspiracy theories category is scored most strongly for correlation with authoritarianism, nationalism, conservatism, and far-right political orientation.

## **Personal and collective anxieties and the acceptance of conspiracy theories**

Table 5 shows the correlations between the variables of personal and collective anxieties and the depth of conviction in categories of conspiracy theories. The data shows all correlations to be positive and statistically important.

**Table 5: Inter-correlation between anxieties and depth of conviction in categories of conspiracy theories.**

	I am anxious about my future.	I am anxious about survival of my nation.
Imperialist	.152**	.225**
New World Order	.128**	.159**
Western	.125**	.300**
Pharmaceutical	.165**	.226**
General factor	.193**	.298**

Note: \*\* statistically significant at level  $p < .01$ , \* statistically significant at level  $p < .05$

The table shows that in addition to all correlations being positive and significant, the correlation between collective anxieties and depth of conviction in categories of conspiracy theories is stronger. The general factor correlates to the greatest extent with collective anxieties ( $r = .298$ ,  $p = .000$ ); it also correlates with individual anxieties ( $r = .193$ ,  $p = .000$ ). When it comes to categories of conspiracy theories, levels of acceptance of Western conspiracy theories shows the strongest correlation with collective anxieties ( $r = .300$ ,  $p = .000$ ), whilst levels of acceptance of Pharmaceutical conspiracy theories correlates strongly with personal anxieties ( $r = .165$ ,  $p = .000$ ).

In general, almost all correlates are positive and statistically important. The connection between conspiracy narratives and the feeling of endangerment seems to be one of the solid findings of the study.



## **Institutional trust, social participation and depth of conviction in conspiracy theories**

Social trust, institutional trust and trust in representatives of communities are key factors in the well-functioning of a democratic society. Social trust is a socio-psychological construct which most directly connects individuals and their communities, motivating or demotivating them to participate actively in communities. Trust is a motivator when it comes to social and political participation, but also when it comes to intra-group relations. In general, researchers into social trust agree on two types of trust: trust in political and social institutions, and trust in other people and communities (Anderson, 2010). **Political** trust and trust in political institutions describes the general evaluative relationship towards political institutions, be it organisations or their status position in society. **Social** trust refers to the assessment of non-political social institutions, such as the judiciary, the education system, the media, religious communities and similar institutions. In this study, we measured political trust in the institutions of the state of Bosnia & Herzegovina, trust in its entities – the Republika Srpska and the Federation of Bosnia & Herzegovina - and trust in social institutions in general.

The impact on the level of trust in political and social institutions made by belief in conspiracy theories is likely to be conditioned by the types of narratives contained in these theories. This impact will also be conditioned by the respondents' assumptions as to the identity of the presumed conspirators; conditioned by those who feel endangered; and conditioned by those who interpret such theories. The impact of the acceptance of conspiracy theories on the trust respondents have in institutions will differ depending on whether the assumed conspirators are considered to be external enemies, or whether they belong to the state institutions of 'my nation'. If the former, then conspiracy theories will be a force for social cohesion; i.e. they will increase the intra-group trust, as well as trust in one's own community. If the latter, the impact will increase mistrust in those political elites that represent political institutions.

Before reporting on the detail of the findings into the connections between the acceptance of conspiracy theories and trust in social institutions, it should be noted that overall trust in BiH institutions amongst the respondents is low. Regardless of the level of authority—the state of Bosnia & Herzegovina or its entities, or general institutions—the strongest expression of trust is never ranked higher than 'neutral' on the scale. Thus, overall levels of trust only vary between the self-reported option: "I have no trust" and the option: "I am undecided". There were no respondents who

registered a positive ranking for trust in BiH institutions. Without going into interpretations as to what this means for the society, statistically this means that there is less scope for establishing significant correlations between these variables and the levels of acceptance of conspiracy theories.

**Table 6: Inter-correlation between institutional trust and belief in categories of conspiracy theories**

	Imperial	New World Order	Western	Pharmaceutical	General factor
BiH Presidency	-.167**	.063*	.007	-.027	-.060
BiH Council of Ministers	-.144**	.079*	-.019	-.034	-.051
RS Government	-.048	.112**	.205**	-.060	.057
FBiH Government	-.114**	.108**	-.028	-.072*	-.039
RS President	-.027	.099**	.250**	-.032	.080**
FBiH President	-.190**	.044	.014	-.022	-.075*
BiH Army	-.053	.097**	-.080**	-.028	-.015
FBiH Police	-.067*	.086**	-.120**	-.036	-.039
RS Police	.025	.125**	.195**	-.113**	.080**
Judiciary	-.138**	.098**	.005	-.074*	-.045
Political parties	-.104**	.099**	.053	-.031	-.006
Media	-.059	.093**	-.026	-.065*	-.016
My religious community	-.025	.105**	.143**	.082**	.084**
NGOs	-.063*	.037	-.084**	-.045	-.049
OHR	-.044	.051	-.127**	-.023	-.040

Note: \*\* statistically significant at level  $p < .01$ , \* statistically significant at level  $p < .05$

Table 6 shows that scores for the correlation between institutional trust and the level of belief in conspiracy theories is significantly weak. On the level of the overall sample, the general factor positively correlates with the trust in the RS President ( $r = .080$ ,  $p < .01$ ); RS police ( $r = .080$ ,  $p < .01$ ); and the religious communities of respondents ( $r = .084$ ,  $p < .01$ ); and negatively correlates with the trust in the FBiH President ( $r = .075$ ,  $p < .05$ ). However, these correlations are so weak that it is impossible to establish any reliable correlations. When it comes to conspiracy theory categories, acceptance of the Western conspiracy theories correlates most strongly with trust in the RS President ( $r = .250$ ,  $p < .01$ ); RS police ( $r = .195$ ,  $p < .01$ ); and RS government ( $r = .205$ ,  $p < .01$ ). The acceptance of Imperialist conspiracy theories correlates most negatively with trust in the FBiH President ( $r = -.190$ ,  $p < .01$ ); BiH Presidency ( $r = -.167$ ,  $p < .01$ ); BiH Council of Ministers ( $r = -.144$ ,  $p < .01$ ); and OHR ( $r = -.127$ ,  $p < .01$ ); and

The next step in the study was to check how perceptions of personal and social injustice, social cynicism, political and social participation correlate with the acceptance of conspiracy theories.

**Table 7: Correlations between perception of injustice, cynicism, participation and depth of conviction in conspiracy theories**

	Imperial	New World Order	Western	Pharmaceutical	General factor
I personally experienced a lot of injustice in life.	.221**	.171**	.189**	.180**	.261**
Society in which I live is unjust.	.226**	.147**	.118**	.145**	.228**
Social cynicism	.287**	.238**	.279**	.207**	.347**
Political participation	.099**	.109**	.183**	.010	.139**
Social participation	.039	.097**	-.120**	-.131**	-.009

Note: \*\* statistically significant at level  $p < .01$ , \* statistically significant at level  $p < .05$

Table 7 shows that the majority of correlations are positive and statistically significant. The general factor as well as categories of conspiracy theories most strongly correlate with social cynicism ( $r = .347$ ,  $p < .01$ ); the experience of personal injustice ( $r = .261$ ,  $p < .01$ ); social injustice ( $r = .228$ ,  $p < .01$ ); and political participation ( $r = .139$ ,  $p < .01$ ). Social participation does not significantly correlate with the general factor, but it correlates negatively with the acceptance of Western conspiracy theories ( $r = -.120$ ,  $p < .01$ ); Pharmaceutical conspiracy theories ( $r = -.131$ ,  $p < .01$ ); and positively correlates with New World Order theories ( $r = .097$ ,  $p < .01$ ). In general, respondents who are more inclined to accept all conspiracy theories are likely to have a stronger perception of personal and social injustice, are likely to exhibit stronger social cynicism, are likely to be more engaged politically, but are also less likely to participate socially.

## Discussion of findings

This study was designed as an exploration into a phenomenon that is not new, but is under-researched in Bosnia & Herzegovina. Conspiracy theory is the term that refers to a set of oversimplified and mostly counterfactual social beliefs in omnipotent and malign groups that coordinate their organised activities with harmful and evil aims

against a particular group or the general public. Examples of conspiracy theories are all around us, ranging from the locally specific to global ones. Did Tuđman and Milošević agree to divide Bosnia & Herzegovina in a secret meeting at the beginning of the war in 1991? Were the 9/11 terrorist attacks in New York secretly organised by the members of American secret services? Is the public kept in the dark about the MMR vaccine causing autism in children? Do the Jewish elders conspire against the rest of humanity to achieve domination over the world politics and economy? All these are examples of conspiratorial narratives which try to explain specific social events that have an impact on the public.

The media, and in particular online communication, have contributed to the prevalence and visibility of conspiracy theories. The freedom that the internet allows, as an unregulated space, has created fertile ground for the increased visibility of conspiracy narratives, with a vast number of web pages pertaining to a wide-range of conspiracy theories. Although it may seem that nowadays there are more conspiracy theories in circulation than ever, conspiracy theories have existed and have impacted on social events since the beginning of written history. These theories are most prevalent in times of historical crises. Research shows that conspiracy theories in US society in the time span between 1890 and 2010 were at their peak around 1900 and between 1940 and 1950 (Uscinski & Parent, 2014). These peaks in the prevalence of conspiracy theories relate to the progress of the industrial revolution, as a period of massive social restructuring, and, secondly, to the emerging Cold War between the USA and the USSR, as an historical period characterised by a high level of insecurity for the American population. Why is this of significance? It may seem redundant to state again that Bosnia & Herzegovina suffered the bloody ethnic conflicts of the 1990s, which are still impacting socially and economically. Politically divided and economically indebted, this country illustrates a range of social phenomena, including strong conviction of many of its citizens in conspiracy theories.

The prevalence of conspiracy theories has a range of different impacts. The corrosive impact of conviction in conspiracy theories is negative, as it weakens social participation in public engagement in everything from politics to public health. There is also a positive side that questions official explanations of social events. When it comes to scepticism towards social institutions, a certain dose of criticism is healthy as it may demonstrate the democratic potential of a society. One should be cautious and consider that the strong prevalence of conspiracy theories and the conviction in conspiracy theories do not often positively correlate with the democratic processes, especially in political fragile contexts such as Bosnia & Herzegovina.

## **Prevalence and structure of conspiracy theories**

With regard to the prevalence of conspiracy theories, the study has identified that around 96% of respondents are convinced by at least one conspiracy theory out of the 24 that were listed. This percentage does not differ from research into conspiracy theories in the USA (Goertzel, 1994) or in Croatia (Blanuša, 2011). With regard to the prevalence of the type of the conspiracy theories in the overall sample, two thirds of the respondents believe that privatization is the result of collaboration between the mafia and state institutions and that large corporations aim at destroying small market interests throughout the world. A slightly smaller number of respondents think that large multinational pharmaceutical companies spread diseases deliberately in order to boost their sales. Next in rank order is the conviction that the fate of nations in the Balkans has always been shaped by imperial forces working behind the scenes, and that the aim of the dissolution of former Yugoslavia was to destroy the socialist state and to impose a capitalist system. The most frequent narrative encountered attempts to explain the poor social and economic situation through conspiracies carried out by influential foreign actors. Further, different socio-economic classes of respondents differ in the strength of their conviction in conspiracy theories, insofar as respondents in lower social classes are more likely to accept conspiracy narratives. This coincided with our expectations, since many studies have confirmed this connection (e.g. Oliver & Wood, 2014; van Prooijen & van Lange, 2014).

The largest differentiation, by socio-demographic traits, is demonstrated between members of different ethnic groups. Respondents of different ethnicities differ mostly in their conviction in conspiracy theory claims that are related to inter-ethnic relations resulting from the conflicts of the 1990s. The difference is strongest regarding claims about: the establishment of Greater Serbia; the expulsion of Serbs from Croatia; the role of the Hague tribunal; and the division of Bosnia & Herzegovina. These issues are still unresolved and are still relevant for the citizens of BiH. This was expected as victimization narratives, encouraged by different ethnic groups, find fertile ground in oversimplified explanations of social events. The victimization of one's own ethnic group strengthens the group's cohesion and shapes the meaning that is made by the group of chaotic and unsafe circumstances. Ethnic groups are

extremely politicized in Bosnia & Herzegovina, and this is used by local politicians to mobilise support, particularly during election campaigns. Ethnic groups in Bosnia & Herzegovina, like elsewhere in the region, still espouse a black-and-white view when it comes to their role and the role of other ethnic groups in the recent conflicts. Such views are mostly mutually exclusive and function like mirror images. There may be some truth in each of these local conspiracy theories, but the oversimplification such narratives offer detaches them from reality.

When we disregard the mirror-imaging among different ethnic groups in Bosnia & Herzegovina, we find the strongest conviction in conspiracy theories in Serb respondents. Next in rank is the conviction in conspiracy theories by Bosniak respondents; with the weakest conviction in Croat respondents. As previously stated, ethnic groups are extremely politicized in Bosnia & Herzegovina, and this is used by local politicians to mobilise support by harnessing the narratives of conspiracy theories. Although conspiracy theories are harnessed in this way throughout the country, such narratives are more prevalent lately in the Republika Srpska. Political discourses often make use of the narrative of the intervention of foreign powers, who are aided by the enemies at home, to conspire against ethnic and political groups. The reasons for this can be found in the prevalence of the ethnic group homogenisation within the Republika Srpska, where political autonomy in relation to the state of Bosnia & Herzegovina is constantly promoted. Historical reasons also prevail when it comes to strong conviction in Western conspiracy theories by Serb respondents. When scores for the categories of conspiracy theories are analysed (i.e. those that do not contain ethnically specific claims), the strongest differentiation is apparent in the scores for Western conspiracy theories. The conviction in these theories is strongest among Serb respondents, which was anticipated, based on the anti-Western sentiment discussed elsewhere (Turjačanin, 2004; 2000; Turjačanin & Majstorović, 2013). The correlation between different categories of conspiracy theories shows that the anti-Western narrative is more likely to prompt conviction in other conspiracy narratives. Therefore, in Serb respondents, we find conviction in all conspiracy narratives more prevalent. This is likely to be caused by a combination of political homogenization and anti-Western attitudes and beliefs, resulting from the perception of Serb respondents concerning Western attitudes towards the Serbs since the 1990s.

The study explored if extrapolation can be made of a general pull towards conspiracy as discussed in other studies. The study is not able to offer unequivocal findings. Most conspiracy narratives rate positively for conviction, which indicates a “monological belief system” (B. Goertzel, 1994; T. Goertzel, 1994; Sutton & Douglas, 2014). Analysing our locally specific conspiracy theories, which feature as conspirators members of different ethnic groups, the study also demonstrates negative correlations as well. Some of these locally specific conspiracy theories have an inter-group function. Because of the importance of such dynamics in our context, the convictions contained in some of these conspiracy theories reflect attitudes towards other ethnic groups and serve the purpose of maintaining inter-group distance and strengthening intra-group cohesion. Bosniaks, Croats, and Serbs experienced a range of different conflicts in the past few decades differently: from armed conflicts in the past to political conflicts in the present. In this context, it is more likely to encounter the conviction that members of an opposing ethnic group are conspirators with malign intentions. Ascribing conspiratorial intentions to members of one’s own ethnic group is not frequently encountered, except in cases when this expresses feelings of collective guilt. Thus, the study demonstrates a general need in respondents to frame world-views in a particular way and to ensure such world-views remain consistent. A strong need for identification processes is apparent and some conspiracy theories fit into such processes. Thus, in societies with a pronounced need for political identification, conspiratorial narratives will coalesce to satisfy such a need. Therefore, in such contexts, it is impossible to find completely monolithic categories of conspiratorial theories that do not overlap.

## **Conspiracy theories and socio-psychological traits of respondents**

Conspiracy theories are based on narratives of a threatened group or society to which an individual belongs. Such theories mostly ascribe conspiratorial intentions to other groups which are, historically or contextually, easy targets for negative association. Such theories also hold that other groups deprive us

of whatever we feel should be ours by right. In these theories, not only do these groups deprive us, but more fundamentally, they want to destroy our way of life, including our society. The effect that such narratives have on inter-group relations is alienation from one another, while on the intra-group level, relations among group members are homogenised.

As anticipated, where emotions are concerned, conviction in conspiracy theories generally warms the emotions towards one's own ethnic group and cools the emotions towards other ethnic groups. Conviction in Western conspiracy theories correlates most consistently with emotions towards other groups. The stronger the conviction in Western conspiracy theories, the more positive the feelings towards one's own ethnic group and the more negative towards other groups. The study demonstrates the significant impact of conviction in conspiracy theories on inter-group distancing or convergence, particularly if there is a history of conflict between the ethnic groups in question.

Also, as anticipated, the study demonstrates that most conspiracy theories strengthen ethnic, religious, and entity identifications. Further, conviction in Western conspiracy theories weakens identification with the state of Bosnia & Herzegovina and with Europe. How these correlations operate differs between ethnic groups. The pattern of correlations reveals that in Croat respondents the conviction in conspiracy theories is related less strongly to ethnic and religious identity, but, rather, is related to respondents' alienation from the entities, the state of Bosnia & Herzegovina, and Europe. In Croat respondents, conspiracy theory narratives are more pronounced in discourses of separation, rather than in identity discourses. Where Bosniak respondents are concerned, conviction in conspiracy theories positively correlates with almost all identifications, both the local and the overarching. In Serb respondents, conviction in conspiracy theories positively correlates with ethnic, religious, and entity identifications, while it does not correlate with identification with the state of Bosnia & Herzegovina, or European identification. This seems to demonstrate the opposite pattern to that seen from Croat respondents, because conspiratorial narratives are more likely to prompt stronger homogenization discourses related to ethnicity, religion, and political autonomy within the Republika Srpska. These are some of the



findings of this study, which we would recommend should be the subject of further research into public political discourses in Bosnia & Herzegovina.

The study analysed the correlations between conviction in conspiracy theories with a cluster of variables that could be deemed to be of traditional-rightist orientation. The data shows that respondents who are convinced of conspiratorial narratives are mostly on the right of the political spectrum: they lean towards authoritarianism, nationalism, conservatism, and religiosity. This was anticipated, given that earlier research has demonstrated similar findings (npr. Abalakina-Paap et al., 1999; Galliford & Furnham, 2017; Grzesiak-Feldman & Irzycka, 2009). The data pertaining to alienation from other ethnic groups, coupled with greater acceptance of narrow identities, consistently matches the correlation between the strength of conviction in conspiracy theories and traditional attitudes.

Further analysis shows that all of the personal and collective anxiety variables correlate positively and significantly with conviction in conspiracy theories. The data shows a stronger correlation between anxieties related to one's own nation and the strength of conviction in conspiracy theories. This is not the case with regard to personal anxieties. This was to be anticipated because conspiracy narratives place the collective group in the position of victim. Conviction in Western conspiracy theories consistently shows strongest correlate scores with collective anxieties, which matches previous analysis on the correlation between strong conviction in Western conspiracy theories and traditional attitudes. Personal and collective anxieties are characteristic of unstable societies, which are undergoing either economic or social transition. In such societies, people need to make sense of the instability in the world around them, which, in its turn, leads them more easily to accept oversimplified conspiratorial explanations. In general, groups that feel more anxious and threatened tend to demonstrate stronger conviction in conspiracy theories (Cichocka, Marchlewska, & de Zavala, 2016; Graeupner & Coman, 2017; Radnitz & Underwood, 2017; Swami et al., 2016).

With regard to correlation between strength of conviction in conspiracy theories and personality traits, all the correlates are weak and there is little consistency between these correlates and different categories of conspiracy theories. Drawing on previous studies, which similarly do not demonstrate any significant correlates, our study partly overlaps with previous research

findings. Overall, personality traits are not likely to impact on strength of conviction in conspiracy theories and are thus not significant social variables, as it was anticipated at the start of the study. The social and political contexts in Bosnia & Herzegovina are significantly different from other contexts, so it could be anticipated that these differences would have a larger impact on conspiratorial narratives.

Finally, in our context, the correlation between conviction in conspiracy theories and variables of identification and inter-group relations reveals that such conviction aligns with rightist, traditional, and conservative attitudes, which are characterised by a constant anxiety for one's own group as well as by alienation from other groups. Bearing in mind the prevalence of conspiracy theories in the media in Bosnia & Herzegovina, these findings offer little optimism. In addition to using conspiracy theory narratives, manipulation of fear and anxiety is an efficient way to strengthen intra-group homogeneity, which also results in a stronger inter-group bias. Inter-ethnic relations in Bosnia & Herzegovina are extremely sensitive and politicized. Given that conspiratorial attributions are highly manipulated in our context, such manipulation does not contribute to the equilibrium of life for citizens in Bosnia & Herzegovina.

## **Social trust and conspiracy theories**

The data in our study shows that the overall trust in the institutions of Bosnia & Herzegovina and its entities is very weak. With regard to trust in the institutions of Bosnia & Herzegovina, the RS and FBiH entities, as well as trust in the media, judiciary, and political parties, the strongest expression of trust is never ranked higher than 'neutral' on the scale. The neutral point describes the position of not being sure whether to trust or not, below which on the scale are differing degrees of stronger to weaker explicit mistrust. This was anticipated, given that similar findings were shown in previous studies carried out in our context (Dušanić, Lakić, & Turjačanin, 2017). Correlations between trust in social institutions and levels of conviction in conspiracy theories proved to be very weak, but they do exist.

For example, the study has demonstrated that the general factor positively correlates with levels of trust in the RS President, RS police, and religious communities to which the respondents belong, while it correlates negatively with levels of trust in the FBiH President. Correlates between trust in institutions and the general factor are weak, and it is therefore difficult to establish any consistent relationship between these variables. On the other hand, strength of conviction in Western conspiracy theories correlates more firmly with trust in the RS President, RS police, and RS government. Further, conviction in Imperialist conspiracy theories shows the strongest negative correlation with trust in the FBiH President, BiH Presidency, BiH Council of Ministers, and the OHR. The analysis of scores by Bosniak respondents reveals weak and mainly negative correlations. The strongest correlation is with conviction in Imperialist conspiracy theories, where data shows negative correlation with levels of trust in BiH institutions and entity institutions. Another finding is that respondents who are likely to be convinced of Pharmaceutical conspiracy theories express weak trust in RS institutions, but express strong trust in their religious communities. In Serb respondents, those who are likely to be convinced of Imperialist conspiracy theories mainly express weak trust in BiH institutions, FBiH institutions, NGOs, and the OHR. Those who are likely to be convinced of Western conspiracy theories express strong trust in RS institutions and weak trust in the OHR. In Croat respondents, the analysis shows the stronger the conviction in conspiracy theories the weaker the expression of trust in all social institutions. The exception to this is conviction in New World Order conspiracy theories, which positively correlates with most of these respondents' self-reported trust in social and political institutions.

With regard to correlation between the perceptions of personal and social injustice, cynicism, and political and social participation, the study shows the general factor correlates with all variables except that which concerns social participation. This finding aligns with other studies that indicate social alienation and feelings of helplessness and disenfranchisement to be the reasons for conviction in conspiracy theories (Abalakina-Paap et al., 1999; T. Goertzel, 1994). The total sample of respondents exhibits positive correlation between conspiratorial thinking and political participation. Although seeming to be a paradox, in our context, this means that people who tend to be convinced of conspiracy theories are more likely to be active political

participants, including participating in social institutions. Such people, who are more driven by conspiratorial narratives, may have chosen to be more politically active. Alternatively, such people, through their political participation, may have been more exposed to conspiratorial narratives. On the other hand, respondents who are more likely to be convinced of conspiratorial narratives self-report weaker participation in social actions, such as fundraising, volunteering, and environmental activism. These respondents, being more cynical, probably don't believe that anything could be changed by voluntary work, so they focus more on political participation alone.

Therefore, in the context of Bosnia & Herzegovina, we can see that people who are convinced of conspiracy theory narratives are likely to adopt a more cynical attitude toward their society, considering it as anomic and unjust. Their trust in elected political institutions is selective, they do not participate significantly in social actions. However, they are not averse to some forms of politically activity. What conclusions can be drawn from this? Taking into account the correlation between politics generally and conspiracy discourses, this situation offers little basis for optimism. Perhaps, looked at positively, since these respondents perceive their society to be unjust, there is a potential for these correlations to motivate change for the better. However, most of the findings in this study coincide with a period of several months in the run up to a general election, when our fieldwork was carried out and when political activity in the country was at its most intense.

## **Counteracting harmful conspiracy narratives**

Social trust is an early casualty of the impact of conspiracy narratives. A significant aspect of conspiracy theories detrimental to social trust is the encouragement of cynicism and mistrust in the good intentions of social institutions and of people in general. Trust in social institutions, government representatives, and interpersonal trust contribute to the greater interest and involvement of citizens in political participation. (Sullivan & Transue, 1999). Trust not only refers to political participation but also to civic participation, which manifests itself through a range of non-political forms of social engagement, such as volunteering or helping others. Research shows that the correlation between trust and participation is mutually supportive – the greater the social participation, the greater the social trust (Flanagan, Cumsille, Gill, & Gallay, 2007). Why is this important? Recent studies carried out in Europe show that extremist groups, particularly far-right ones, manipulate and abuse the destructive potential of conspiracy narratives (Baldauf et al., 2017; Bartlett & Miller, 2010). Break-down of social trust either in political institutions or in relations between citizens leads to break-down in democratic social relations, which in its turn leads to the strengthening of authoritarian ideologies. In the interest of balance, not every sceptical attitude is by default cynical and destructive. There are healthy ways of being critical of the societies in which we live and of political institutions. Public dialogue about these matters can bring about an improvement in society.

The study shows that conviction in conspiracy theories correlates negatively with the degree of trust in political and social institutions, and also with the strength of social engagement of the respondents. Such conviction correlates positively with authoritarianism, cynicism, perception of social injustice, and political engagement. With regard to the creation of favourable social and political environments, the prevalence of conspiracy theories and their effects do not contribute to the general prosperity of the majority of people. A weak economy or deep social crises are contexts which are difficult to change but are strongly conducive to conviction in conspiracy theories. Certain things can be changed, however,

and societies should strive to change them. What can be done to counter the negative effects of harmful conspiracy narratives? In any local context, this will depend on several factors: the sources of such narratives; the actors in such narratives (both conspirators and victims); and the content of such narratives.

Concerning concrete steps that can be undertaken, Sunstein and Vermeule (Sunstein & Vermeule, 2009) outline 5 ways in which governments may counter conspiracy theories: 1. A ban on public dissemination of conspiracy theories; 2. Sanctions for those who disseminate conspiracy theories; 3. Engagement in counter-speech to discredit conspiracy theories; 4. Formal hire of credible private parties to engage in counter-speech; 5. Motivating third parties and encouraging them to assist through counter-speech. The authors consider the first two options to be the weakest of the five, because they undermine an open society by limiting freedom of speech. The authors claim that the most advantageous approach is for governments to engage in counter-speech directly, in combination with the assistance of other parties.

The US psychology professor Seth Kalichman offers a way to counter those conspiracy theories that seek to negate scientific facts related to AIDS. This approach could also be applied to most other medical and pharmaceutical conspiracy theories (Kalichman, 2009). It is disadvantageous to rely on one study alone when we draw conclusions. The scientific community expects all scientific studies to be independently replicated and confirmed in order for them to be credible. For example, the ubiquitous conspiracy theory asserting the connection between the MMR vaccine and autism in children, took root in 1999 with the publication of a study, the sample group for which comprised 12 children, based on whose medical records the link between the MMR and autism was asserted. The impact of this study on public perception was significant, leading to an increasing number of independent studies on the same topic, none of which have established any such link. After 10 years, the author of the study himself admitted to falsifying the results and was accused of breaching scientific ethics (Flaherty, 2011). Regardless of dozens of independent studies that have disproved the original findings, the remains of the original study are still echoing in public space. Further, one should always pay attention to

the credibility of information that is presented as scientific. Tabloids cannot be treated with the same significance as scientific journals. Even though scientific journals may occasionally be inaccurate, as we have seen above, the publication criteria used by these journals are much more rigorous than they were previously. They insist on rigorous controls of the research undertaken from start to finish and ultimately on the public availability of research results. Scientific results must be replicable which can never be the case for conspiracy theories. This is of particular significance in the domain of medical research, because the consequences of misinformation have the potential to be harmful and sometimes even to cause death. When evaluating medical information (particularly that which is available online), in addition to finding more reliable sources, medical doctors should be consulted, because they have the ability to filter information in multiple ways, based on both the theoretical and practical knowledge they have.

When it comes to what government and society can do to counter conspiracy theories, the strongest actor in counter-speech is the government itself and most of our recommendations relate to governmental responses.

## **1. Be transparent in government**

The first general recommendation, as common sense would have it and as the results of this study demonstrate, is that social and political institutions should be open and transparent. We are adapted to live in a system in which decisions are made neither transparently nor logically. In closed societies, where there is no free flow of information between the government and the public, there are more secrets which can fuel conspiratorial ideas. In our society, local or international politicians present us with decisions that influence our lives that lack any transparency about the mechanisms and processes behind such decisions. The effect of this paucity of information and the perception that we are unable to have any impact on decision making together prompt alternative

interpretations of social phenomena. (Sunstein & Vermeule, 2009). An example, in our context, of how conspiracy theories are created as a result of the lack of government transparency can be seen in the tragic death of David Dragičević and the events that unfolded during 2018 in Banja Luka surrounding his death (Wikipedia, 2018). Starting as a personal request by the father for an investigation into the suspicious death of his son, there emerged a movement called "Pravda za Davida" ["Justice for David"]. The movement is based on anti-system conspiracy narrative which holds that the government and the police hide facts which could be discredit them and this is why they seek to deceive the public. Due to flawed investigative procedures and a number of failures by the prosecutor's office and the police, together with subsequent botched arrests, a point has been reached where the public may increasingly be convinced by the conspiratorial narrative. On the other hand, around this case emerged another, pro-system, conspiratorial narrative, in which the movement in collaboration with the international factors acts against the political system in the Republika Srpska (Ivas, 2018; SRNA, 2018). Thus, one social phenomenon in a certain context may be related to different conspiracy theories. It should be borne in mind that the development of this conspiratorial narrative was most likely encouraged both by the poor socio-economic situation and public dissatisfaction caused by the lack of openness and transparency surrounding this case.

## **2. Bolster critical thinking by means of education**

The second general recommendation, which may be even more general than the first and which requires a long-term approach, is to shape the education system in such a way as to focus more on the development of critical thinking and research skills in young people. Elementary psychological research shows that education in research methods has long-term positive effects on everyday problem-solving (Fong, Krantz, & Nisbett, 1986; Kosonen & Winne, 1995; Nisbett, Fong, Lehman, & Cheng, 1987). Further, specific studies show the connection between conviction



in conspiracy theories and less developed capacity for analytic thinking. An improvement in analytical thinking skills brings about weakening of conviction in conspiracy theories (Swami, Voracek, Stieger, Tran, & Furnham, 2014). Improving critical thinking skills is a long-term process, the effects of which are more far reaching than merely impacting on the matter of conspiracy theories. The improvement of these skills can be a most effective remedy for many social problems that have their roots in oversimplified and / or misleading social reasoning.

Countering the spread of conspiracy theories encounters specific problems. One such problem is deciding how to proceed if their source is the government and government officials. Unremarkably, conspiracy theories are used for political ends: for example, American President Donald Trump, who in a recent public address denied that the number of casualties in the hurricane that hit Puerto Rico was 3,000, claiming that the figure was much lower, all the while accusing the Democrats of using the figure against him as a tool of their political campaigning (Fernández Campbell, 2018). Locally, frequent addresses by RS President Milorad Dodik also draw on conspiracy narratives in which the West and the opposition conspire to topple the legitimate RS government (Kovačević, 2018; Tanjug, 2018; Глас Српске, 2018; CPHA, 2018). Both cases show how senior government officials make use of oversimplified conspiratorial explanations for social events in which they claim that their political opponents conspire, not only against them personally, but against the general public. Clearly, such conspiracy narratives serve political ends and lead to the homogenization of political community around the identity of the threatened subject, the public, the nation, the political group or other locally appropriate groupings. Conspiracy theories construed in this way put the public in a paradoxical position: given that the conspiracy narrative relies on a perceived loss of control over one's own political and social community, the community feels it has no choice but to accept conspiracy theories if it wants to maintain a sense of control. The paradox is that the conviction in these conspiracy narratives has the opposite effect – namely, a loss of democratic control (Hernáiz, 2008). In such cases, the harmful impacts of conspiracy theories are a breakdown of the democratic framework with no direct redress available.

### **3. Nurture a critical public through alliances of media and CSOs**

Under such conditions, civil society institutions, i.e. NGOs, media and the public will have to work together to counter conspiracy theories. NGOs working on the evaluation of the effects of certain policies, political parties or individuals, can focus their evaluation on whether there is evidence that such public statements by politicians and political parties are justified. Moreover, the onus is on the electronic and other media to critique such discourses, because conspiracy theories harm social trust.

### **4. Raise awareness about the dangers of conspiracy theories**

Lastly, the public as a whole should be sensitized in relation to conspiracy theories, especially those which are rooted in ideological conflict. Again, excellence in education must be emphasised which has the potential to create powerful foundations for critical thinking and the critical evaluation of information. Nurturing critical thinking is crucial. Social psychology has long been aware of everyday social reasoning being carried out on “automatic pilot”, with little control and evaluation being exercised (Bargh & Chartrand, 1999; Shiffrin & Schneider, 1984). Controlled thinking requires effort and conscious will to evaluate information accurately. The automatic processing of information is much easier and efficient; it does not require much effort and when we are not motivated, we rely on it. In return, little energy is expended, but information, then, is accepted as it is presented. As previously stated, there is evidence that it is possible to improve empirical reasoning (Nisbett & Ross, 1980), which is a task on which education institutions could focus their efforts. When evaluating information, another challenge is to take into account factors that motivate such inquiry. Motivation for general participation in political and civic processes lies to a great extent in understanding how society and political systems function, which is also an area in which educational institutions play an important role. Depoliticized education should be a priority, focused on achieving an open society and social welfare.

A particular challenge is the reach of the internet, as the dominant medium through which conspiracy theories are emerging and evolving. Web 2.0, as a paradigm which moves away from static and uni-directional webpages towards user-created and shaped webpages, has enabled the creation of social networks and user-generated content. As with everything, this has both its positives and its negatives. Social media are full of: information, both verified and unverified; accurate scientific information and pseudoscience; prosocial tendencies and also antisocial tendencies. Many websites disseminate conspiracy theories that are based on unverified facts. One of the famous American websites that promotes problematic, destructive, and cynical conspiracy narratives is [www.inforwars.com](http://www.inforwars.com). Its owner Alex Jones was recently sanctioned by having his accounts deleted on services such as Apple, Facebook, YouTube, Spotify and others (Hern, 2018). The reason given for this was his promotion of violence and hate speech. Such sanctions will hit the owner of this website hard, but it seems to be having the opposite effect on those who are readily convinced of conspiracy theories: i.e. since he is being silenced, he must be right. Similar phenomena have occurred in our context. In Serbia, as in the rest of the region, conspiracy theory related to the MMR vaccine has circulated for years. Some public figures have even promoted this theory in their posts on social networks. Given that this conspiracy theory impacts on the take up of immunization in the population and thus poses a threat to public health, the Serbian authorities have issued a warrant to question some of these public figures; for example singer Jelena Karleuša (Blic, 2018). This is an example of direct state intervention to counter harmful conspiracy narratives, particularly with regard to harmful effects on the health of the public. Certainly, government must act but, as in the previous example of government sanctioning, it is to be seen what the response is in those who are already convinced of such conspiracy narratives. Young people navigate large amounts of information on the web daily. What has the potential to be effective is to educate young people at school as to how to distinguish between relevant and irrelevant information; how to recognize credible sources of information and distinguish them from those that promote fake news and pseudoscience. Nowadays, the internet is the most important source of information and also is the means via which young people enjoy themselves. Therefore, school curricula should concentrate

on developing and improving online media literacy. Media literacy, as taught in schools today, should be updated. The digital world is changing rapidly and these changes need to be reflected in school curricula. Web 2.0 shows how important it is to have appropriate filters through which to select information and the know-how to navigate online communication. These are all new skills that need to be adopted not only by young people, but also by all of those who use the internet to communicate and search information.

## Research limitations and recommendations

In addition to the useful insights that this study offers, it is also limited in certain ways. In these kinds of studies, conclusions and generalizations relating to the entire population are constrained by the sample of respondents. The sample in this study is relatively robust, insofar as it reflects, to a reasonable degree, the traits of the population at large. This is a descriptive-correlational study, through which we can describe certain phenomena and investigate correlations among them. However, we cannot draw any cause-and-effect conclusions from these phenomena. Based on the results of this study, we cannot claim with certainty how conviction in conspiracy theories *impacts* on social phenomena or social attitudes, such as cynicism or social trust. Further, we cannot claim with certainty that cynicism *impacts* on the acceptance of conspiracy theories. What we can say, however, is that these variables are *connected* and that they will likely be correlated in a certain number of respondents. Research methodology would argue for an experimental study in order to be able to discuss the causes and effects, but such a study could not technically and organisationally be feasible with a sample of this size. This was a compromise we had to accept in order to include a large number of respondents and collect this amount of data. Another limitation relates to statistical analysis. In this study, statistically speaking, we used relatively simple descriptive and correlational procedures, which allowed for a wide-ranging overview of data, but which neither delved deeper into psychological mechanisms and processes nor did they analyse potential mediator variables. This compromise was made because of the genre and scope of this study. In future publications, data analysis will need to be elaborated in more detail.

A further limitation relates to the fact that this was a survey, in which respondents were presented with closed-ended questions, which do not allow respondents to construct their own responses. This compromise was accepted in order to conduct the research efficiently when dealing with the size of our sample. Sometimes, such a limitation can be addressed by conducting additional qualitative research on a smaller sub-sample of respondents who match the quantitative sample in some important socio-demographic variables. This can be done through interviews or discussion

focus groups, during which discussion with respondents can focus on various aspects of their conviction related to conspiracy theories, such as their reasons for accepting or not accepting certain conspiracy theories; or the ways in which they counter them. Such an approach would enable us to conduct a more detailed analysis of the foundations for conviction in conspiracy theories and how these foundations correlate differently. Further, respondents in this study were offered a limited number of statements of conspiracy theories. This may have meant that we omitted some conspiracies that are currently prevalent.

There are other approaches to researching conspiracy theories, which do not rely primarily on psychological research methods, yet these could contribute to our analysis. Such approaches would potentially entail qualitative research of media content and political discourses in our context. This would enrich the interpretation of our results and would be a fresh research project to consider.

This study gives an overview of the current social and political context in Bosnia & Herzegovina. Fieldwork was carried out during a general election campaign, which is a period of heightened political passions, and which situation must be reflected in the results of any socio-psychological research. Currently, we are unable to assess the extent to which our findings will stand the test of time. This will only be possible to determine when this research or similar research is replicated in the future. Any future research may enable us to assess whether conviction in conspiracy theories is the result of current socio-political circumstances or whether it is the result of psychological traits.

In conclusion, this study has offered us a range of useful findings in the field of conspiracy theory research. It has also highlighted how this field of research can be enriched. This is a pioneer study of a social phenomenon which we hope will contribute to the advancement of knowledge in the fields of sociology and psychology.

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