

Conspiracy Theories in Eastern Europe

This collection of state-of-the-art essays explores conspiracy cultures in post-socialist Eastern Europe, ranging from the nineteenth century to contemporary manifestations.

Conspiracy theories about Freemasons, Communists and Jews, about the Chernobyl disaster, and about George Soros and the globalist elite have been particularly influential in Eastern Europe, but they have also been among the most prominent worldwide. This volume explores such conspiracy theories in the context of local Eastern European histories and discourses. The chapters identify four major factors that have influenced cultures of conspiracy in Eastern Europe: nationalism (including ethnocentrism and antisemitism), the socialist past, the transition period, and globalization. The research focuses on the impact of imperial legacies, nation-building, and the Cold War in the creation of conspiracy theories in Eastern Europe; the effects of the fall of the Iron Curtain and conspiracism in a new democratic setting; and manifestations of viral conspiracy theories in contemporary Eastern Europe and their worldwide circulation with the global rise of populism. Bringing together a diverse landscape of Eastern European conspiracism that is a result of repeated exchange with the “West,” the book includes case studies that examine the history, legacy, and impact of conspiracy cultures of Bulgaria, Estonia, Hungary, Moldova, Poland, Romania, Russia, Slovakia, Ukraine, the former Yugoslav countries, and the former Soviet Union.

The book will appeal to scholars and students of conspiracy theories as well as those in the areas of political science, area studies, media studies, cultural studies, psychology, philosophy, and history, among others. Politicians, educators, and journalists will find this book a useful resource in countering disinformation in and about the region.

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Conspiracy Theories

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Conspiracy Theories in Eastern Europe

Tropes and Trends

**Edited by Anastasiya Astapova,
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and Tamás Scheibner**

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Abbreviations

ADL	Anti-Defamation League
AFCP	Archives of the French Communist Party
AIG	Archives of the “Istituto Gramsci”
ANOVA	Analysis of variance
ATO	Anti-terrorist military operation
BBC	British Broadcasting Corporation
CDDDABCSSISBPA	Commission for the Disclosure of Documents and Declaration of Affiliation of Bulgarian Citizens with State Security and the Intelligence Service of the Bulgarian People’s Army
CEDIM	Center for the Study of Ethnicity, Citizenship and Migration
CEU	Central European University
CIA	Central Intelligence Agency
COMPACT	Comparative Analysis of Conspiracy Theories
COST	European Cooperation in Science and Technology
CPU	Communist Party of Ukraine
CPI	Corruption Perceptions Index
CPSU	Communist Party of the Soviet Union
CRULH	Centre de Recherche Universitaire Lorrain d’ Histoire
DGSI	Direction générale de la sécurité intérieure (General Directorate for Internal Security)
DNA	Direcția Națională Anticorupție (National Anti-Corruption Directorate)
EEA	European Economic Area
EEU	Eurasian Economic Union
EU	European Union
FBI	Federal Bureau of Investigation
FIDESZ-MPP	Fiatal Demokraták Szövetsége – Magyar Polgári Párt (Hungarian Civic Alliance)
FNA	French National Archives
FRG	Federal Republic of Germany
FSS	Federal Security Service
GDCOC	General Directorate Combating Organized Crime (Bulgaria)

GERB	Grazhdani za Evropeisko Razvitie Balgariya (Citizens for European Development of Bulgaria)
GL AFAM	Grand Lodge of Ancient Free and Accepted Masons of Germany
GMG	General Media Group (Republic of Moldova)
GMO	Genetically modified organism
HHC	Hungarian Helsinki Committee
HIV	Human immunodeficiency virus
HPV	Human papillomavirus
HSS	Hrvatska seljačka stranka (The Croatian Peasant Party)
HUF	Hungarian forint
ICTV	International Commercial Television (Ukraine)
ICTY	International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia
ILS	Istituto Luigi Sturzo (Luigi Sturzo Institute)
IMF	International Monetary Fund
IRES	Institutul Român pentru Evaluare și Strategie (Romanian Institute for Evaluation and Strategy)
IRI	International Republican Institute
IRH-ICUB	Institute for Research in the Humanities – Research Institute of the University of Bucharest
KGB	Komitet Gosudarstvennoy Bezopasnosti (Committee for State Security)
LGBTI	Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex
LW	Left wing
MANSZ	Magyar Asszonyok Nemzeti Szövetsége (National Association of Hungarian Women)
MDF	Magyar Demokrata Fórum (Hungarian Democratic Forum)
MGB	Ministerstvo gosudarstvennoy bezopasnosti SSSR (Ministry for State Security)
MK	Republic of North Macedonia
MMR	Measles, mumps, rubella
MP	Member of Parliament
MSI	Movimento Sociale Italiano (Social Italian Movement)
MTI	Magyar Távirati Iroda (Hungarian News Agency Corporation)
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
NGO	Nongovernmental organization
NKVD	Naródníy Komissariát Vnútrennikh Del (People’s Commissariat for Internal Affairs)
NTS	Narodno-Trudovoj Sojuz rossijskix solidaristov (National Alliance of Russian Solidarists)
OHCHR	Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights
OSF	Open Society Foundations
PiS	Prawo i Sprawiedliwość (Law and Justice)

PRM	Partidul România Mare (Greater Romania Party)
PSD	Partidul Social Democrat (Social-Democratic Party, Romania)
PSI	Partito Socialista Italiano (Italian Socialist Party)
PUNR	Partidul Unității Naționale Române (Romanian National Unity Party)
RM	Republic of Moldova
RMBK	Reaktor Bolshoy Moshchnosti Kanalnyi (High power channel-type reactor)
RPF	Rassemblement du Peuple Français (The Rally of the French People)
RW	Right wing
RWA	Right-Wing Authoritarianism
SANU	Serbian Academy of Science and Arts
SAS	Slovak Academy of Sciences
SBU	Sluzhba bezpeky Ukrainy (Security Service of Ukraine)
SD	Standard deviation
SRI	Serviciul Român de Informații (Romanian Intelligence Service)
SWAT	Special Weapons and Tactics
TI	Transparency International
UFO	Unidentified flying object
UK	United Kingdom
UN	United Nations
UNSCEAR	United Nations Scientific Committee on the Effects of Atomic Radiation
US/USA	United States/United States of America
USAID	United States Agency for International Development
USL	Uniunea Social Liberală (Social Liberal Union)
USSR	Union of Soviet Socialist Republics
VMRO-DPMNE	Vnatrešno–Makedonska Revolucionerna Organizacija–Demokratska Partija za Makedonsko Nacionalno Edinstvo (Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization–Democratic Party for Macedonian National Unity)
VOA	Voice of America
WHO	World Health Organization

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Introduction

Eastern Europe in the global traffic of conspiracy theories

*Anastasiya Astapova, Onoriu Colăcel, Corneliu
Pintilescu, and Tamás Scheibner*

After the fall of the Iron Curtain, expectations about the rapid democratization, smooth transition to market economy, and integration into the global flux of goods, people, and ideas of Eastern European countries ran high. Over three decades after 1989, the political trends in Eastern Europe, such as the rise of populism, reveal that the democratic transition is easily reversible. Moreover, the region has emerged as a propitious place for inventing, adapting, mediating, and redistributing conspiracy theories. What was initially viewed as a source of all virtues is now seen as evil: the European Union has become the primary target of conspiratorial narratives in the region (and beyond), often being perceived as a plot of hidden powers bent on dominating the continent and drastically changing the world as we know it. These conspiracy theories are hardly marginal, since leading political figures such as Viktor Orbán, Jarosław Kaczyński, and Liviu Dragnea have been disseminating them for a long time now. Their conspiratorial narratives depict Brussels as the “new Moscow” (Bridge 2017, 48), thus comparing the EU to the Soviet Union or, alternatively, portraying the European project as a German plot to colonize Eastern Europe. These narratives revive twentieth-century experiences all too familiar to the locals: the Soviet effort to limit state sovereignties across Eastern and Central Europe and the German imperial aspirations known as *Drang nach Osten*. The new narratives also resonate well with the traditional self-perceptions of the nations of the region as victims of great powers whose “very existence may be put in question at any moment” (Kundera 1984, 35).

Another historical experience the area commonly draws on when constructing conspiratorial narratives is the historical Jewish presence and long-standing antisemitism in Eastern Europe. While larger Jewish communities in the region did not survive World War II outside Russia and a few Southeastern European countries, it has been proven that antisemitism actually requires no Jews (Lendvai 1971): contemporary Poland is a striking example (Bilewicz et al. 2013). As it is well known, one of the most influential conspiracy theories, *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, originated in Eastern Europe and was mediated to the West mostly by White Russian émigrés in the late 1910s and 1920s (Marks 2003, 172–73). For example, the Russian “white émigrés” disseminated a conspiracy theory in interwar Germany depicting Jews as operating “a seamless web of conniving finance capitalists and murderous Bolsheviks, threaten[ing] to conquer the world”

(Kellogg 2005, 1–2). Although it was unveiled as a forgery a hundred years ago, it survived and has been widely circulated on the internet and reprinted by publishers spreading neo-Nazi ideology.

With the recent populist revival and the rise of authoritarian leaders in Eastern Europe, however, antisemitic discourse reached mainstream politics and surfaced in campaigns against the American-Jewish billionaire George Soros across the region. The Soros campaign revived old antisemitic tropes and iconography. Effectively, it scapegoated Soros as an embodiment of an alleged hidden global network of ruthless capitalists. The novelty of the campaign was that it added human rights activists, refugees, and migrants to the old antisemitic conspiracy theories. Since Donald Trump's victory in the US presidential elections, anti-Soros conspiracy theories have gained special popularity. For example, there were claims that Soros aims to bring Mexicans back to the United States—due to some antipatriotic money hustle resulting in the conscious destabilization of the country. Affirmative reporting on such ideas has also helped to establish anti-Soros conspiracy theories in Eastern Europe. Ironically, in the United Kingdom, they reversed the geography of conspiracism and looked for scapegoats in the East: there, migrants and migrant communities from Eastern Europe were depicted as major threats and fueled conspiracy theories against a European Union, blamed for allowing the free movement of the workforce.

Anti-EU and anti-Soros narratives are just two examples of conspiracy theories that have received a great impetus from Eastern Europe in the past decade. The ruling techniques that authoritarian politics employ globally are roughly the same, and conspiracy theories are parts of a common toolbox. Far-right subcultures, with extensive online presence, have effectively spread such theories across borders, while rightist radical parties are well connected and emulate each other. However, it is safe to argue that some of the best-known international conspiracy theories are co-created by American, Western, and Eastern European actors.

This volume aims to corroborate this view and challenge the public and academic consensus on conspiracy theories as a primary product of the United States or, generally, Western political culture. This consensus is partly a result of the very history of conspiracy theory research, which has developed at the conjunction of American studies, political science, and psychology and, consequently, has focused on US sources and phenomena. Undoubtedly, due to a set of historical conditions (Goldberg 2003), the United States proved to be a particularly rich soil for the development of a conspiracy culture. Moreover, with English being a *lingua franca* and US culture having worldwide impact, conspiracy theories that originated in the United States set the main trends of conspiracism. The primary focus on the United States and, somewhat later, on Western conspiracy thinking (Butter and Knight 2016, 8) has shaped the perception of the United States and the West as the primary sources of conspiracy theories. Also, most of the influential works on conspiracy theories have been written based on US materials, with the United States often understood as the ultimate case of conspiratorial paranoia (Knight 2003; Butter and Reinkowski 2014). Conspiracy theory research, however, hardly profits from an exclusivist attention to English sources,

and continuing on this beaten path is likely to relegate the global phenomenon of conspiracism to the confines of Western-style democracies.

Consequently, this edited volume aims to bridge yet another “great divide” in conspiracy theory research (Butter and Knight 2016) by highlighting some of the most widespread or particularly telling conspiracy narratives of Eastern Europe. Our focus is on a region that, in spite of its major significance in both the history of some of the best-known conspiracy theories and their contemporary circulation, has rarely made it into the mainstream of conspiracy theory research. We argue that the overview of these particular conspiracy theories can help us to better grasp not only their specificities, as they emerged, reshaped, or just recirculated in Eastern Europe, but also the diversity of the conspiracy narratives across the region and beyond.

Definitions and approaches

Even though research into conspiracy theories has been dominated by representatives of political science, psychologists, and American studies, interest in this field has been growing at such a large pace across a wide range of disciplines that it has arguably become a discipline in its own right (Boltanski [2012] 2014, 196). However, while defining what a conspiracy is does not constitute a subject of disputation (see M. R. X. Dentith’s chapter in this volume), what constitutes a conspiracy theory remains a big issue. There are, however, several key characteristics of conspiracy theories scholars agree on. One of the most synthetic is the definition provided by Michael Barkun, who argues that “a conspiracy belief is the belief that an organization made up of individuals or groups was or is acting covertly to achieve some malevolent end” (2003, 3). A similar one is proposed by Cass R. Sunstein and Adrian Vermeule, who claim that any attempt to explain an “event or practice by reference to the machinations of powerful people” acting in secret is a conspiracy theory (2009, 205). These definitions point at two essential characteristics of conspiracy theories: that of secrecy and the assumption of the existence of a clandestine group with specific interests. It is also important that the latter has a broad action radius; it is a “gigantic and yet subtle machinery of influence set in motion to undermine and destroy a way of life” (Hofstadter 1964, 29). The third common feature concerns not the content of the claim, but rather, its epistemological status: conspiracy theories are presented as “fundamental, unshakeable principle[s]” that are “by [their] very nature irrefutable” (Byford 2011, 36). In its sometimes complicated structures of causes and consequences, conspiracism imitates genuine intellectual inquiry, but in contrast to the latter, it indulges in a mode of questioning that does not allow for the reconsideration of original causes. The result is “a closed system of ideas about a plot,” and this system dismisses all attempts at criticism and relativization as actions by the very powerful conspirators that take information management under their control (Barkun 2003, 7). What follows is that any piece of criticism is yet another argument in favor of the conspiracy theory. This regime of inquiry is so essential to conspiracism that Brian L. Keeley even defined conspiracy theories as theories “for which evidence against

them is actually construed as evidence in favor of them” (1999, 120). The discursive regime that governs conspiracy theories is closely linked to their obsessive character: as Mark Fenster argued, conspiracy theorists are “driven by a circular, inexhaustible desire for more information” of which carefully selected pieces on the expense of other types of evidence could be mounted to prove the existence of a conspiracy ([1999] 2008, 13).

Approaches to conspiracy theory discourses vary greatly in academic scholarship, and it is difficult to bridge the gap between two basic attitudes toward conspiracism (Butter and Knight 2016). One approach treats conspiracy theories as pathological and strongly related to paranoia and irrationality (Hofstadter 1964; Pipes 1997; Robins and Post 1997), while another growing body of research rejects this pejorative connotation and argues for viewing conspiracy theories as “a cultural practice of interpretation,” “a narrative form” (Fenster [1999] 2008, 13) or a sort of “stigmatized knowledge” (Barkun 2003, 12). The first approach relates conspiracism to normative constructs of knowledge production being interested in revealing either the universal logical flaws of conspiracist thinking or some psychological flaws irreconcilable with an imagined liberal subject. The second approach takes a functionalist view and tries to identify how conspiracy theories are conditioned by the social and cultural milieu in which they appear and in what ways conspiracism ultimately affects that very environment (e.g., Butter 2014; Byford 2011). While the rationalist-universalist approach has provided strong arguments against certain forms of conspiracy theories and proved its potential to add valuable input when it comes to fight actual malign conspiracy theories in the political and social arena, it could also hinder research by oversimplifying complex discursive phenomena (Fenster [1999] 2008, 11). There is no doubt that conspiracy theory is “an evaluative term with significant pejorative connotations” (Byford 2011, 21) and has long been a “routinized strategy of exclusion,” of “stripping the claimant of the status of reasonable interlocutor” (Husting and Orr 2007, 127) both in the mass media and academia. The catchphrase “conspiracy theory” has become a tool of delegitimization, which “confer[s] stigma on certain knowledge claims” (Barkun 2003, 13, 71) and switches off the *modus interpretandi*. However, recent changes in forms and discourses of global politics suggest that stigmatization does not even keep conspiracism out of the social-political agora. Rather, assertions of any sort could be labeled as conspiracy theory no matter how well grounded their truth claims are. Therefore, the primary task of the volume is to seek to understand the function that conspiracy theories fulfill in societies and cultures, both right now and in the long term.

As mentioned previously, however, the “great divide” in this area of research has also formed due to its regional focus on the United States and the West more generally, which is why the definitions above often formed by taking into account only limited cases and contexts. This is why one of the questions raised by this edited volume is this: How do these definitions operate outside of the Western world? Conspiracy theories in Eastern Europe provide a compelling answer to this research question.

An introduction to a volume that features the term “Eastern Europe” in its title has to grapple with the issue of “the East of Europe,” which is far from being a self-explanatory one. There has been a plethora of concepts developed in various languages to describe more or less the same geographical area on various grounds. Other than cultural and political traditions and agendas that have a say in the issue, there are also specific academic disciplines that have their own preferred options. There is hardly a choice that could be satisfactorily applied to all historical and contemporary contexts and that is suitable to all approaches within an interdisciplinary project (Mishkova and Trencsényi 2017). No doubt, “Eastern Europe” is a historically loaded term that has rarely been taken up as a self-description in the region itself that it is supposed to designate, and the notion is historically closely associated with a cultural grade where the “East” is always already backward (Wolff 1994; Schenk 2017). In the second half of the twentieth century, “Eastern Europe” was applied to the Soviet Bloc in the English-speaking world and was often accompanied by a simplifying approach that presumed the existence of a unified culture in the Soviet satellite states (Autio and Miklóssy 2011), although it was less common after the anti-Stalinist uprisings, and the diverging political routes elevated the political significance on the international arena of each socialist state that did not belong to the Soviet Union. From the 1990s, however, the epistemological crisis of area studies, which in a large part resulted from a policy-oriented approach motivated by an imperial conduct (Dale, Miklóssy, and Segert 2015), was joined by a dramatic decrease of interest in European states between Germany and Russia. These two related factors resulted in a gradual refashioning of Eastern European Studies within academia. By now, many centers, departments, and institutes specializing in Eastern Europe lack subsidies to maintain a geographically and linguistically diverse academic portfolio, and the remaining funds are usually channeled toward Russian Studies, or the programs are shut down entirely. As far as remaining projects in area studies are concerned, Eastern Europe as a geographic reference has mostly been replaced by East Central and/or Southeastern Europe. However, no choice is actually free of geopolitical underpinnings, since they all reflect the advance of the EU or the NATO enlargement process.

First, there have been political developments that from our perspective rather connect than divide the broad region. The way populist authoritarian leaders in government are instrumentalizing conspiracy theories as part of their political propaganda is not (yet) a pan-European phenomenon and also cannot be restricted to either East Central or Southeastern Europe. Political systems, institutions, and practices in these countries may vary greatly, but the transformation of liberal democracies into illiberal states is a political tendency that links both sides of the Eastern borders of the European Union. An unmistakable concomitant of such tendencies is the increasing emphasis conspiracy theories get in the political campaigns of ruling political forces. By now, conspiracy theories are clear underpinnings to state policies at an unprecedented extent elsewhere in Europe. The term “Eastern Europe,” therefore, appeared a practical choice that reflected both our specific interest in conspiracy theories in a historical context marked

by the socialist period and post-socialist transition, and still kept the distinction from a Central Asia with a considerably different political, economic, and cultural history.

Second, a loosely defined Eastern Europe makes sense for a region where large minority groups, though represented in nation-states, have frequently been the target of conspiracism perpetrated against them by ethnic majorities. For instance, Germans, Russians, Poles, Romanians, Hungarians, Armenians, Ukrainians, the Roma, and first and foremost, the Jews formed communities that provoked conspiracy theories from Russia to the former Yugoslavia, with no real alternatives to the label of Eastern Europe. As Benjamin Schenk (2017) pointed out, in Jewish studies, there seems to be a renaissance of the term, exactly on the basis of a massive Jewish historical presence across these lands.

Conspiracy theories in Eastern Europe

Conspiracy theorizing has a long history in Eastern Europe, but scholarship started to reflect on this legacy relatively recently, in a large part as a result of current global political trends and the growing impact of such theories on social imaginaries. In the past two decades, social sciences and, in particular, political science contributed the most to research in conspiracy theories converging, naturally, on contemporary phenomena in most cases. In the past few years, historians also started to investigate the prehistory of today's discourses, but most other disciplines within the humanities, such as literary studies, have not shown considerable interest in conspiracy theories so far, even though in related fields, such as semiology, groundbreaking research has been done in countries where semiotics has a strong tradition (e.g., Estonia; see Madisson and Ventsel 2020). Even though research on conspiracy theories in Eastern Europe is scattered and fragmented, it is still possible to identify certain major patterns that stand out as focal points.

Conspiracy theories in Eastern Europe are predominantly interpreted as political techniques to overcome rival social or political forces. In this respect, the region resembles most other areas, but it is important to point out that the relative significance of directly politically related conspiracism is even higher in Eastern Europe than in the United States. This has a lot to do with the history of the peoples living in the region and the way conspiracy theorizing emerged as an effective technique both to rule and to challenge the ruler. Toward the end of this section, we will consider a series of other reasons as well, but the legacies of empires and nation-states, as well as related xenophobic attitudes, deserve particular attention from the perspective of contemporary authoritarian employment of conspiracism.

Although conspiracy thinking is deeply embedded in the human character and is reflected in centuries-old practices, such as witch hunts and trials (Rabo 2020), according to a wide consensus, modern conspiracy theories emerged in Europe as a reaction to the spread of the ideas of the Enlightenment and the 1789 French Revolution (Groh 1987, 23–24; Cubitt 1989, 144–46; Byford 2011, 44–45). In Eastern and Central Europe, the striving for social and national emancipation destabilized the great powers dominating the region—German, Austrian, Russian,

and Ottoman Empires—from within. Their conservative elites—made up mainly of the aristocracy and the clergy—deferred liberal reforms and showcased alleged or moderately significant conspiracies (such as the Hungarian Jacobin conspiracy in 1794–95) as major threats to the throne in order to introduce stricter social control or even terror. As such, conspiracism entered the usual repertoire of court politics. In such circumstances, secrecy became a main ingredient of political activism, because, as Dieter Groh argues, “under the conditions of the Ancien Regime,” any kind of oppositional activity “was only possible in secret” (1987, 24). Freemasons or later, Italian *Carbonari*-inspired secret societies became common forms of sociability across the region during the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (*ibid.*). Consequently, the idea of secret societies plotting against the “Throne and Altar” traveled from Western Europe eastward (Rogalla von Bieberstein 1977, 5–6).

While conspiracy theories continued to serve as political tools for rulers to limit the chances of being seriously challenged, such theories were also twisted in the new context to serve the opposition. The emerging national movements seeking national independence—from under what was (re)conceptualized then as foreign oppression—elaborated narratives of martyrdom and suffering caused by the aforementioned empires. Suspicion was redirected toward real and perceived social actors who were supposed to advance the interests of the court. This inspired a rich variety of tropes, from the empire’s hidden tentacles reaching everywhere to precursory concepts of a “deep state.” Narratives of victimhood also flourished in a context where great powers continued to pose challenges to the emerging nation states’ sovereignty and territorial integrity (Byford and Billig 2001; Blanuša 2013; Panczová 2017). Accordingly, Poland was presented by the local nineteenth-century Romantic writer Adam Mickiewicz as the “Christ of Europe” following the three partitions of the country (1772–95) (Rosman 2017, 29). Religious martyrdom and suffering served as a central trope for self-representation in a series of other Eastern European cultures as well. Such deep-rooted imagery reinforced the allegorical nature of self-identification, and new calamities or crises, which were often incredibly severe and violent, were usually understood in terms of historical precedents, suggesting that the same external forces prevented the nation from regaining its agency. We need to recall this in order not to claim that such interpretations are necessarily wrong or lie far from a realist account of international relations, but to point out that there is a historically conditioned mindset that is receptive to any explanation based on strictly limited collective agencies being overruled by the coordinated action of mighty powers. For conspiracy theorizing, such conditions provide excellent opportunities and certainly figure as an important factor in the emergence of conspiracy cultures in the region.

Apart from conspiracy theories related to an “external” enemy that could be identified with an actually existing state or political entity, the same context inspired a plethora of conspiracy theories about “the enemy within.” Among the internal enemies that supposedly undermined national cultural and political fulfillment, the heterogeneous and politically varying lodges of Freemasons, oppressed religious groups, various minorities (e.g., the Roma, ethnic Germans,

Hungarians, Polish, Ukrainians, and Russians), and a particularly elusive social construct, “the Jewry,” all played a prominent role. The Jewish minorities, largely due to their significant roles in an often extremely rapid economic and social modernization, received outstanding emphasis in Eastern European conspiracy theories throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Accordingly, discussions of antisemitic conspiracism provide a substantive part of conspiracy theory research: for the most part, this research discusses antisemitic conspiracy theories in the context of authoritarian regimes or dictatorships (Cohn [1967] 1996; Gerrits 1995; Michlic 2006; Gibson and Howard 2007), but attention was paid to the effects of old religious beliefs (Poliakov 1987; Patai 1996) and to the phenomenon of “antisemitism without Jews” (Lendvai 1971; Bilewicz and Krzeminski 2010; Bilewicz et al. 2013) as well.

Clearly, antisemitism in Western Europe was widespread, and conspiracism often relied on centuries-old prejudices against “the Jewry.” It is well known that religious antisemitism contained a strong conspiracist component ever since the Middle Ages (Maccoby 2006, 2–3), and the legend of the blood libel (the idea that Jews kidnap Christian children and use their blood for Jewish ritual food) received repeated attention and credit up until the mid-twentieth century, being a pan-European phenomenon (Dundes 1991). Still, the pace of modernization in Western Europe was less intense, and social tensions did not fuel “othering” that much, which found all too easy a subject in Eastern Europe, given the proportion of Jews in most societies in the latter part of the continent. Either in rapid course of assimilation (as in Austro-Hungary) or less assimilation (as in the communities from the Russian Empire), Jews were largely (although not exclusively) perceived in the region as strong promoters of the capitalist economy and liberalizing reforms. Within the modern urban society, Jews were able to enjoy “anonymity” and assert themselves, especially in various areas of the tertiary sector (Bronner [2000] 2019, 45). Besides, Jews became associated with emerging new cultural and intellectual currents and were “identified with avant-garde trends in literature and painting” (ibid., 49). Some of them were involved in the most diverse (national) liberal or socialist political settings that sought emancipation on multiple levels. In sum, Jews were perceived “as a symbol of the modern world by those who most detested this world” (Cohn [1967] 1996, 28). All these developments created by the turn of the twentieth century a particularly favorable context for the flourishing of various antisemitic conspiracy theories in Eastern Europe.

The outstanding text that made a major impact on antisemitic conspiracism worldwide was born in this context. *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion* was first published in Imperial Russia in 1903, and it was disseminated, and possibly fabricated, by Okhrana (the secret police of the late tsarist period) in order to fuel state-endorsed antisemitism (De Michelis 2004; Hagemester 2008). This was the first conspiracy theory emerging in the region that enjoyed global impact following its translation into many languages (Webman 2011, 2–3). *The Protocols* merged old forms of “Judeophobia” with a “distinctly modern form of political antimodernism” (Bronner [2000] 2019, 48). It is difficult to measure the impact of religious cultures on modern antisemitism, but it could be that Greek Orthodox Christianity

provided an even more hostile context for both Jewry and modernism than Roman Catholicism westward (Poliakov 1987). Drawing on this dual-originated antisemitism, Jews were identified as those who were plotting to overthrow the tsarist “feudal despotism in order to set up their own far worse form of tyranny,” in which their control of the world was allegedly installed through their gradual takeover of the universities, the newspapers, and all spheres of public space (Bronner [2000] 2019, 48–49).

The Protocols illustrate how top-down disseminated conspiracy theories became a key instrument of twentieth-century authoritarian or dictatorial regimes to mobilize support and legitimize violence against various groups perceived as enemies from within (Byford 2011, 144). *The Protocols* also provided context for a new conspiracy theory: that of Jewish Communism or Judeo-Bolshevism. This was instrumentalized in the region for explaining the abrupt dismantling of the multinational empires after World War I and the Russian Revolution of 1917 and still is. In this conspiracy theory, which was very popular in the interwar period and resurfaced after 1989, Jews—who were equated with Communists—were found guilty of the dramatic fall of these empires and the revolutions that followed (Gerwarth 2016, 89; Hanebrink 2018, 34–35). The potency of this conspiracy theory, which became a “cliché of counter-revolutionary,” rested on a combination of sentiments, which, due to cultural, political, and geographic factors, was felt most acutely in East-Central Europe—antisemitism and anti-Communism (Gerrits 1995, 60). Hitler’s rise to power boosted the emerging Fascist movements in the region and their antisemitism. For example, the Legion of the Archangel Michael, founded in Romania in 1927, or the Arrow Cross Party, established in Hungary in 1935—at that time under the name “the Party of National Will”—gained momentum in the late 1930s (Payne 1995, 273). In Romania, Fascist conspiracist narratives “conflated Freemasons with Jews and communists as perpetrators of a global plot against Christianity and national self-determination” (Clark 2012, 41). Later on, during World War II, the myth of Judeo-Communism turned into a key element of the anti-Soviet official propaganda of the East European satellite countries or puppet-states of Nazi Germany, especially in Hungary, Romania, Slovakia, and Croatia (Voicu 2004).

The emergence of the Cold War brought yet another shift in the conspiratorial narratives of the region targeting the Jews: under Communist rule clear-cut antisemitic public discourse was generally not allowed (it always had to be wrapped), which provided yet another reason for adherents of the myth of Judeo-Bolshevism to stick to their belief, and the myth remained a main component of the local underground anti-Communist narratives. Various groups within the leadership of the Communist parties, however, continued to rely on Jewish stereotypes in their political practice (especially by linking capitalism with Jews). They did not refrain from the use of antisemitic coded language and abused antisemitic conspiracy theories in their struggle for power. Such conduct gained momentum during the Stalinist anti-Jewish purges of the early 1950s, reaching its climax with the Slánský trial in Czechoslovakia in November 1952 (Hodos 1987, 84). Another important example would be the anti-Zionist campaign in Poland in 1968

(Stola 2006), but the idea of a Zionist conspiracy was employed as a political tool throughout the entire era.

In general, the early Cold War was undoubtedly one of the “golden ages” of conspiracy theories. On both sides of the Iron Curtain, conspiracy narratives in their McCarthyist or Stalinist versions were key features of political life in the late 1940s and 1950s. During the first decade of the Cold War, Stalinist conspiracy culture was transferred to the satellite states and also informed the political choices and practices of Western European Communist parties (Girard 2012). Cold War conspiratorial tropes marked also the post-1989 conspiracy landscape (Melley 2011), and these reverberations were intensified by the new tensions between the West and Russia following the 2014 Ukrainian crisis (Kuzio 2017).

The roots of Stalinist conspiracy culture could be identified in the profound vulnerability of the regime in the aftermath of the October 1917 Revolution. At that time, the Bolsheviks developed a strong disposition to perceive both the inner and the outer world as inexhaustible sources of counter-revolutionary conspiracies. This disposition became an essential part of Soviet political culture under Stalin and a component of the powerful syndrome of the “siege mentality” (Viola 1993, 98). Furthermore, the Soviet Union experienced radical economic and social transformations during early Stalinism. This created an “unpredictable world,” in which conspiracy theories had been turned into “central paradigms by which the [Soviet] regime sought to explain undesirable political processes,” while “behind-the-scenes intrigues” became everyday practices within all echelons of the party hierarchy (Rittersporn 2014, 13, 25). What might be called Stalinist conspiracy culture entailed various political and cultural practices of identifying and punishing the imagined or real conspirators mainly through purges. The latter were carried out in a performative way (Wood 2005; Caumanns 2016) and instrumentalized by the official propaganda for legitimizing state violence, mobilizing the population, or explaining the failures of some state policies. Although much more reduced in intensity compared with the Stalinist period, some of these conspiracy theories continued to frame the way party elites looked at political dissent during the 1970s and 1980s, when these narratives portrayed dissidents as tools of Western plots undermining the stability of the Soviet regime (see Anna Kirziuk’s chapter in this volume).

The role of authoritarian or dictatorial regimes in contributing to the emergence of a conspiracy culture in Eastern Europe, whether historical or contemporaneous, features as a primary concern of scholarship on conspiracy theories in Eastern Europe. It is still contested as to what extent such non-democratic regimes added to the proliferation of conspiracy theories in Eastern Europe over the last century. According to Ilya Yablokov, who compared conspiracy cultures in the United States and Russia, there are significant differences between these two cases apart from the common elements. While in the United States (and in the West, in general) conspiracy theories usually “emerge from grassroots movements and are kept at the margins of official political discourse,” in Russia “the political and intellectual elites are major producers and disseminators” of conspiracist narratives (Yablokov 2018, 2). In order to explain this feature, Yablokov draws on

Matthew Gray's research, which argues that in most of the countries of the Arab world, "the state is a conspiracist narrator, aided by state monopolization, control or influence over the mass media, strong governing party structures, and the direction of a charismatic or domineering leader" (Gray 2010, 119).

This leads us to the already classic debate about the relationship between authoritarianism and conspiracy theories. As many observed, conspiracy theories have been a key tool of dictatorships: Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union under Stalin are the best examples (Cohn [1967] 1996; Byford 2011; Rittersporn 2014). Arguably, conspiracy theories have been "the refuge of every dictator and authoritarian leader in the world" because real or imagined conspiracies represent useful tools "for legitimizing tyranny and oppression," taking into account that their alleged existence makes people believe that they "need a strong leader to guide them and protect them from malign outside influences" (Byford 2011, 144). In this context, the question of how conspiracism conditioned the politics of fear gained particular attention (Humphrey 2002; Rittersporn 2014; Stojanov 2015; Caumanns 2016).

Consequently, it does not come as a surprise that the argument of a connection between authoritarianism (especially right-wing) and conspiracist beliefs (Abalakina-Paap et al. 1999; Grzesiak-Feldman and Irzycka 2009) is strong. In this respect, the recent extensive instrumentalization of conspiracy theories by populist authoritarian leaders in Eastern Europe could be seen as yet another chapter in the same story. Although these tendencies have a history in the region, the recent success of populist leaders in the West suggests that these trends are also connected with global phenomena. Namely, it seems to be linked to what Ruth Wodak interpreted as the process of "taking advantage" of the "media-democracy" (Grande 2000) by right-wing populist leaders who managed to "on the one hand, [appear] unusual and populist, or anti-establishment, and on the other, authoritative and legitimate" (Wodak 2015, 11).

There are reasons to think that the legacy of dictatorships continues to impact how people react to conspiracy theories. In Eastern Europe, the secret police have been a much more feared agency in the everyday life of citizens than in any democratic state: while research proved that the United States intelligence agencies spied on domestic individuals to a much greater extent than previously thought (Theoharis 2004; Culleton and Leick 2008; Charles 2015), they generally did not form an integral part of the citizens' perception of what constitutes the state. In contrast, the potential presence of the secret police triggered suspicion and secrecy in a way that could be conceptualized in retrospect today as part of the "deep state." Such impressions were reinforced by the opaque ways state institutions functioned before 1989/1991 and also by the unclear legacy of these after the transition period to democracy. In Belarus, for instance, the experience of living under dictatorships lives on in folk memory and still stirs fear of the secret services, and not without reason (Astapova 2017). In Romania, the 1989 revolution is frequently portrayed by conspiracy theories as the outcome of coordinated actions by a group of party members and secret police leaders seeking to overthrow Ceaușescu and his close collaborators (Voicu 2000; Roth 2016). In

Bulgaria, it is believed that Freemasons secretly took power during State Socialism and kept their influence on state institutions such as the Bulgarian courts (Medarov 2017). These conspiracy theories could find a relatively wide audience, fitting in with the citizens' previous experience under dictatorships. Ultimately, this entails an empathic disposition to the interpreter: conspiratorial thinking should not necessarily be dismissed as something irrational.

Ethnic conflicts have also risen along with extreme nationalism and antisemitism, which in turn, proved to be a further source of conspiracy theorizing: former conspiratorial tropes resurfaced in new forms, adjusted to the post-1989 contexts. Conspiracy theories about Freemasons, Jews, or about great powers plotting against the nation's sovereignty and territorial integrity, most of them suppressed by censorship under State Socialism, became particularly popular after 1989. For example, the conspiracy theory of Judeo-Communism reemerged in Poland, Romania, and Hungary intertwining with the anti-Communist ethos (Shafir 1994, 80; Hanebrink 2018, 2–3).

Conspiracism was further boosted in the entire region by disappointments with the post-socialist transition caused by disturbing economic and social outcomes, which have increased economic inequalities and a feeling of powerlessness (Ortmann and Heathershaw 2012). Many scholars argue that belief in conspiracy theories rises in political, economic, and social turmoil (Grzesiak-Feldman 2013; van Prooijen and Acker 2015; Swami et al. 2016). Those feeling powerless when facing large-scale turbulences are predisposed to explain away their difficulties as effects of the machinations of evil conspiratorial forces (Hofstadter 1964; Abalakina-Paap et al. 1999; Darwin, Neave, and Holmes 2011; van Prooijen and Jostmann 2013). Thus, by “simplifying and by linking a series of events in relation to its supposed causes and effects, conspiracy theories may offer seemingly coherent explanations for distressing phenomena” (Swami et al. 2016, 74) and have the function of restoring the feeling of control over an environment disturbed by “distressing societal events” (van Prooijen and Acker 2015, 753).

Two kinds of conspiracy theories made particularly salient marks on the post-socialist transition. On the one side, former Communist elites disseminated narratives that presented the fall of the regimes as effects of Western or Jewish plots or, in some cases, as we have seen, the coordinated action of secret police institutions (Byford and Billig 2001; Yablokov 2018). Many of these conspiracy theories in the region aspire to explain the sudden fall of what was previously perceived as stable regimes. On the other side, different kinds of conspiracy theories were spread from below. Someone had to be blamed for the billions of lost jobs in the region and the general feeling of insecurity in the 1990s. A theory was formulated, for instance, that the former *nomenklatura* conspired to acquire the economic positions and wealth in the emerging capitalist societies. From the fact that some members of the post-Communist elite greatly benefited from the privatization of national firms thanks to the unequal distribution of information, networks, and access to state infrastructure, not to mention questionable legislation (Eyal, Széleányi, and Townsley 1998, 4–5), accordingly, it was concluded

that a hidden statewide agenda was executed step by step in a well-coordinated manner.

The post-1989 democratization led to the acceleration of the globalization of Eastern European societies with an immense impact on conspiracy theorizing. Not only did old conspiracist tropes resurface to be reshaped to fit the new post-socialist context, but the region rapidly integrated into the global exchange of conspiracy theories. Very often age-old conspiratorial tropes were blended with new global ones. One of the most popular conspiracy theories in Eastern Europe, which we mentioned above, is precisely like that: the case against the entrepreneur George Soros has relied on old antisemitic stereotypes and was further inspired by New World Order-type conspiracism. The latter found a large audience in the region since the political and economic transition did not provide the expected prosperity to all. Global plots embodied by international institutions such as the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank, or the European Union were found guilty. The dramatic economic and social effects of the ravaging neo-liberal reforms promoted in the region by these institutions after 1989 fueled the spread of such conspiracy theories. One of the most harmful consequences of such conspiracy theories has been that due criticism of some transnational actors and institutions became politically loaded and stigmatized, which essentially undermined critical discourse worldwide.

The wider context of such conspiracy theories that make effective tools of explaining the world is found in an emerging anti-elitism. Distrust in the political, economic, cultural, and intellectual elite has been a core feature of global politics from Donald Trump to Viktor Orbán. While there is little doubt that anti-elitism has popular roots, a significant part of the elite capitalized on these tendencies and used them to defend their privileges vis-à-vis the very people they were supposed to act for. In turn, as global humanitarianism opened career opportunities for the privileged, self-proclaimed representatives appeared to speak for the dispossessed with little knowledge of the real interests and specific contexts of those they claimed to represent. This created complicated political dynamics in which anti-imperial and anti-elitist sentiments played a role. It is not rare for the European Union (aligned with the Habsburg Monarchy or the Soviet Union in historical allegories) to be seen as an instrument of the elite to undermine traditional values with the help of liberal policies.

Anti-elitism translated to international relations, however, is not specific to small states. Some great powers also employ narratives about national victimhood, and Russia is a particularly interesting case complicated by a self-colonizing twist. For centuries, Russia has portrayed the West as a plotting oppressor (Yablokov 2018), and growing anti-Western attitudes among the Russians in the 2000s are far from a novelty. Concentrating on popular nostalgia about a lost paradise and growing anti-Western attitudes among Russians in the 2000s, Serguei Alex Oushakine showed that conspiracy theories could be an efficient tool for achieving social cohesion and defining the collective identities of newly emerging communities (Oushakine 2009). In some countries, these antisemitic conspiracy narratives involved the revival of religious beliefs and the growth of new religious

movements that involved frequent references to the struggle with “Western subversion,” on behalf of the principles of the Orthodox Church (Melnikova 2004; Verkhovsky 2006; Akhmetova 2010; Astapova et al. 2021). The most recent book on conspiracy theories in Russia by Elliot Borenstein shows how this paranoid fantasy—which, until recently, characterized only the marginal and the irrelevant—now, through its embodiment in pop culture, has spread everywhere (2019). Borenstein focuses on the role of the folk in this respect and argues that in the Russian example, none of the ideological stances that have become prominent in Putin’s rule is simply top-down propaganda. The leaders nearly always build the fantasy from what they already have to work with—what people readily provide and circulate (*ibid.*, xi).

Although marked by the legacy of past dictatorships and the post-socialist transition, Eastern European countries are hardly unique and isolated nowadays, which is also true for their conspiracy theories. Scholars have shown how recent conspiracy narratives repeat the concerns from all over the world, such as the ones about food safety (Kormina 2016), vaccination (Craciun and Baban 2012; Pop 2016), genomic technologies (Kalmre 2016), and natural and technological disasters (Kalmre 1998). In some countries of the region, including but not only Hungary and Poland, there has emerged a recent thread of Islamophobia and the Eurabia conspiracy theory, in particular—the idea that there is a secret plan to Islamize and Arabize Europe, although these countries do not have (yet) a significant number of immigrants coming from outside Europe (Goździak and Márton 2018; Krekó and Enyedi 2018). This could be seen as a recent ideological shift from fears of the “Western conspiracy” to fears of the “Eastern conspiracy”—migrants from the Middle and Far East seeking to destroy European nations by infiltrating them (Astapova 2020).

Since Eastern Europe became clearly integrated into the global flux of conspiracy theories, there is no point in speaking about Eastern European exceptionalism. However, it makes sense to start to map Eastern European conspiracism to identify major patterns, which are either specific to the region or could be compared to other semi-peripheral regions, and to explore the shifts and local varieties of existing conspiracy theories. Further, issues like fake news and post-truth, currently researched in the Anglophone cultures, have been embedded in Eastern European politics for decades and still persist. The use of conspiracy theories by Eastern European populist politicians as well as contemporary authoritarian leaders is obvious according to many scholars (e.g., Kuzio 2011; Ortmann and Heathershaw 2012; Stojanov 2015; Colăcel and Pintilescu 2017; Kasekamp, Madisson, and Wieringa 2018; Yablokov 2018; Borenstein 2019). Thus, a significant part of the contributions dealing with the conspiracy theories in various countries of the region focus on these recent trends marked by the rapid globalization of the conspiracy landscape.

This overview of the contributions on conspiracy theories in Eastern Europe lead us to the conclusion that most of them focus on four thematic areas: (1) conspiracy theories and their relationship with dictatorships or authoritarian regimes in the region, including the recent authoritarian drift of some East European countries;

(2) antisemitic conspiracy theories (this category overlaps with the first one, since the Soviet Union, but especially Nazi Germany and its satellite countries, heavily instrumentalized anti-Jewish conspiracy theories); (3) conspiracy theories that are strongly entangled with national victimhood narratives, presenting the countries of the region as victims of great powers; (4) new trends or emerging conspiracy tropes in the region framed by the globalization process. This volume is the first systematic collective attempt to provide an overview of the most prolific and influential conspiracy theories in Eastern Europe. These topics are exemplified in terms of the main trends and tropes of conspiracy theories in the region and by presenting their variety from different countries. The volume aims also to cover the gaps of previous research, often written in national languages with limited international academic circulation or concentrating on some countries that are bigger players in the region (Russia, in particular) rather than others. As a first step, our objective was to bring together scholars of cultural studies, ethnology, folklore, history, media studies, political science, and philosophy to present case studies from a variety of countries that either are of significance to the analysis of the entire region or apply an approach that transcends national boundaries.

There are several lines of investigation guiding the inquiry along this edited volume: (1) the historical conditions of the popularity of conspiracy theories in the region, with a focus on how the interwar, Cold War, and post-Cold War periods framed the conspiracy landscape of the region; in this respect, particular attention will be paid to continuities and discontinuities of some key conspiratorial tropes during the twentieth century and beyond; (2) the relation between conspiracy theorizing in the region and broader phenomena such as authoritarianism, national-identity building, antisemitism, populism, and globalization; (3) the modes of circulation from the Cold War to the post-Cold War period, with a focus on the integration of the conspiracy culture of the region in the global flux of conspiracy theories; thus, some of the chapters included in this volume tackle the issue of what particular conspiratorial tropes circulated and how and challenge the previous assumptions such as those related to Cold War conspiracy culture; (4) how an assessment of the conspiracy landscape in Eastern Europe could help us better understand what conspiracy theories are, why people endorse them, and what their functions are within societies.

Structure of the volume

Starting from the main trends displayed by the conspiracy landscape of the region, this edited volume is divided into four sections: the first one focusing on how the experience of recent dictatorships marked the content and dissemination of conspiracy theories in the Cold War and in post-Cold War contexts; the second section dealing with two of the most influential conspiratorial tropes related to “the enemy within” from the nineteenth century up to today—namely, the anti-Jewish conspiracy theories and those related to Freemasons; the third part, which outlines some key conspiracist narratives in the countries of the region within the broader framework of the national victimhood narratives; and the fourth part focusing on

the rapid integration of the region into the global flux of conspiracy theories and the rise of populism.

The first section consists of three chapters dealing with some of the most prominent manifestations of conspiracism under Socialism and their reverberations either in other spaces (Western Europe) or in the post-socialist period. This part aims to provide insights into less-researched parts of the landscape of conspiracy theories of the Cold War period. We also hope to enrich the previous contributions on conspiracy theories in the Eastern bloc that focused mainly on Stalinist conspiracy culture. The chapters of this part provide new arguments for challenging the image of the Iron Curtain as an impenetrable barrier (Péteri 2004) and contribute to a better understanding of the aftermath of Cold War conspiracy culture.

The opening chapter of the volume, authored by Anastasiya Astapova, deals with Chernobyl-related conspiracy theories. She investigates storytelling about the tragedy, highly significant for understanding the background of conspiracy theorizing going on in the Soviet and post-Soviet world. This chapter shifts the focus from the most invoked approach of conspiracy theories in the post-Soviet space as mainly top-down disseminated narratives. It brings to the fore the importance played by rumors in shaping and spreading them. Astapova argues that despite their dissemination for more than three decades, the forge of these conspiracy narratives is still an ongoing process. The latter reflects ethnic and ideological clashes, conspiracist elements of popular culture, and the Cold War–like tensions between Russia and the West, heavily deepened after 2014.

In his chapter, Pascal Girard elaborates on the transfer of Stalinist conspiracy culture to the Western Communist parties during the early Cold War period. He argues that Stalinist conspiracy culture played a key role in shaping the mindset of the members of the French and Italian Communist Parties and influenced the domestic political life in the two countries where these parties activated a phenomenon that was previously underestimated by scholars focusing on the history of the two Communist parties. Drawing on the archives of the French and Italian Communist Parties, Girard provides us a view contesting the impermeability of the Iron Curtain in the early Cold War period and helps us to better understand the entanglements between the inflated conspiracy narratives in the socialist bloc and those in the West. He concludes that this transfer, which was part of building a “Western *homo sovieticus*,” largely failed.

Anna Kirziuk discusses in her chapter the nature and the function of anti-Western conspiracy theories mentioned in secret documents circulated within the KGB and CPSU leadership during the late Soviet period. In her view, conspiracy theories were instrumental for the late Soviet regime when dealing with dissidents after the Helsinki agreements. Kirziuk argues that in these secret documents there were three main intertwined “narrative strategies” aimed at depriving dissidents of agency: one presenting their activity as a result of a Western conspiracy to undermine the Soviet regime; the trope of presenting dissent as a form of “mental illness”; and the so-called Jewish wives conspiracy theory, interpreting the activity of the dissidents as an evil influence of their alleged Jewish spouses. These conspiracist beliefs endorsed by leaders among the KGB and Party elite provided

“a coping mechanism” to protect their self-esteem and their worldview when facing vivid criticism targeting the official ideology and way the Soviet system functioned.

The second section covers two of the most widely circulated conspiracy theories in the region about “the internal enemy”: Jews and Freemasons. Besides the external plotting enemies coming from the West or from the East, among those conspiracy theories enjoying a long-term impact in Eastern Europe are those featuring Jews and Freemasons as “enemies” from within. Due to their past significant share of the urban population and the key role played by Jews in the modernization process in Eastern Europe, anti-Jewish conspiracy theories enjoyed and still enjoy a prominent place within the conspiracy landscape of the region. As in other parts of the world, the conspiracist narratives about Jews were related to those about Communists. This connection was accentuated within the conspiracy theories in Eastern Europe by the deep effects of the 1917 Russian Revolution on its history. The conspiratorial tropes related to Freemasons and Jews share also the legacy of the anti-modernity and anti-liberal ethos, which emerged within the conservative circles of the region by the end of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries and continued in different forms up to the present.

The second section is opened by the chapter authored by Péter Csunderlik and Tamás Scheibner on a highly influential conspiracy theory in Eastern Europe during the twentieth century and beyond: the myth of the Judeo-Bolshevik conspiracy. The authors argue that this myth has a long history in Hungary, quite revealing of the discursive context within which the tide of illiberal politics is growing across present-day Eastern Europe. As an alleged plot against the people, the self-effacing strategies of Judeo-Bolshevism are indicative of both the myth’s use over time and of its value for Viktor Orbán’s brand of populism.

Todor Hristov and Ivelina Ivanova’s chapter shifts the focus from Jews to Freemasons by dealing with the conspiracist narratives about Freemasonry and the judiciary in post-socialist Bulgaria. After 1989, Bulgarian secret societies had recruited many former secret police members. Hristov and Ivanova argue that the latter turned their networks, created under Socialism, into forms of capital to be used in other social fields. Several media scandals surrounding the issue reverberated across the country and revealed a web of relationships between Freemasons, magistrates, and the former secret police. Ultimately, the conspiracy theories related to the rule of law brought together contradictory rationalities that, according to Hristov and Ivanova, helped local audiences come to terms with post-socialist transition. Drawing on this case study, they argue that “the psychoanalytic concept of overdetermination” should be reconsidered as an epistemic tool in the research of conspiracy theories.

Dominika Bulska, Agnieszka Haska, Mikołaj Winiewski, and Michał Bilewicz deal with the antisemitic conspiracy theories in Poland. Jewish-related conspiracy theories are deeply rooted in the history of this country. Even if nowadays the number of Jews living in the country is dwindling, antisemitic attitudes, especially antisemitic conspiracist beliefs, are widespread within Polish society. This chapter aims to measure the popularity of conspiracy theories about Jews and to

assess their function within contemporary Polish society. The authors conclude that belief in antisemitic conspiracy theories was constant in Poland during the last decade. These conspiracy theories reshape old antisemitic conspiracist tropes that have been popular among the Poles since the nineteenth century. The function of these conspiracy theories is to provide simple explanations for complex social and economic phenomena or the failures of one's own group, thus restoring feelings of control over the situation.

The third section of the volume deals with the relationship between conspiracy theories, national-identity building, and victimhood narratives in the context of the upsurge of nationalism and populism in post-socialist Eastern Europe. From the violent dissolution of Yugoslavia to the emergence of post-2014 Cold War-like narratives, the chapters of this part provide insights into how conspiracy narratives have been instrumentalized in ethnic conflicts or fueled narratives of national victimhood that had already enjoyed deep historical roots in the region.

Nebojša Blanuša analyzes various conspiracy theories related to the dissolution of Yugoslavia before and after the breakup of the Yugoslav federation in the early 1990s by paying special attention to their genealogies. Most of these conspiracy theories developed before the dissolution of Yugoslavia and outlived the Yugoslav way of life, although taking new shapes and being instrumentalized in new contexts. If before the dissolution of Yugoslavia the legitimacy of the federal state was partially based on popularizing conspiracy theories about enemies from within and abroad plotting against the Yugoslav people, after the dissolution, various local conspiracy narratives explained this process by blaming states such as the United States, Germany, Hungary, or Italy. Blanuša argues that, although displaying significant differences from one post-Yugoslav country to another, most of the widespread conspiracy theories related to the dissolution of Yugoslavia share a similar function: that of blaming the other in order to elude coping with the traumatic, violent past.

Olga Baysha analyzes the anti-Russian conspiracy theories within the Ukrainian media in the aftermath of the Euromaidan revolution, with a case study on those conspiracist narratives related to the Odessa street fighting on May 2, 2014. During this tragedy, 48 people died during violent street clashes between groups of Ukrainians supporting the Euromaidan revolution and their opponents. Looking into the possibility that both Russia and Ukraine make use of similar discursive strategies, the author approaches the instrumentalization of conspiracy theories used by Ukrainian politicians to instigate collective fears and shift attention away from ethnic division within the country. Baysha concludes that conspiracist narratives contribute to destroying the symbolic space essential for maintaining communication within a society, and consequently, they deepen divisions and may lead to outbreaks of violence.

Zuzana Panczová deals with the trope of victimhood in Slovakian conspiracy theories, which is conducive to defining a sense of belonging to the nation. The chapter aims to analyze the role played by conspiracy theories in the discursive strategies of self-victimization instrumentalized by political or religious authorities and the media responses to them in the case of the killing of the reporter

Ján Kuciak in 2018. Panczová argues that this tragic event received media and institutional attention that fed into a broad public assumption that the nation itself was, as a result, under threat. As such, conspiracy theories vehiculated with this occasion tie in with the master narrative of the Slovak nation and their articulation and reception are heavily influenced by deep-rooted stereotypes about external enemies of the nation.

The last section of the edited volume deals with the impact of globalization on the conspiracy theories landscape of the region and how the populist wave fueled the flourishing of conspiracy cultures in Eastern Europe. Two of the chapters in this section deal with conspiracy theories illustrating the full integration of the region into the global flux of conspiracy theories: those related to George Soros and anti-EU conspiracy theories. Finally, by assessing some of the most influential trends of conspiracism in the region, this part aims to contribute to a broader theoretical discussion about conspiracy theories and their function within societies.

Corneliu Pintilescu and Attila Kustán Magyari elaborate on the conspiracy theories about George Soros in Hungary and Romania and their relationship with populism. The chapter focuses on the conspiracist narratives disseminated by two populist leaders, Viktor Orbán and Liviu Dragnea, from 2010 to 2019. Pintilescu and Kustán Magyari argue that post-2010 anti-Soros conspiracy theories have been built on similar narratives endorsed by local far-right circles during the 1990s. Both the old and new versions of anti-Soros conspiracy theories portray the American-Jewish billionaire as the epitome of the evil global financial forces plotting to undermine national sovereignty and values. However, while the Soros-related conspiracy theories of the 1990s were overtly antisemitic and disseminated by extremist groups at the fringes of the political landscape, those emerging in the 2010s display an implicit antisemitism and enjoy a mainstream position. Although these particular conspiracy theories became a key component of the populist rhetoric in both countries, Orbán proved more effective than Dragnea in his endeavor to refuel its populist discourse.

Onoriu Colăcel deals with conspiracy theories on commercial TV and their function within contemporary Moldovan society. The chapter argues that conspiracist narratives come across as a way to legitimate political choices in the former Soviet republic, with conspiracy theories essentially coming from abroad—that is, mostly from Russian and Romanian media. As local political television tends to expose conspiracy theories in order to change or reinforce people's attitudes, the genre offers a compelling case study in the rise of populist politics in the Russian and Romanian-speaking Republic of Moldova. As such, this glimpse into the inner workings of the Moldovan media can help with better understanding of both Brussels- and Kremlin-sponsored news and opinion across Eastern Europe.

Biljana Gjoneska, Kristijan Fidanovski, and André Krouwel elaborate on the emergence of EU-related conspiracy theories in the Republic of North Macedonia in the context of the indefinitely postponed accession negotiations with Brussels, the 2017 political crisis (following the resignation of the conservative leader Nikola Gruevski), and the 2018 change of the official name of the country. All

these elements of the international and internal contexts provided fertile ground for the dissemination of EU-related conspiracy theories and challenged the prevailing pro-EU aspirations in North Macedonia. Thus, the chapter provides useful insights into the political, social, and psychological factors affecting the belief in EU-related conspiracy theories in the country. It concludes that the North Macedonian public space became increasingly populated with conspiracy theories about the EU due to the aftermath of a recent turbulent past, a political climate dominated by instability and scandals, and constant support among a part of the local population for the conservative party (VMRO-DPMNE), which turned toward an anti-EU stance.

The closing chapter, authored by M R. X. Dentith, contributes to the theoretical discussion about how to distinguish between warranted and unwarranted conspiracy theories. Drawing on examples from Eastern Europe, with a focus on Romania, Dentith argues that the generalist approach of analyzing conspiracy theories as something that is *prima facie* irrational entails the risk of operating with false assumptions and ignoring the evidence. He claims that this generalist approach was framed mainly taking into account Western political contexts and could be problematic when dealing with other regions. He invokes the case of Eastern European societies where the recent history—especially the experience of living under oppressive regimes—questions the effectiveness of this approach. Dentith concludes that we should favor a particularist approach: investigate case by case based on evidence and pay more attention to the political and historical context in which conspiracy theories occur.

This is precisely the approach we aim to encourage by the publication of this volume. As with every culture, conspiracy cultures, both mainstream and alternative, are complicated sets of theories, tropes, narratives, discourses, images, and practices that could reveal social symptoms; they are likely to provide valuable coping mechanisms and can be easily turned into political tools as well. In all these cases, the local context is decisive in how to interpret them, for very similar conspiracy theories could signal different social dynamics across various social and political structures. The turbulent past of Eastern Europe, from the failed imperial projects through intense national conflicts to the Cold War, created perfect conditions for conspiracy theorizing, and any intervention by any political or social actor, from civil societies to philanthropic organizations or elected political bodies, could be easily portrayed as illegitimate. One of the main reasons for the success of populist governments in the region originates in the fact that the local elites have been divided into two main streams: those who have tried to accommodate local societies to an ideal—an imagined version of Western democracies, a political drive that had its political momentum in the 1990s—and those who have turned underground conspiracism into state policy and, therefore, offered a mistaken but familiar answer for those very real problems that the same conspiracy theories tried to tackle in the first place. As such, conspiracy theories have a mobilizing effect that has shaped political self-awareness. While today it seems that everything happened for questionable reasons, the long-term effects of this mobilization, and all the social conflicts it brought about, are difficult to predict.

Conspiracy theories have played a key role in building imagined communities and mobilizing citizens against ruling elites at the time nation-states surfaced on the map of Eastern Europe. Thus, conspiracy theories have shaped a sense of identity geared toward contesting (political) authority, while actual engagement in political action suffered from lack of grassroots support. The top-down dissemination of conspiracy theories by members of the establishment is tantamount to the deliberate use of propaganda. Ultimately, distrust in government and various state-building interventions fueled both top-down and bottom-up circulation of conspiracy narratives.

It is important to realize that conspiracy theory research in Eastern Europe almost necessarily needs to go beyond the immediate concerns about the rise of populism: it shall be at least a *moyenne durée* investigation because most popular conspiracy theories are historically embedded. It is quite challenging to understand their contemporary effects without a good sense of their historical scope. The centrality that history occupies in the consciousness of even the less-educated Eastern Europeans is unusual in a large segment of the West. Not only are these histories conditioned by a series of conspiracy theories but also secrecy and actual conspiracies have been integral state practices and core activities to such an extent that they established conspiracy theories as a perfectly legitimate way to make sense of the world. From Prague to Moscow, conspiracy theorists are not stigmatized to the same extent as they commonly are elsewhere, and particularly so in the Western world. The chapters of this edited volume illustrate how the circulation and the transmission modes of similar conspiratorial tropes allow us to approach Eastern Europe as a whole, even though this requires grouping together diverse political, cultural, and linguistic traditions.

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- 2 AIG: MF 274–275, Lists of spies, suspects, and expelled members.
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- 5 During the first day of the Central Committee meeting of January 1945 in Ivry, half of the orators mentioned it in their speeches, Archives of the French Communist Party (AFCP, Bobigny): Central Committee meeting, January 21–23, 1945.
- 6 AFCP: Central Committee meeting, April 20–21, 1946; Political Bureau, October 17, 1946.
- 7 AFCP: Political Bureau, July 10, 1947; Secretary, July 15 and 28 and September 22, 1947.
- 8 AFCP: Political Bureau, October 9 and 22 and November 6, 1947; Secretary, October 14 and 20 and November 4 and 10, 1947.
- 9 AIG: MF 277, Central Committee, November 11–13, 1947.
- 10 French National Archives (FNA, Paris): ‘Ecole centrale de responsables dans le travail municipal, Février 9–28, 1948. Cours général n° 6’ in box BB18 4067 (Plot of Toulon, 1952); AFCP: Political Bureau, November 6, 1947.
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- 13 Italian National Archives (Rome): Box 36, Home Office Minister, Public Order, 1944–46.
- 14 AFCP: Political Bureau and Secretary, 1952–53.
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- 16 AIG: MF 127 and 262, Records of the Directory, September 1953 and September–October–November 1956.
- 17 FNA: Papiers Vincent Auriol, Conseil des Ministres, 552 AP 60 and Report « Le PCF en 1950 », Direction Centrale des Renseignements Généraux, 19960325, Article 1.
- 18 Office Universitaire de Recherche Socialiste (Paris): Comités Directeur, Conseil Nationaux and Congrès Nationaux, 1947–56.
- 19 Office Universitaire de Recherche Socialiste (Paris): Comités Directeur, Conseil Nationaux, and Congrès Nationaux, 1947–56.
- 20 Istituto Luigi Sturzo (Rome): Collection of posters of the Christian Democracy.
 - 1 The Soviet secret police had different names in different periods of its existence. The most famous of them are *Narkomat Vnutrennih Del* [People’s Commissariat of Internal Affairs, 1934–43], *Ministerstvo Gosudarstvennoi Bezopasnosti* [Ministry of the State Security, 1946–53], and *Komitet Gosudarstvennoi Bezopasnosti* [Committee of State Security, 1954–91].
 - 2 All quotations are translated from Russian by the author.
 - 3 The term refers to texts that propagated in handmade copies beyond the eyes of censors among opposition-leaning friends and associates.
 - 4 The Fifth Department was created in 1967 to counter the “ideological sabotage of the enemy.”
 - 5 Katherine Verdery comes to a similar conclusion in her analysis of *Securitate*: uncovering of hidden enemies was the *raison d’être* of secret state service in Socialist Romania (Verdery 2014, 85–86).
 - 6 National Alliance of Russian Solidarists (NTS) was an anti-Communist organization founded in the 1930s by Russian émigrés, which aimed to overthrow the Communist regime in their motherland.
 - 7 In reality, this person did not exist.

- 8 Andrei Sakharov was one of the founders of the non-official Moscow Human Rights Committee, the author of many writings on the issues of human rights, political freedom, free speech, and the dangers of the Cold War arms race. In 1975, Sakharov was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize.
 - 9 As soon as participants opened their posters, plainclothes KGB officers came up to them, tore or seized the posters, and arrested their holders. On the posters there were demands to respect the Soviet Constitution, to release the dissident Vladimir Bukovsky who had been placed in a mental hospital the day before, and to conduct an open trial of the writers Andrei Sinyavsky and Yuri Daniel (both were arrested for publishing their pieces abroad).
 - 10 Knowing the psychological base of belief in conspiracies, we can assume that in the late Soviet period, there were no mass excesses of scapegoating precisely because there was not a widespread, socially determined sense of lacking control.
 - 11 Review of questions received at lectures on the international situation and foreign policy of the USSR, 1981–82, Russian State Archive of Recent History, Fund 5, Inventory 84, Folder 119.
- 1 All translations from Bulgarian by the authors.
 - 2 For a detailed analysis of the complex network of resemblances and differences between secret societies and secret police in East European Countries, which also takes into account Simmel's concept of a secret society, see in Verdery (2014, 77–80, 136–38, 148–52).
 - 3 The story of Mr. T as a secret agent is based on his dossier as a secret agent of State Security declassified by the Commission for the Disclosure of Documents and Declaration of Affiliation of Bulgarian Citizens with State Security and the Intelligence Service of the Bulgarian People's Army (CDDDABCSSISBPA 2009). The account of the career of Mr. T after 1989 is based on an interview published in Blitz (2014).
 - 4 See (CDDDABCSSISBPA 2009). The claim that Col. Klyanev offered protection to Mr. T as a conscript is unsupported by documents. However, that seems probable against the background of life stories of secret agents collected in (Angelov 2007) or the typical career of a secret agent described in Metodiev (2012).
 - 5 The account of the case of Mr. D and Mr. M is based on the detailed description of the facts in the ruling of the District Court of Sofia (*Milev v. Donchev* 2007). The case was classified, but it was nevertheless published by an independent website for investigative journalism.
 - 6 The account of the bill and the parliamentary debates is based on the detailed and profound analysis in Medarov (2017).
 - 1 In 2017, 1,019 Poles participated in the study.
 - 2 The r-Pearson correlation between the belief in Jewish conspiracy and age = 0.19, $p > 0.001$; between average income and the belief in Jewish conspiracy the r-Pearson correlation = -0.21 , $p > 0.001$; between years of education and the belief in Jewish conspiracy the r-Pearson correlation = -0.16 , $p > 0.001$.
 - 3 The r-Pearson correlation between political attitudes and the belief in Jewish conspiracy = 0.32, $p > 0.001$.
 - 4 The Smolensk air disaster occurred on April 10, 2010, when a Polish presidential plane crashed near the city of Smolensk, killing all 96 people on board, including the president of Poland, Lech Kaczynski, and his wife, Maria.
 - 5 One of the problems has to do with the fact that in various countries the data is gathered using different methods (i.e., via telephone interview vs. personal interview). This can be a source of uncontrolled error due to the so-called social desirability bias, according to which participants have a tendency to answer survey questions differently, depending on whether they answer the questions in privately or in the presence of another person. Moreover, ADL only presents data in a form of "percent of participants who agreed with that statement" (League 2014).

- 1 In his speech on November 24, 2018, the prominent Croatian politician and leader of Croatian Peasants Party (HSS), Stjepan Radić warned the National Council delegation that signing the unification will be “an act of conspiracy against people, above all against Croatia and Croats” (Hrvatski sabor n.d.).
- 2 Parts of this section are based on my research published in the chapter “Conspiracy Theories in and About the Balkans.” In *Routledge Handbook of Conspiracy Theories*, edited by Michael Butter and Peter Knight, 596–609. London: Routledge, 2020.
- 3 Take for example the statement of S. Rajaratnam, second deputy prime minister of Singapore at the Seventh Summit Conference of the Non-Aligned Countries in New Delhi in 1983: “the United States lost the take-over bid primarily because, I suspect, the Americans are not, unlike their more experienced and dedicated Soviet rivals, particularly good at political conspiracy. This may be because, unlike Soviet conspirators, American conspirators tend to talk too much” (cited in Kusumaatmadja et al. 1983, 137).
- 4 The more nuanced dynamics and primary sources are depicted in Blanuša (2011).
- 5 For example, Robert D. Kaplan’s *Balkan Ghosts* (1993) or Warren Zimmermann’s *Origins of a Catastrophe: Yugoslavia and its Destroyers* (1996) (Kaufman 1999).
- 6 Such conspiracy theories also mentioned the secret US National Security Directive of the Reagan administration as part of its imperialist agenda, which is similar to the already mentioned Yugoslav conspiracy theory about the monster of financial capital (South African Communist Party 1999). Similar ideas of economic destabilization as the first step of dismantling Yugoslavia are also expressed in Talbot (2000).
- 7 The survey was held by the Department of Psychology, Singidunum University, in Belgrade in 2017.
- 8 The survey was held by the Faculty of Political Science, University of Zagreb, in 2018.
- 1 More information about the group can be found in the report by the Council of Europe (2015, 20).
- 2 All translations from Ukrainian and Russian are done by author unless otherwise noted.
- 3 These three television channels have been leaders in the Ukrainian TV market for decades, which is acknowledged elsewhere (BBC 2018). The situation is more complicated with respect to news sites, as their ratings can be evaluated by many parameters; the sites discussed in this study are recognized as “top popular resources” by different Ukrainian marketing sources (Marketer 2018).
- 1 This process has a certain gradual progression, with the individual stages developing from the act of aggression, through awareness of injury by the victim and subjective identification with the status of the victim, to acknowledgment of this status by the surroundings (Bar-Tal et al. 2009, 5–6).
- 2 Pavkovic and Kelem emphasize this point: “Nations singing anthems possess more than rulers, landscapes and homelands, they also have their preferred histories (or rather historical myths) that not only uniquely identify the singing nation but sometimes define it” (Pavkovic and Kelem 2015, 31–32). Victimhood as a component of anthemic lyrics is derived from the poetics of romantic sentiment. The latter drew a contrast between the nation’s glorious past and its deplorable present-day suffering. We find this, for example, in the Hungarian anthem, which was composed in the same period as its Slovak equivalent.
- 3 This survey was carried out by the Institute of Sociology in the Slovak Academy of Sciences in collaboration with the Institute for Public Affairs and the Centre for Research of Public Opinion and the Institute of Sociology in the Czech Academy of Sciences. The collection of data was performed in the first half of March 2018. In Slovakia there were 1,012 respondents, aged 18 and upward (SME 2018).
- 4 A specific example of contemporary populism that uses the moment of victimization may be found in the rhetoric of Donald Trump (Johnson 2017; Szilágyi 2017).
- 5 While this paper was being written, Marián Kočner was officially accused of commissioning this murder. Some months previously, other people were accused of performing

and facilitating the murder. The presumption of their connection with the Calabrian Mafia was not borne out (The Slovak Spectator 2019).

- 6 Since the party is attempting to cleanse its public image from accusations of disseminating neo-Fascism, the leading party member and parliamentary deputy Milan Uhrík, responding to the position published here, declared that the murder could not be excused. He said that the Facebook statement was not the official stance of the party or of its Bratislava organization. The statement was later deleted by the administrator of the Facebook page. More about this case at, for example, Kysel' 2018.
- 7 Anton Srholec—a priest likewise well known for self-sacrificing work with people on the margins of society, author's comment.
- 1 All translations from Hungarian and Romanian by authors, unless otherwise noted.
- 1 A term used by the Minister of Foreign Affairs of North Macedonia, Nikola Dimitrov, in an address to the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, Federica Mogherini, on March 7, 2018 (retrieved from www.mfa.gov.mk).
- 2 The COST COMPACT Action can be accessed at: <https://conspiracytheories.eu/>.
- 1 For example, a surprise party for Stalin might well have encompassed the entire state and thus be the proper subject of a conspiracy.
- 2 This point has also been made by Robert Brotherton and Christopher French (Brotherton and French 2014).
- 3 Similar arguments have been proposed by Michael Barkun (Barkun 2003), Viren Swami, Martin Voracek, Stefan Stieger, Ulrich S. Tran, and Adrian Furnham (Swami et al. 2014).
- 4 For further details of this criticism of both Sunstein and Cassam, see "The Problem of Conspiracism" (Matthew R. X. Dentith 2018).
- 5 This has been noted by other scholars, such as Joseph Uscinski (Uscinski 2018).
- 6 I use this word advisedly here: "sensible" here refers to the idea that at least entertaining conspiracy theories about political events is not out of the ordinary.
- 7 See both my book (Dentith 2014) and the article "When Inferring to a Conspiracy Theory Might Be the Best Explanation" (Dentith 2016).
- 8 Conspiracies can fail, and for a number of reasons: sometimes the conspirators have a falling out; the existence of the conspiracy is leaked out before any work toward the desired end is ever completed; or the conspirators never get around to doing anything, despite an express desire to do so.
- 9 Many of the evidential issues concerning conspiracy theories are covered in my article "Conspiracy Theories on the Basis of the Evidence" (Dentith 2019).
- 10 In some cases, the only available explanations might turn out to be conspiracy theories: the September 11 attacks in New York, of 2001, for example, are conspiratorial no matter which rival explanation you favor. The terrorist plot explanation features people working in secret toward some end (thus, a conspiracy) while the claim it was an inside job orchestrated by the US government is obviously a conspiracy theory as well.
- 11 The consequence of this conspiracy theory being promoted by the Hungarian government has been that the CEU was forced to relocate its campus from Budapest to Vienna in 2019.
- 12 If, for example, you either think attitudes toward conspiracy theories are not unique to particular polities, or that no matter the social consequence to some belief in such theories, we should still be particularists.
- 13 See also this article for more details of the issues surrounding vaccination rates and the role of the anti-vax movement in Romania (Kakissis and Coman 2018). There have also been, in recent years, similar conspiracy theories about the HPV (Human papillomavirus) vaccine in Romania.
- 14 For a nuanced debate on why we might be epistemic particularists but generalists of an *ethical persuasion* with respect to conspiracy theory, see the debate between Patrick

- Stokes (Stokes 2018), Lee Basham (Basham 2018a), and myself (M. R. X. Dentith 2018c) in the volume *Taking Conspiracy Theories Seriously*.
- 15 There are also other measures we can look at, such as the 2017 Digital News Report, which looks at digital news consumption in 37 countries, focusing on issues of trust and misinformation. According to the report, “Trust in Romanian media is low in international comparison, with evidence of political and economic interference in the news agenda” (Radu 2017).
 - 16 Low-level conspiratorial activity in this case will simply be backroom deals; high-level conspiratorial activity will be massive cover-ups and the like.
 - 17 For more on this, see Grigorij Mesežnikov’s chapter in *Conspiracy Theories in Europe: A Compilation* (Mesežnikov 2014).
 - 18 There is also the question of the role the Romanian diaspora plays in framing those perceptions, given that not only does Romania have one of the largest diasporas in the world but also the most significant part of the diaspora happened in the early years post the December 1989 Revolution. Many of the members of this diaspora live in polities considered to be *less corrupt* than Romania. Does the existence of such a large expatriate population—one that arguably is in a position to see how politics works in their host nations—lead to cases of Romanians in Romania being more likely to perceive corruption in Romania? If so, this lends credence to the notion that in a society that has a history of conspiracy, and is still dealing with the transition from a closed- to open-style of governance, suspecting corruption and conspiracy is not itself irrational.
 - 19 See, for example, Eduard Rudolf Roth’s article “The Romanian Revolution of 1989 and the Veracity of the External Subversion Theory” (Roth 2016).
 - 20 For example, Romania had a secret police service prior to the Communist period, the *Siguranța*.
 - 21 This is not in itself an unusual claim: the Bonn Republic of Western Germany (1949–90) featured many former Nazis in high-ranked positions, leading some to claim that while the Nazis had been ostensibly defeated in World War II, the Nazi regime simply quietly moved into the background of political life in the new republic.
 - 22 Although being either former Securitate or a collaborator did not preclude one from public office. Rather, the system relied upon an honor system: it was assumed that former Securitate officers and collaborators would not stand for public office.
 - 23 Such generalism in the West might also come across as historical, given the history of conspiracy there, but the seeming open and transparent governments of most Western nations are taken as evidence that the era of abundant conspiring is past. Whether this is true or not is open to debate; for example, Kathryn S. Olmsted’s book on US conspiracy theories of the twentieth century suggests conspiracies in the US over the course of the twentieth century have been more common than scholars tend to think (Olmsted 2009).
 - 24 I have outlined one way in which we can systematically investigate particular conspiracy theories here (M. R. X. Dentith 2018b).
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