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Conspiratorial thinking and foreign policy views: evidence from Central Europe

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ABSTRACT

Foreign policy analysts assume that conspiratorial thinking is linked to citizens' foreign policy views and in particular to a preference among citizens for an alignment with Russia rather than the West. Empirical studies on the relationship between conspiratorial thinking and citizens' foreign policy views are, however, lacking, despite a growing general academic interest in its origins and consequences. Our analysis breaks new ground by empirically evaluating the relationship between conspiratorial thinking and foreign policy preferences based on ISSP survey data for Slovakia. We find that conspiratorial thinking decreases the extent to which citizens prefer their country to be aligned with the West. The effect of conspiratorial thinking is substantively meaningful and on par with other predictors of foreign policy views.

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Introduction

A burgeoning literature in social sciences now examines the origins of conspiracy theories and conspiratorial thinking (Miller, Saunders, and Farhart 2016; Uscinski, Klofstad, and Atkinson 2016; van Prooijen and Jostmann 2013; van Prooijen, Krouwel, and Pollet 2015). Conspiracy theories are explanations for events, which find causes in "hidden, malevolent groups secretly perpetuating political plots and social calamities to further their own nefarious goals" (Oliver and Wood 2014, 952). Citizens scoring high on conspiratorial thinking attach conspiratorial explanations to political events and circumstances, which impacts their political attitudes and preferences (Douglas et al. 2019). Despite current efforts to understand conspiratorial thinking, we know little about its consequences, particularly when it comes to foreign policy. The lack of scientific engagement with the consequences of conspiratorial

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thinking for foreign policy views is in stark contrast to the interest in these implications among policy-makers. For instance, extensive policy research on "hybrid warfare" pins much of its attention on conspiracy theories as causes for the weakening of support for the West and an erosion of trust within Western societies (Fiott and Parkes 2019). To our knowledge, there is very little empirical research on the relationship between conspiratorial thinking and foreign policy preferences.[1] Our contribution examines this link. We make a theoretical argument about how conspiratorial thinking is likely to shape foreign policy views and we test this expectation empirically with data from a unique public opinion survey.

We examine if conspiratorial thinking is associated with a preference among citizens for the international alignment of their country. We use the case of Slovakia in our analysis. While the mechanism we envisage is more general in nature, Slovakia is a well-suited case for several reasons. First, Slovakia is a new European Union (EU) and NATO member state. After transitioning out of socialism in 1989 and gaining independence in 1993, the country's recent history has been marked by the attempts to enter Western-led international organizations, such as the EU and NATO. All post-independence governments in Slovakia paid lip-service to the alignment with the EU and NATO. Since 1998, all governments pursued strong pro-EU policies which radically transformed Slovakia's domestic and foreign policy. This pro-Western integration consensus has been led by the mainstream elites, but has not been mirrored by the public (Gyárfášová 2017). One in five respondents of a survey from Slovakia expressed recently that their country should support Russia in a hypothetical conflict between Russia and the US (Denison 2019). Secondly, policy analysts contend that conspiratorial thinking would make it more likely for Slovaks to prefer their country to be aligned with Russia rather than with the West (Nič and Šuplata 2017).

We use the Slovakian module of the 2014 edition of the International Social Survey Programme (ISSP) to test our hypothesis. This is a unique data set because it is one of the few instances where a high-quality population-based survey includes measures of conspiratorial thinking as well as foreign policy views. The measure for conspiratorial thinking was only included in the Slovakian module of the ISSP but not in other countries. Our findings demonstrate that conspiratorial thinking makes it less likely for citizens to prefer Slovakia to be aligned with the West and more likely to take an independent position. By contrast, we do not find that conspiratorial thinking is related to a greater preference for Slovakia to be aligned with Russia. This is important for the policy debate on the role of conspiracies in foreign policy,

[1]Uscinski and Parent (2014, 93–94) note about the US that Republicans with pronounced conspiratorial thinking show less support for the war in Iraq than Republicans with low conspiratorial thinking. In a similar vein, Democrats with pronounced conspiratorial thinking exhibit less support for the war in Afghanistan than their peers who score lower on conspiratorial thinking.

where this assumption has been voiced (Bentzen 2018; Daniel and Eberle 2018; Rychnovská and Kohút 2018).

Conspiratorial thinking and foreign policy attitudes

Scholars long debated whether citizens possess meaningful foreign policy preferences at all (Aldrich, Sullivan, and Borgida 1989; Holsti 2004). On the one hand, citizens might not be interested in following the news generally or foreign policy in particular, given its very limited relevance for their daily lives. On the other hand, international politics often happens at venues which are less transparent to the public. For instance, most events at NATO or EU forums in Brussels are not covered by the media as much as national politics, nor scrutinized as carefully by national parliaments as domestic policy making (Auel, Eisele, and Kinski 2018; de Wilde and Raunio 2018).

Precisely because of the opaque nature of foreign policy, citizens use heuristics to form opinions on foreign policy issues. Heuristics allow them to hold structured views even when they lack specific information (Hurwitz and Peffley 1987). Citizens' foreign policy views are driven for instance by basic attitudes towards war and the use of force, ideological orientations, and cues they receive from trusted parties (Eichenberg 2016; Reifler et al. 2014; Peffley and Hurwitz 1992). These factors also play a role when it comes to a diverse range of other foreign policy issues which are more akin to the views we examine. For instance, citizens rely on information from parties they support when it comes to forming their own position on issues as diverse as the Israel-Palestinian conflict and membership in international organizations (Cavari and Freedman 2017; Marquis and Sciarini 1999). Attitudes towards the EU are also driven by elite cues as well as by ideological orientations on a cultural rather than an economic left-right dimension (Kleider and Stoeckel 2019; Steenbergen, Edwards, and de Vries 2007).

We believe that conspiratorial thinking is another important source that shapes citizens' foreign policy views. Edelson et al. (2017, 936) describe the analogous mechanism succinctly:

> Just as underlying political predispositions, such as left/right ideology or partisanship, shape how people form more specific opinions, evaluate information, and choose among alternatives (Berinsky 2009; Lodge and Taber 2013; Lord, Ross, and Lepper 1979; Zaller 1992), underlying conspiratorial thinking drives people to attach conspiratorial explanations to specific events and circumstances as they come to pass (Uscinski, Klofstad, and Atkinson 2016).[2]

It is a lens through which citizens understand the world that makes them more likely to see "authoritative accounts as fabricated and powerful actors

[2]Closely related conceptualizations of conspiratorial thinking can be found in Uscinski and Olivella (2017, 2) who consider it a distinct worldview, in the work Uscinski and Parent (2014) as well as Douglas et al. (2019) who see it as an ideological orientation, in Enders' (2019) work who defines it as a belief system, or in Oliver and Wood's (2014, 954) study who consider it a general orientation towards politics.

as conspirators" (Edelson et al. 2017, 936). Indeed, the predisposition to interpret political circumstances as a collusion of a secretive group of elites that advance interests at the expense of the "common people" mirrors the populist differentiation between an "us" versus "them" (Douglas et al. 2019, 18). A likely implication for citizens' foreign policy preferences is that the ties of a country in the international arena, which are negotiated by powerful political elites, are interpreted as evidence of precisely the elite collusion that individuals high in conspiratorial thinking are alarmed about. We therefore expect citizens with pronounced conspiratorial thinking to prefer their country to be less intertwined with other countries and international organizations.

Conspiratorial thinking also includes the notion that key information is hidden by elites and not publicly available (Uscinski and Parent 2014). Hence, conspiratorial thinking can offer a convenient and logically coherent reasoning for an individual to take a stance on foreign policy even in the absence of precise knowledge and irrespective of her party's position. If the important bits and pieces of information would not be covered by the media anyway, there would be little need to consume more information and a lack of engagement would not preclude someone from forming a position. In that sense, conspiratorial thinking offers a powerful way to understand the world for citizens who could find it otherwise more difficult to form preferences on foreign policy: it enables them to take a position that challenges government policy, such as an alignment with the EU and NATO (Harambam and Aupers 2014; Enders 2019).

Based on these theoretical considerations we believe that conspiratorial thinking shapes citizens' views on the alignment with Western international organizations in fundamental ways. Slovakia is firmly aligned with the EU and NATO, which is a position formally supported by a majority of political parties (Volkens et al. 2019). We expect conspiratorial thinking to influence individuals' preferences about alignment and in particular to decrease their likelihood to prefer Slovakia to be aligned with the EU and NATO.

Research design

We use the Slovakian module of the 2014 edition of the ISSP. This is a unique survey because it includes measures on respondents' foreign policy views as well as measures for conspiratorial thinking, along a set of important control variables. The ISSP survey was conducted with a random sample of 1156 respondents via face-to-face interviews in September and October of 2014 and offers a high-quality sample to test our hypotheses (Krivý et al. 2014; Scholz et al. 2017). [3]

[3]Respondents were selected by using a multilevel stratified random sample, stratified by the Slovakia's administrative regions and urbanization level (Krivý et al. 2014).

Dependent variable

We measure geopolitical preferences with the following question item: "The events in the Ukraine and subsequent sanctions also stirred a debate about Slovakia's geopolitical alignment. How should we be aligned?" The answer categories include

(1) "Always stand by the West (EU and NATO)",
(2) "Predominantly stand by the West (EU and NATO)",
(3) "Attempting a balanced position between Russia and the West",
(4) "Predominantly stand by Russia", and
(5) "Always stand by Russia"

The question also includes a "don't know" category. We remove from the analysis respondents who selected this category. We merge option (1) and (2) into a category "stand by the West" and we merge options (3) and (4) into a category "stand by Russia". Hence, our dependent variable has three categories: stand by the West, a balanced position, and stand by Russia.

Explanatory variables

Conspiratorial thinking

We measure conspiratorial thinking with an item about the extent to which respondents believe that information is hidden while the world is governed by secretive groups. This item resembles common measures used in the literature (Lantian et al. 2016; McClosky and Chong 1985; Uscinski and Olivella 2017). When prompted to express their view, respondents were asked to select a position on a measure where one end point denotes no conspiratorial thinking and the other end point is pronounced conspiratorial thinking. Specifically, one end of the answer scale is agreement with the statement that "the world is complicated, but we know the important facts about the important events". The other end of the scale is agreement with the statement that "the reality is often different than suggested; the world is governed by secretive groups according to a secret scenario". Respondent could select these end points or one of the three categories in between these endpoints (see Appendix for details). Although multi-item measures can be preferable when available, our single item measure has desirable properties. It does not reference any specific conspiracy theory and therefore avoids common pitfalls (Brotherton, French, and Pickering 2013). Moreover, the content of the item mirrors the measure that Lantian et al. (2016) find to be a valid, reliable, and economical measure of conspiratorial thinking (cf. Lyons, Merola, and Reifler 2019).

Partisan cues

In order to parse out the role of conspiratorial thinking, we control for a number of confounding factors. Given the complexity and opaqueness of foreign policy for most voters, the literature suggests that citizens form foreign policy views based on cues they receive from a party they support. The Slovakian party system includes a large number of parties, some of which frequently collapse and disappear, while some survive over a longer period of time (Haughton 2014). Yet, what matters to account for party cueing in the context of our dependent variable is whether voters receive pro-Western or anti-Western cues. At the time of the survey, the Slovak political system was characterized by a pro-Western consensus. A single-party government led by Direction-Social Democracy (*Smer-Sociálna Demokracia*) came into power in 2012 and pushed for deeper European integration. The Slovak parliament included only two minor parties that took soft Eurosceptic positions; together these parties had 18 percent of the seats: Freedom and Solidarity (*Sloboda and Solidarita*) and Ordinary People and Independent Personalities (*Obyčajní ľudia a nezávislé osobnosti*) (see Bakker et al. 2015; Polk et al. 2017; Volkens et al. 2019). Other Eurosceptic and anti-Western parties existed, but they were not represented in parliament. We code whether a respondent supports a party that is taking a pro-Western position, an anti-Western position, or no party. The survey does not include a measure of party identification but we can rely on an item that taps the party a person would vote for if elections were happening "in this week".

Ideological orientations

Citizens also derive foreign policy views from their broader ideological orientations. Western-European left-wing parties often held positive, pro-Russian views during the Cold War (Everts and Isernia 2015), and we might expect the same to be the case nowadays, also for the comparable parties in Eastern Europe: left-leaning views might still be linked to a preference for siding with Russia. We account for the role of left-right orientations which we measure using a left-right self-placement scale. Individuals who have negative views of the European Union can be expected to oppose an alignment with the West. To take this into account we measure whether respondents believe that European integration went too far or whether it should go further.

Trust

Citizens who distrust their government have been found to show less support for their governments' foreign policy in the US (Hetherington and Husser 2012). In Europe citizens who distrust their government see European integration more skeptically (Armingeon and Ceka 2014). In the same vein, trust in politics might affect whether Slovakians approve of their country's standing

Table 1. Results from multinomial logit model.

	Balanced position		Stand by Russia	
	Risk ratio	SE	Risk ratio	SE
Conspiratorial thinking	1.29**	(0.10)	1.16	(0.14)
Respondent has no PID	1.23	(0.26)	1.37	(0.45)
R supports anti-Western party	0.63	(0.16)	0.75	(0.30)
Left right ideology	0.84***	(0.03)	0.84**	(0.05)
EU support	0.87***	(0.03)	0.77***	(0.05)
Trust in parties	0.83	(0.10)	0.92	(0.18)
Education	1.39	(0.26)	1.48	(0.43)
Age	1.02***	(0.01)	1.02	(0.01)
Female	1.21	(0.22)	0.75	(0.21)
Constant	1.83	(1.99)	0.75	(0.64)
Log likelihood	−611.65265			
Observations	740			

Reference category of the dependent variable: stand by West. Reference categories of independent variables: respondent backs party that supports a Western alignment, male; coefficients display relative risk ratios; Standard errors in parentheses, * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$. Unweighted sample (see Appendix A2 for weighted results)

by the West because it is government policy. A dummy variable controls for government party support already. Yet, we want to additionally control for low levels of trust that citizens might have in politics more broadly, and the confounding effect this might have on their foreign policy views. We therefore control for citizens' level of trust in parties generally. Furthermore, we control for individuals' education, age, and gender. [4]

Results

We conceive of foreign policy views as a choice between three options that do not necessarily need to be on a single dimension: respondents might want Slovakia to stand by the West, to stand by Russia, or they might prefer neither of these choices and instead favour a balanced position that does not predetermine an alignment with either side. To account for the potentially unordered nature of the outcome variable, we estimate multinomial logit models.[5] The results show that conspiratorial thinking is an important predictor that helps us to understand when individuals prefer Slovakia not to be standing by the West but to be taking a balanced position. Conspiratorial thinking does not, however, increase the likelihood of respondents preferring their country to stand by Russia.

[4]Foreign policy attitudes might be also driven by individual hawkishness. We conducted a robustness check and found no evidence that it drives attitudes in our analysis. We present the results in the online appendix.

[5]We also estimated an ordered logit model with three response categories (stand by West, balanced, stand by Russia). The results are substantively similar (see Appendix), but we show the results of a multinomial logit model because it does not rest on the assumption that the categories of the dependent are ordered in a particular way ex ante. Multinomial logit models rest on the independence of irrelevant alternatives (IIA) assumption, which is met in our case (see Appendix Tables A5-A7).

The model in Table 1 presents the results of a multinomial logit model. The left column shows how the independent variables affect the relative chance of a respondent to prefer a balanced position rather than standing by the West (which is the reference category).[6] The right column shows the relative chance of an individual to prefer Slovakia to stand by Russia rather than standing by the West. Conspiratorial thinking is a statistically significant predictor for preferring Slovakia to take a balanced position rather than standing by the West, but it is not a statistically significant predictor for preferring it to stand by Russia. This relationship holds when controlling for a wide range of variables, including ideological orientations and trust.

The results table only shows whether an independent variable makes it more likely for a respondent to prefer a balanced position or, respectively, standing by Russia, rather than siding with the West. While this is important information, Figure 1 shows a more comprehensive picture: it reveals the likelihood of an individual falling into one of the three categories of the dependent variable at different levels of an independent variable. This perspective offers a more intuitive presentation of the effects and their substantive size. Accordingly, the probability for respondents to prefer Slovakia to stand by the West is 39 per cent when their conspiratorial thinking score is zero and this probability decreases to 20 per cent when their conspiratorial thinking score is at its highest value. At the same time, the probability of respondents to prefer Slovakia to take a balanced position increases from 50 per cent to 71 per cent. The probability of respondents to prefer Slovakia to stand by Russia is not related to conspiratorial thinking.

Figure 2 reveals that the effect of conspiratorial thinking is also substantively meaningful. The rope ladder plot shows marginal effects of a two standard deviation change of all independent variables.[7] As suggested in the literature, left-right orientations and support for the EU play an important role for foreign policy views. Additionally, age is a significant predictor for foreign policy views in Slovakia. The role of conspiratorial thinking is almost as strong as the effect of the variables that tap into ideological orientations. By contrast, our analysis shows that party cueing does not seem to be decisive for citizens' foreign policy views. Citizens who support anti-Western parties do not exhibit less support for the alignment with the West.[8]

[6]Results are displayed in terms of relative risk ratios. A one-unit increase in conspiratorial thinking increases the relative risk of a respondent to prefer Slovakia to take a balanced position rather than standing by the West by 1.29 (Table 1, left column of coefficients).

[7]It shows a change from zero to one in the case of dummy variables.

[8]In the online appendix, we demonstrate that the effect of conspiratorial thinking remains robust when controlling for individual party ideology as well.

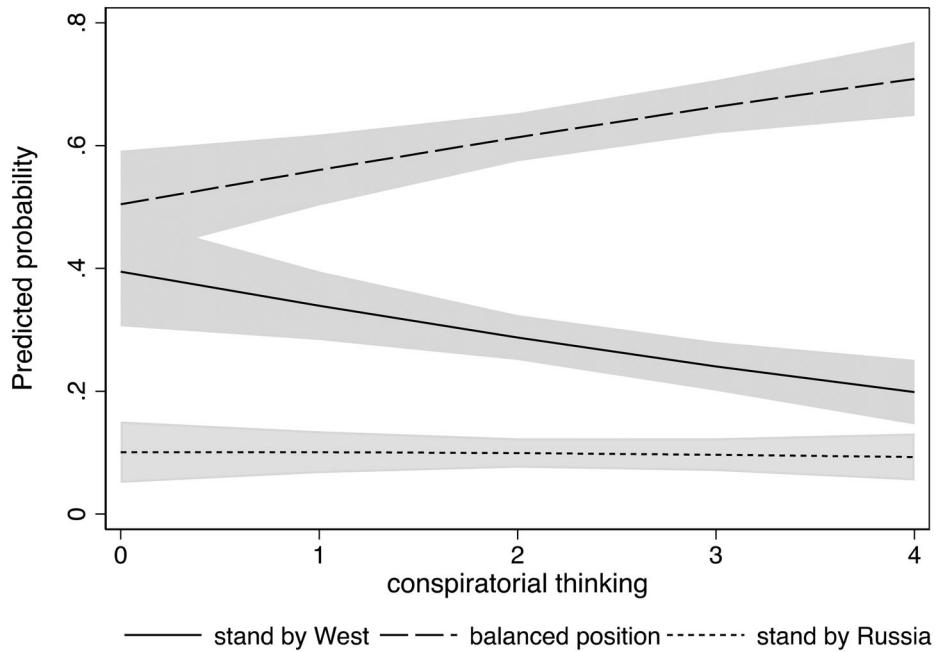

Figure 1. Predicted probabilities based on results from Table 1.

Note: Grey area shows 95 percent confidence interval.

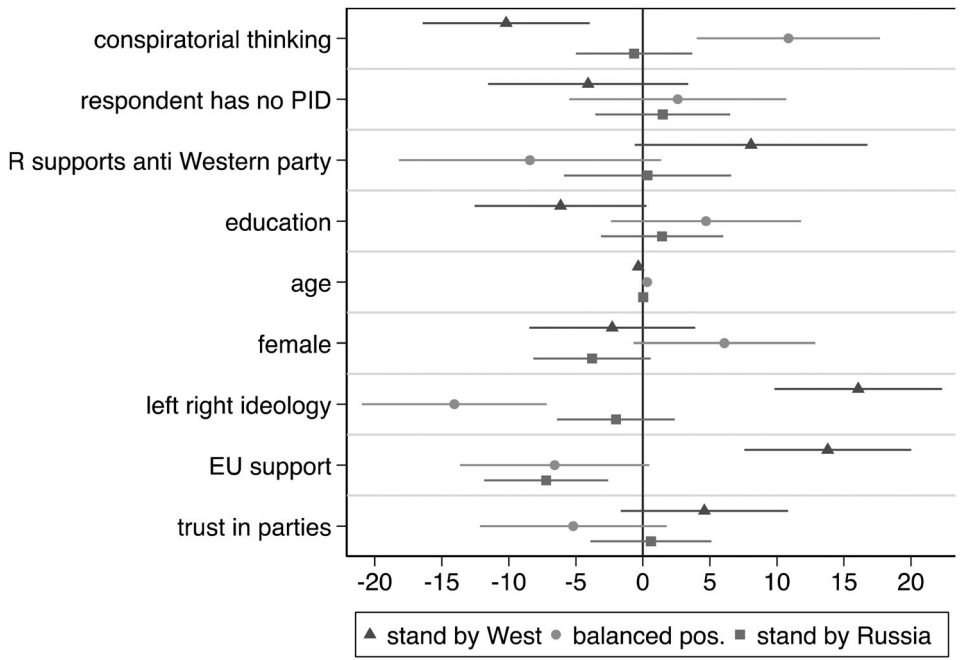

Figure 2. Marginal effects of a two standard deviation change of independent variables.

Note: Marginal effects of a two standard deviation change of independent variables on each of the categories of the dependent variable. Lines represent 95 percent confidence intervals.

Discussion and conclusion

A growing literature examines the causes and consequences of conspiratorial thinking, but empirical research on the implications of conspiratorial thinking for citizens' foreign policy views has been lacking. Our analysis begins to fill this gap. We use a high-quality population-based face to face survey that was fielded in Slovakia in 2014 to analyse the relationship between conspiratorial thinking and whether citizens prefer their country to align with the West, with Russia, or whether they prefer it to take a balanced position. We find that conspiratorial thinking decreases public support for an alignment with the West, and that it increases support for a "balanced" position. Conspiratorial thinking appears not to increase support for an alignment with Russia. These results confirm the findings of policy scholars who argue that conspiratorial thinking decreases support for the West (Fiott and Parkes 2019).

A rich literature emphasises the important role of elite cues and ideological orientations for citizens' foreign policy views (Berinsky 2009; Zaller 1992). We argue that conspiratorial thinking also shapes citizens' foreign policy views. Conspiratorial thinking involves that citizens assume that a group of elite actors is conspiring against the interests of the "common people". We argue that citizens who engage in conspiratorial thinking withdraw support for an alignment of their country with other governments or international organizations. Seen from a conspiracist frame, any alignment or coalition is interpreted as an instrument of elites to act against the interests of citizens. We find empirical support for this mechanism. The effect of conspiratorial thinking is substantively meaningful. An individual who exhibits strong conspiratorial thinking is about 19 percentage points less likely to support a Western alignment compared to someone who exhibits no conspiratorial thinking at all. It increases a person's probability to support a balanced position by 21 percentage points. The effect of conspiratorial thinking is almost as large as the effect of other ideological orientations on foreign policy views.

Our analysis is a first step towards a better understanding of the relationship between conspiratorial thinking and foreign policy views. We see at least two avenues for future research. First, with respect to the prevalence of conspiratorial thinking (Douglas et al. 2019), our results raise a question about the extent to which conspiratorial thinking shapes foreign policy views in a wider set of countries and when context conditions are different. Our results suggest that conspiratorial thinking is an important variable that should be taken into account more widely in efforts that seek to develop a more comprehenseive understanding of citizens' foreign policy views. Second, our analysis examines a specific preference about the Western or Eastern alignment of a country, but there are a range of foreign policy views that could be shaped by conspiratorial thinking. In fact, conspiratorial thinking might be related to a set of specific foreign policy demands.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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