



# THE CONSPIRATORIAL MINDSET IN AN AGE OF TRANSITION

*Conspiracy Theories in France, Hungary and Slovakia - Survey Results*

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All errors and omissions remain our own.

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- Conspiracy theories should not be dismissed as a psychological problem that only affects a small minority – a subtler suspicion of political institutions and their power is far more pervasive.
- The current period of transition in Europe has resulted in increased uncertainty about national identities and a perceived loss of control. These are in turn the ideal conditions for the proliferation of conspiracy theories about the role of government.
- In France, Hungary and Slovakia, we found that very significant numbers agree that it is not the government that governs, but that someone else is pulling the strings. Respondents indicated that international finance, other countries and, especially in France, large media empires were the major conspirators.
- Demographic factors such as gender, age, education and employment are not the key determinants for these beliefs. Politics (especially party politics) matters much more than social status in shaping a conspiratorial mindset – a firm belief that conspiracies can be used to explain all sorts of events and decisions.
- Comparing survey results from France, Hungary and Slovakia points to a deep relationship between conspiracy theories, populism and democracy. A conspiratorial mindset and a populist mindset are connected to lower levels of institutional trust and reflect a significant concern about the quality of democracy in contemporary political institutions. Supporters of populist parties in France and Hungary are more likely to agree that the government does not run the country and that others are pulling the strings.
- The danger of conspiracy theories is not only the link between a conspiratorial mindset and undemocratic attitudes or populism, but also the link to xenophobic and anti-Semitic prejudices. There is evidence of substantial levels of anti-Semitic conspiracy theorising in Hungary and Slovakia. (This could not be tested in France.)
- The key to developing an appropriate response to the conspiratorial mindset is to appreciate how the roots of dangerous conspiracy theories can play a role in short-circuiting them. Merely unpicking the logic of conspiracy theories or debunking the theories and trying to dissuade believers is unlikely to have the desired effect. To challenge conspiracy theories campaigners should therefore be conscious of and address the deeper considerations underpinning them, including political transitions, perceived loss of control, institutional distrust, and populism.

## SECTION 1: INTRODUCTION

*I fear that a volcano of conspiracy is about to explode and that we are being lulled to sleep with a false sense of security.<sup>1</sup>*

Maximin Isnard, deputy in the French legislative assembly, delivered this warning two years after the French revolution of 1789. Partly instigated by the King's failed attempt to escape Paris in 1791, his words reflected widespread paranoia towards the royal government's actions. He and others believed that the central government was conspiring against the French people, threatening to undermine the revolution and leaving France exposed to foreign invasion.<sup>2</sup>

As the historian Timothy Tackett explores in his research on the period, the French revolution precipitated an onslaught of conspiracy theorising, both among the public and within the National Assembly. The roots of this paranoia, he argues, can be traced to the wider context of this crucial period of transition: to deep feelings of mistrust, uncertainty and changing identities.<sup>3</sup>

### The terrain of transition

Something similar is taking place today – not just in one place, but across a number of European countries. As we will attempt to show, current developments in Europe are setting the conditions for a concerning, potentially corrosive form of conspiracy theorising.

Our argument is simple. Europe is going through a period of transition. This transition is not just economic. For many European countries, how they view themselves; their culture, their place in the world; their economic, political and military power; their confidence in their own democratic institutions; are all in flux. With national identities changing or at risk of change, many Europeans are traversing a period of uncertainty.

This period is also marked by a growing conviction on the part of citizens that they and their representatives cannot really enact fundamental change on a large scale; that, while online they can sign petitions and campaign for specific causes in ways they could never do before, fundamental policy questions are, in fact, out of their hands. These widely held beliefs serve as a promising terrain for political paranoia and conspiracy theorising – for referring to particular groups as operating 'behind the scenes of' or 'above' government.

But our argument is also a moral and ethical one. While we agree wholeheartedly that suspicion and mistrust are natural, even reasonable, responses to a time of transition (and that vigilance is a required part of democratic accountability), we want to make clear that we think some conspiracy theories have the capacity to undermine core democratic principles. Anti-Semitic conspiracy theories, to give one example, are poisonous because they threaten the basic principle that citizens treat each other with equal concern and respect.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, a wider conspiratorial outlook – that sees malign forces in every institutional nook and cranny and that dismisses every official source as part of a giant cover-up – is at best unhelpful and at worst destructive at a time of a serious crisis of political legitimacy across Europe.

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<sup>1</sup> Tackett, 'Conspiracy Obsession in a Time of Revolution: French Elites and the Origins of the Terror, 1789-1792', p. 708

<sup>2</sup> Ibid, pp. 708-11

<sup>3</sup> Ibid, p. 712

<sup>4</sup> See for example, Krekó, 'The empire of conspiracy: the axiomatic role of anti-Semitism in the ideology of the Hungarian extreme right'. Also see Dworkin, *Taking Rights Seriously*.

The moral part of the argument will bring us to the relationship between conspiracy theories and populism. The structural similarities between the two ideas are clear – for instance, their glorification of ‘the people’ as the source of wisdom on the one hand (for populists) and as the target of malicious conspirators (for conspiracy theorists) on the other. So, too, are the similarities between their potential dangers: both populism and conspiracy theories lend themselves to simplistic, unconstructive debate and often fail to carry out what their advocates say they want to do, whether that is bringing politics closer to ‘the people’ or helping to implement more transparent, open government. In fact, populism often evokes and exploits conspiratorial perspectives. Populism uses conspiracy theories to support its Manichean worldview: dividing the world into Good and Bad.

At the same time, populism and conspiracies should remain conceptually separate. It would be an error to conflate the two: populism is a thin-centred ideology (or on some accounts a rhetorical style);<sup>5</sup> conspiracy theories are specific beliefs that at most form a constituent part of an ideology.

### Three case studies

This study is part of a wider project being carried out jointly by Counterpoint, Political Capital, the Center for Research on Prejudice, the Institute for Public Affairs, and the Zachor Foundation. The aim of the project is both to build a stronger understanding of conspiracy theories and rival political narratives – particularly those with a xenophobic or anti-Semitic foundation – and to explore through workshops and interventions how those that pose a danger to democratic values can be dealt with and, if necessary, short-circuited.

The report focuses on three countries: France, Hungary and Slovakia. The choice of countries – covering both Western and Eastern Europe – reflects our argument that the politics of transition is a pan-European phenomenon, not only characterising the post-Communist transition states of Central and Eastern Europe.

Our analysis will draw on survey results about conspiracy theories and related issues in all three countries. The questions asked in each of the countries were the same. The survey methodologies, however, were different, meaning that any comparison of the results should be treated with caution. In this report, we restrict ourselves to broad comparisons of patterns in the data from the different countries, rather than any direct comparing of figures. Each set of results from the surveys has been previously released, but it is in this report that we draw the findings together for the first time. Details of the three surveys can be found in the annex to this report.

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<sup>5</sup> See Fieschi, ‘Introduction’,

## Opening definitions

Before introducing our argument, we first give definitions for a few key terms used throughout the report. For the purposes of this report, we define ‘conspiracy theory’ using the ‘intuitive’ definition given by Cass Sunstein and Adrian Vermeule:

*A conspiracy theory is ‘an effort to explain some event or practice by reference to the machinations of powerful people, who have also managed to conceal their role’<sup>6</sup>*

This definition allows for a specific conspiracy theory to be true. Indeed, our critique of conspiracy theories does not centre on whether individual conspiracy theories are true or false. Rather, it centres on what we call a ‘conspiratorial mindset’,<sup>7</sup> a firm belief that conspiracies can be used to explain all sorts of events and decisions. The conspiratorial mindset may lead to correct decisions in certain cases – it hardly needs saying that some conspiracies are in fact real. But someone with a conspiratorial mindset is likely to often go wrong simply because their approach relies too heavily on conspiracy theories in the face of the available evidence. We label someone with a conspiratorial mindset a ‘conspiracy theorist’.

In line with the definition above, theorists have described conspiracy theories as being structured through three roles: first, the ‘conspirators’, the powerful people who have devised the conspiracy and have concealed their role to most of the public; second, those in the public who have been duped by the ‘conspirators’; and third, the small number of enlightened individuals aware of the conspiracy.<sup>8</sup>

According to the definition followed in this report, a belief that the government is not fully in control of the country is not in itself a conspiracy theory, because it can also reflect the view that the government’s powers are merely limited. For a full-blown conspiracy theory to emerge, power must at least be attributed to a particular source – a secret club or an individual megalomaniac, for instance. It is quite easy to imagine someone believing the government is powerless but at the same time recognising that the power is not located elsewhere. They might believe instead that no-one holds the amount of power that governments profess to have; that power has dispersed; that events are largely shaped by chance; or that complex and unpredictable interactions between individuals and institutions now form the basis for decisions, with no one dominant group being responsible. This perspective could be described as sceptical or disillusioned, but it is not conspiratorial.

In the main body of the report, we will at times talk about conspiracy theories in general, but often as part of our argument we will focus on conspiracy theories about the role of government. That is, we will focus on beliefs that suspect groups other than the government to be covertly controlling major political and policy decisions, with or without government collusion. Many conspiracy theories fall into this category – including anti-Semitic conspiracy theories that perceive Jewish leaders and organisations to hold enormous political power. We will make clear throughout the report when our argument refers explicitly to conspiracy theories about the role of government.

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<sup>6</sup> Sunstein and Vermeule, ‘Conspiracy Theories’, p. 4

<sup>7</sup> The choice of term here is controversial. ‘Paranoid style’ is often used (see Hofstadter, ‘The Paranoid Style in American Politics’) but has misleading connotations. The term ‘conspiracy mentality’ was also discussed, but we decided it was too deterministic – for more details, see Moscovici ‘The conspiracy mentality’.

<sup>8</sup> Counterpoint, ‘Conspiracy theories: a literature review’

## The structure of the report

The report is structured as follows. In the second section, we discuss how different kinds of transitions in France, Hungary and Slovakia have led to a commonly held feeling of powerlessness, drawing on survey data from each of these countries. In section 3, we look at how this feeling can then lead to a belief that certain actors are ‘pulling the strings’ of government from behind the scenes and what this means for the popularity of conspiracy theories about the role of government. In section 4, we explore the role of institutional distrust in the context of conspiracy theories. We also turn to the danger associated with conspiracy theories and their connection to populism and radicalism. Finally, we conclude with some recommendations and look forward to the final stages of the joint project.

## SECTION 2: WHY TRANSITIONS MATTER

A transition is a move from one stage to another. Transitions happen in politics all the time: between leaders after the results of an election; reform of public services; or changes to a country’s constitution. But sometimes transitions are deep and fundamental – they change how citizens perceive themselves, their society and their country. The countries in our study are undergoing a number of these kinds of transitions.

### Post-Communist transitions

The first transition we look at is the economic transition of post-Communist Central and Eastern European states. The transition has not just been to a different type of economy and politics – it has had a significant social and cultural impact across the region, transforming identities in the process. At times, this has resulted in new or reprised cultural conflicts.

According to the political scientist Bartek Pytlas, ‘nation-building processes in Central Eastern Europe have been marked by a constant (re-)shaping of the symbols of national identity’.<sup>9</sup> To illustrate this, Pytlas gives the example of the tensions between nationalists in Slovakia and Hungary – the former fearing Hungarian irredentism and the latter fearing for the Hungarian minority in Slovakia.<sup>10</sup>

The transitions to capitalist economies in Central and Eastern Europe in the past twenty five years have therefore had far-reaching cultural consequences. On their own, however, they have not necessarily led to a perceived loss of control. If anything, the opposite has occurred – freed from Communist institutions, the process of rebuilding has endowed people with more autonomy than they have ever had before. While uncertainty about identity runs deep – with new institutions, new social movements and new personalities leaving many questions unanswered – these transitions have by themselves not created a feeling of powerlessness.<sup>11</sup> But the picture changes when the post-Communist transitions are combined with other transitions across Europe. When the post-Communist transitions and the transitions discussed in the next section are taken together, we find that the consequences are both a feeling of uncertainty about national identities and a perceived loss of control.

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<sup>9</sup> Pytlas, ‘Radical-right narratives in Slovakia and Hungary: historical legacies, mythic overlaying and contemporary politics’, p. 164

<sup>10</sup> Ibid, pp. 171-81

<sup>11</sup> Bakacsi et al., ‘Eastern European cluster: tradition and transition’, p. 79

## Transitions and the EU

The European Union is a project that by its nature comprises a series of transitions. The single market, the Eurozone, and the constant development and evolution of supranational institutions through repeated treaty changes have transformed European societies. In addition, from the Second World War onwards the various waves of immigration across and into Europe have significantly altered the social and ethnic make-up of European societies.

As post-Communist Central and Eastern European states joined the European Union, the 'newcomers' were in most cases reassured to be part of a set of institutions that promised economic restoration and acceptance on the world stage. But now the EU is facing a further period of transition.<sup>12</sup> Calls for reform have grown steadily louder since the onset of the Eurozone crisis, with some demanding a partial return to the more comfortable confines of nation states and others insisting that the best course of action lies in further European integration. Europe appears to be at the initial stages of yet another process of transition – with the real possibility that some member states may even leave the European Union.

At the same time as Europe's transition, other 'background' transitions are taking place that are beginning to reshape Europe's position in the world, from the rise of other economic powers such as China and India to the increasing urgency for action on climate change. On top of these shifts in global power, the technological revolution appears to have weakened the authority of European governments further, at times rendering them impotent in the face of mass online mobilisation.<sup>13</sup>

## Further uncertainty

Transitions often lead to uncertainty – the next stage of a transition is likely to be different and unfamiliar when placed next to what came before, even if it is a clear improvement. But in the case of Europe the transition is doubly uncertain because the next stage is not just unfamiliar – it is unknown. The post-Communist transitions may well have sparked uncertainty, but they at least knew that they were transitioning to capitalist democracies. Today in Europe, a feeling of transition is mixed with a sense of confusion: the European institutions will change, but it is not clear what they will change into.

Moreover, these changes threaten collective identities. When Greece was close to leaving the Eurozone in 2012, this did not just represent a threat to the country's finances, but also to the narratives, myths and values that made up the country's identity. Similarly, a 'two-speed Europe' with a fiscal union for the 17 Eurozone members would have deep social and cultural consequences. The futures of national and European identities are unclear.

## Transitions and control

The transitions just discussed have not just had an impact on national and European identities. In some cases, they have also provoked a perceived loss of control; a belief that governments do not have the power to truly make policy. This has meant that decision-making both by individual states and at the European level seem insignificant in the face of wider crises. In the lead-up to the 2012 French presidential election, former President Sarkozy campaigned on his ability to steer France through stormy economic waters and to defend its triple A rating – yet within 100 days before the election, France's rating was downgraded.<sup>14</sup> Sarkozy was unable to fend off the markets. Rightly or wrongly, the impression was that

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<sup>12</sup> See e.g. Rendall, 'The EU opens its doors to Croatia'

<sup>13</sup> See e.g. Marek Beylin's description of mobilisation against ACTA in Beylin, *Przygody Polaków z demokracją*

<sup>14</sup> Deen and Fouquet, 'Sarkozy Dealt Blow 100 Days Before Election With French Loss of AAA Rating'

governments were at the mercy of wider global developments. In Hungary, the government depicts its actions against banks, multinational companies and the EU as a ‘freedom fight’ for national sovereignty and control.

## Who's in charge?

The results from the first part of our survey complement our argument about a perceived loss of control. In France, Hungary and Slovakia, we asked citizens whether they agreed or disagreed with the statement ‘Actually, it is not the government that runs the country; we don’t know who pulls the strings’.

**Table 1. Agreement or disagreement with the statement ‘Actually, it is not the government that runs the country: we don’t know who pulls the strings.’ (%)**

	France	Hungary	Slovakia
Agree (rather or totally)	50	42	63
Disagree (rather or totally)	39	36	25
Don’t know / no response /neither agree nor disagree	11	23	12

*Source: Political Capital/ Counterpoint/ Institute for Public Affairs*

In all three countries, the most common response was agreement.<sup>15</sup> Before continuing, we should clarify that these results do not prove that majorities believe in conspiracy theories in France, Hungary and Slovakia. This is for the simple reason that the survey questions do not explicitly refer to ‘the machinations of very powerful people, who have managed to conceal their role’. Instead, these findings reveal the nature and fertility of the terrain for conspiracy theories about the role of government – they suggest that vast numbers of citizens are sympathetic to the view that the government is not really governing, and explicitly leave open the question of who (if anyone) has filled this apparent vacuum of power.

One optimistic answer is that people believe that the technological revolution has given individuals power at the expense of the state. But while successful online campaigns by advocacy groups and individuals are testament to the ability of the Internet to create equalities in political power, it is hard to believe that individuals now feel the Internet has given them any significant power to, for instance, alter a country’s credit rating or contain and reverse global warming. For the most part, the transitions we have discussed in this section feel as if they are out of both government and individual control. The perceived transfer of power away from democratic institutions - and often towards unaccountable market forces - has led to individuals themselves feeling helpless too.

But the question of where, according to the public, power really lies is worth exploring further. Our analysis in the next section supports our argument by looking at who people in France, Hungary and Slovakia think is pulling the strings of government from behind the scenes.

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<sup>15</sup> We do not focus on the differences between countries as it is likely that they are in part due to methodological variations.

## SECTION 3: WHO PULLS THE STRINGS?

Drawing on psychological accounts, the historian Timothy Tackett describes paranoia (as applied to individuals) as ‘often characterised not only by a deep mistrust of others but by a mistrust of oneself: a weak and unstable sense of autonomy and an exceptionally frail sense of identity.’<sup>16</sup> As Tackett notes, this definition can be mapped on to nation states – where national or collective paranoia is characterised by a weakening sense of national autonomy (or self-government) and concern about the undermining of national identity.

The findings from the last section suggest that the onset of a new collection of European transitions has led both to a firmer belief that governments do not have control of their countries and a greater feeling of uncertainty about national identities. Many citizens are sceptical of their government’s ability to govern their country and fear for their national identity. According to Tackett’s description above, new transitions have therefore laid the foundations for a form of political paranoia.

In this period of flux, conspiracy theories can provide an odd source of comfort. It may feel better to live in a world full of familiar enemies – Jews, Americans, greedy bankers, liberals, cultural Marxists – than remain uncertain or powerless. Understanding the economic crisis as the machinations of a few sinister characters is more reassuring than trying to understand the structural flaws of economic and political institutions. Personalising abstract problems like financial crashes is attractive – and can be a form of ‘symbolic coping’ that invokes unknown and potentially sinister forces to reduce anxiety.<sup>17</sup> Without this human element, these problems remain too distant from everyday experiences and too difficult to comprehend. In this extended period of crisis, we have seen conspiracy theories about the European Union spread at breakneck speed.<sup>18</sup>

### Identifying the culprits

We have found that many people in our three focus countries believe that the government is not in control. But this still raises the question of who people believe are truly running the country. The next question in our surveys in France, Hungary and Slovakia addressed this head-on. In each country we asked, ‘Among the following groups, which ones are, according to you, those who control [France/Hungary/Slovakia] from behind the scenes?’, giving respondents the options ‘International finance’, ‘Some religious groups’, ‘Other countries that try to dominate us’, ‘Large TV networks and newspapers’, and ‘Secret groups such as the Freemasons’. (More details of the methodology for this question can be found in the annex to the report.)

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<sup>16</sup> Tackett, ‘Conspiracy Obsession in a Time of Revolution: French Elites and the Origins of the Terror, 1789-1792’, p. 712

<sup>17</sup> Wagner, Kronberger and Seifert, ‘Collective symbolic coping with new technology: Knowledge, images and public discourse’

<sup>18</sup> Péter Krekó, ‘Conspiracy Theories on the rise in Europe’,  
<http://www.opensocietyfoundations.org/voices/conspiracy-theories-rise-europe>

**Table 2. Among the following groups, which ones are, according to you, those who control [country] from behind the scenes? (multiple choice, %)**

	France	Hungary	Slovakia
International finance	77	37	56
Other countries that try to dominate us	44	23	32
Some religious groups	20	8	8
Large TV networks and newspapers	45	5	10
Secret groups such as the Freemasons	27	5	10
Others	0	2	6
None	8	22	3
I don't know/ I don't want to respond	1	24	22

*Source: Political Capital / Counterpoint / Institute for Public Affairs*

This second question in our survey deals more directly with the issue of conspiracy theories than the first. Here the respondent is asked to explicitly identify the ‘powerful people’ from our original definition. Further, by referring to control of the country from ‘behind the scenes’, the question implies their actions are covert. This in effect meets Sunstein and Vermeule’s definition of a conspiracy theory as ‘an effort to explain some event or practice by reference to the machinations of powerful people, who have also managed to conceal their role’. The event or practice is the running of the country. The ‘powerful people’ are (the individuals at the helm of) international finance, religious groups, and so on, who ‘conceal their role’ by operating from ‘behind the scenes’.

This does not rule out the possibility that these theories might be true, or that agreeing that some of these groups are running the country from behind the scenes is a rational and legitimate response. But it does point to the degree to which the public might be susceptible to the conspiratorial mindset, a lens on to the political world that sees betrayal and conspiracy at every turn.

## The reins of power

The first striking thing about these results is the sheer size of support for the different group-based theories. We refrain from comparing the figures from each country directly for methodological reasons, but it is clear that there is widespread backing for the belief that covert forces other than the government are holding the reins of power.

There is also a clear hierarchy of the different groups that are alleged to be in positions of power. ‘International finance’ is a clear first in all three countries, far higher than the other options. Given the salience of the financial crisis, it is unsurprising that international finance ranks highly. Even the rhetoric of some politicians has reflected the dominance of the market. Since the financial crisis, the language used about the markets has been notably anthropomorphic; the media use phrases such as ‘the markets are impatient’, ‘the markets are nervous’, or ‘the markets are recovering’. As a result, the response to the crisis has been couched in terms of how to placate the market. Politicians have justified unpopular policies by pointing to actors out of their realm of responsibility – ‘we have to do this because of ... the markets’.

By emphasising market forces as out of the hands of government, politicians have reinforced the idea that international finance is the foremost arbiter of policy.

‘Large countries that try to dominate us’ was also a popular option. This has particular resonance in Central and Eastern Europe where still simmering national tensions make the issue more salient. In particular, Hungary’s history of oppression (by the Turks, the Habsburgs, and the Russians) has resulted in an enduring sentiment that powerful international forces are controlling the country from behind the scenes. In Slovakia, Mesežnikov notes that ‘the so-called “Hungarian agenda” constitutes an important part of public and political discourse in Slovakia ... Slovak nationalist politicians frequently saw the notorious “hand of Budapest” behind some events, especially those related to the situation of the Hungarian minority.’<sup>19</sup>

In France, on the other hand, ‘Large TV networks and newspapers’ also ranked relatively high when compared to Hungary and Slovakia. This result may reflect the French media’s historical ties to the political sphere. Former President Charles de Gaulle maintained a tight grip on television, using it to broadcast government propaganda – in part because he was paranoid about opposition to the government in the press.<sup>20</sup> The current situation is different, but the French media is still not perceived to be an entirely autonomous institution, and some see it on a par with big business.

The other two options – ‘some religious groups’ and ‘secret groups such as the Freemasons’ – were chosen less frequently. It is promising that the results suggest that these options are less popular with the public, since on the face of it they are the most problematic conspiracy theories – they are the conspiracy theories historically most often associated with intolerance and paranoia.<sup>21</sup> Unfortunately, we were not able to break the category ‘some religious groups’ down further by religion in the case of the French survey, but results from the Hungarian and Slovakian surveys demonstrate that anti-Semitic conspiracy theories are dangerously widespread.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Mesežnikov, ‘“Hungarian threat” as conspiracy stereotype in Slovakia’

<sup>20</sup> Kuhn, *The Media in France*

<sup>21</sup> See e.g. Ruiz, ‘Fighting the International Conspiracy: The Francoist Persecution of Freemasonry, 1936–1945’

<sup>22</sup> In the Hungarian and Slovak surveys, anti-Semitic stereotypes were explored. Respondents were asked to express their agreement or disagreement (the five point scale was as follows: I totally agree, tend to agree, neither/ nor, tend to disagree and totally disagree) with the following statements:

- *Jews seek to extend their influence on the global economy.*
- *Jews often operate in secret, behind the scenes.*
- *Jews sometimes meet secretly to discuss issues important to them.*
- *Jews aim to dominate the world.*
- *Jews want to have a decisive voice in international financial institutions.*
- *Jews achieve their group goals by plotting secret agreements.*

In Slovakia about one third of respondents agreed (totally or rather agreed) with all the statements and about one fifth disagreed, whereas the percentages of DK (don’t know) and NA (not applicable) responses were also relatively high (ranking from 24 per cent up to over 30 per cent). It is interesting that the respondents did not make any differentiations between the propositions. Anti-Semitic stereotypes are more likely to be found among the supporters of nationalist parties. In Hungary, 36 per cent of regular Internet users agreed with the statement ‘Jews would like to rule the World’. We found a similar ratio (31 per cent) in the Slovakian sample. For the statement ‘Jews would like to control international financial institutions’, we found that 46 per cent of the respondents agreed in Hungary and 34 per cent in Slovakia. The results are not directly comparable due to sampling differences, but nevertheless reveal the widespread acceptance of these theories.

## Collective identities in danger

Our claim is that the onset of a number of transitions affecting countries across Europe has led to a period of deep uncertainty about collective identities. It has also meant that individuals feel neither they nor their governments have control over the most important decisions shaping their futures. These are ideal conditions for conspiracy theories about the role of government to flourish. Some of these conspiracy theories may well be legitimate; others are implausible but harmless. However, some risk encouraging intolerance towards minority groups. Any kind of intolerance is to be condemned, but a form of intolerance that treats its target as all-powerful, unaccountable and devious is particularly noxious.

Are there more general concerns, however, about the prevalence of conspiracy theories? In the next section we turn to this question by exploring who supports the conspiratorial statements from the three country surveys in our study. We focus in particular on the relationship between institutional trust, conspiracy theories and populist politics.

## SECTION 4: THE MORAL COMPONENT OF CONSPIRACY THEORIES

Our argument has focused on how the current period of transition has increased feelings of uncertainty about collective identities and a perceived loss of control – and how it may lead to the prominence of the conspiratorial mindset. But we have not taken into account the moral dimension of the argument. Why is the process we have described worrying? Here we turn to this question. To do so we explore which members of the public in the three countries are most inclined towards conspiracy theories.

### Scepticism everywhere

We turn first to demographic factors. But we find little evidence of consistent and strong correlations between political scepticism or conspiracism and gender, age, education level, religion, employment or income in the three countries in the study.

For instance, while in Hungary and Slovakia men were more likely to agree with the statement ‘Actually, it is not the government that runs the country: we don’t know who pulls the strings’, in France the gender gap for this question was very small.

**Table 3. Gender by agreement or disagreement with the statement ‘Actually, it is not the government that runs the country: we don’t know who pulls the strings.’ (%)**

	Hungary			Slovakia			France		
	Agree	Disagree	Don’t know	Agree	Disagree	Don’t know	Agree	Disagree	Neither/Refused/Don’t know
Male	58	42	18	78	22	7	52	39	9
Female	50	50	27	66	34	17	49	38	13

Source: Political Capital/Counterpoint/Institute for Public Affairs

There is also no strong evidence for a steady relationship between education level and the responses to the questions asked. In Hungary, we found that less access to education slightly increased the chances of agreeing with the ‘we don’t know who pulls the strings’ statement. In France, we found a weak correlation between education level and conspiracist attitudes in the same direction. In Slovakia, the opposite was the case: the higher the education level, the higher the support for conspiracy theories about the role of government. We found similar inconsistent and weak correlations for other demographic factors such as age and economic status.<sup>23</sup>

These results suggest that the conspiratorial mindset is a phenomenon that does not just have the potential to affect the most disadvantaged or detached in society. It speaks to wider political concerns. There is no one easily identifiable demographic group that can be picked out if we intend to respond to or debunk conspiracy theories about the role of government. Indeed, as this report has argued, conspiracy theories about the role of government are not an isolated problem but a symptom of a wider societal malaise, the consequences of a growing perceived loss of control and a belief that the future of the country’s identity is uncertain.

## Trust and distrust: the moral component of conspiracy theories

If demographic factors do not play an important role in explaining conspiratorial politics, what does? The analysis from Counterpoint’s report on France indicates that the conspiratorial mindset is deeply intertwined with institutional distrust, as well as distrust of other people. The report notes that:

*Those who think that democracy doesn’t work well, that politicians don’t care about people like them and who trust neither the left nor the right to run the country are far more likely to agree with conspiracist statements than others.*<sup>24</sup>

It is to be expected that the conspiratorial mindset and distrust are closely related. Returning to Sunstein and Vermeule’s definition, a conspiracy theory involves ‘machinations’ by people who ‘have managed to conceal their role’. Believing in a conspiracy theory therefore presupposes a belief that powerful people are lying – and this suggests a distrustful disposition. In other words, as Eli Sagan has noted, ‘the fundamental paranoid view is that the world, and those who people it, are untrustworthy’.<sup>25</sup>

While related, conspiracy theories are not the same phenomenon as distrust; instead a conspiratorial belief is an important subgroup of the category of distrustful dispositions. Distrust can emerge because the institutions that are responsible for managing public affairs are seen as incompetent or corrupt (serving their own private interests instead of the public good). The perception of conspiracy, based on the definition we use above, goes beyond either of these because it accuses powerful people of secretive plotting. Of course, these three types of distrustful dispositions can overlap: conspiracy may coincide with the incompetence and the corruption of these institutions – but not every institution perceived to be incompetent and/or corrupt is perceived to be involved in a conspiracy as well.

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<sup>23</sup> See Gombin, ‘Conspiracy Theories in France Interim Report’, for further analysis of the French case.

<sup>24</sup> Gombin, ‘Conspiracy Theories in France: Interim Report’, p. 27

<sup>25</sup> Sagan, *The Honey and the Hemlock*, p. 16, referred to in Tackett, ‘Conspiracy Obsession in a Time of Revolution: French Elites and the Origins of the Terror, 1789-1792’

But understanding conspiracy theories with reference to distrust is important because it brings out the moral dimension of our argument. According to the philosopher Katherine Hawley, distrust is not just the absence of reliance – we may for instance not rely on a faulty refrigerator, but that does not mean that we do not trust it. Hawley argues that distrust is a matter of commitment as well, giving the following definition:

*To distrust someone to do something is to believe that she has a commitment to doing it, and yet not rely upon her to meet that commitment.*<sup>26</sup>

We do not distrust the faulty refrigerator because we believe it has no commitment to working in the first place. On the other hand, in a (monogamous) marriage, a woman may distrust her husband if she suspects him of having an affair, because they have made a commitment to only be with each other.

When applied to institutions, this definition of distrust indicates that an individual who distrusts the government believes that it has made a commitment but does not rely on the government to meet that commitment. The commitment in this context is naturally understood as a democratic commitment – a commitment by the government to govern on behalf of the people it is meant to serve. For institutional distrust, the commitment not met is to an entire community.

On this analysis, if an individual distrusts their government they believe that because it has made a commitment it has a responsibility to govern democratically. The government in their eyes has committed a moral failing by not living up to this commitment. This is how institutional distrust involves a moral stance on the behalf of the distruster.

We have argued that there is a connection between conspiracy theories and institutional distrust, and that this distrust is morally rooted. But we can make the moral component of conspiracy theories more explicit. In the case of conspiracy theories about the role of government – where people other than the government are in control of the country from behind the scenes – the government fails to uphold its commitment to its citizens by allowing others to govern in its place. If the government does not rule, it manifestly (and *a priori*) fails to live up to its commitment to rule on behalf of the people. According to a believer in this conspiracy theory, this is a moral weakness on the part of the government even if it is not directly involved in collusion. Suppose, for instance, that someone believes that a rich and influential religious sect is making key decisions and the government is powerless to stop it. Even if the believer in this conspiracy theory does not think that the government is involved in the machinations, they will still think it is not living up to its commitment to rule democratically – and that is a moral deficiency.

This moral component in conspiracy theories is crucial to our argument. One reason we believe that conspiracy theories need to be taken seriously is that they reflect a significant concern about the quality of democracy. The findings of this study suggest that this concern is widespread in France, Hungary and Slovakia. The conspiracy theories we have discussed are underpinned by a deep and systemic distrust that is not compatible with a healthy democracy.

Conspiracy theories are symptomatic of the legitimacy crisis of representative democracies. As we have seen, the notion that the government does not govern is pervasive. Citizens believe that those they elect are not the real owners of power; democracy is instead a play where the director remains hidden. Populism, often building on conspiracy theories, is also a widespread response to this legitimacy crisis.

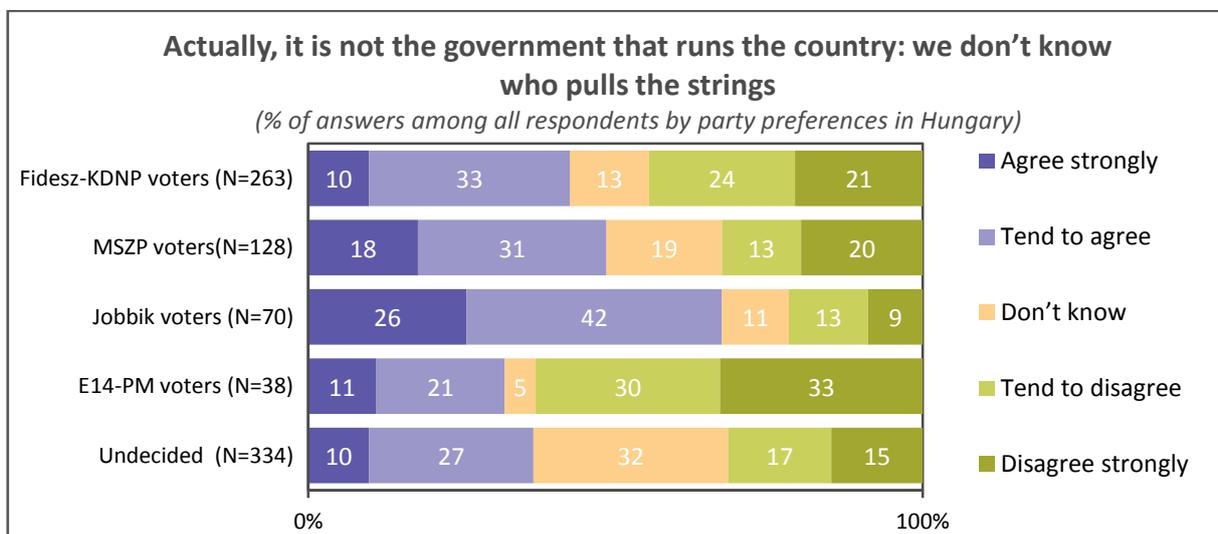
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<sup>26</sup> Hawley, 'Trust, Distrust and Commitment', p. 18

## The populist mindset

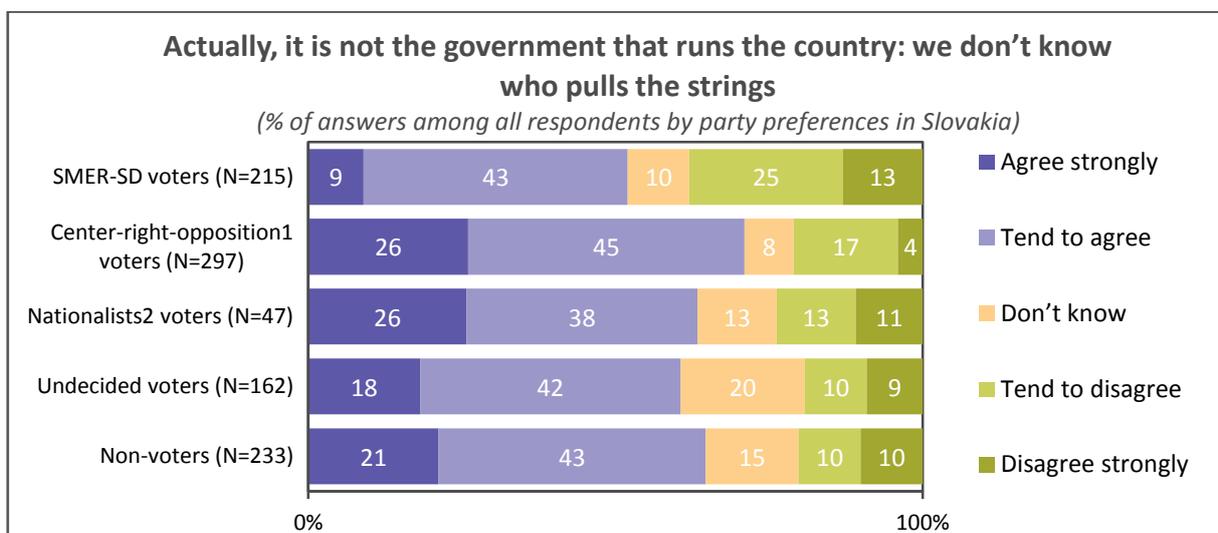
The growth of populism in Europe over the last 30 years is another political phenomenon connected to low levels of institutional trust. The results from our three surveys point to a relationship between conspiracy theories and populist politics. In France and Hungary, supporters of populist radical right parties – the Front National in France (or its leader Marine Le Pen) and Jobbik in Hungary – are more likely to agree that the government does not run the country and that others are pulling the strings. (Interestingly, however, in Slovakia members of the centre-right opposition are the strongest advocates of conspiracy theories). As we stated above, agreeing with this position is not sufficient to be a conspiracy theorist. But it does constitute part of the conspiratorial mindset, since it represents a step towards the second, directly conspiratorial statement that addresses who exactly is pulling the strings of government from behind the scenes.

**Figure 1. Party preference by agreement or disagreement with the statement ‘Actually, it is not the government that runs the country: we don’t know who pulls the strings.’ Hungary**



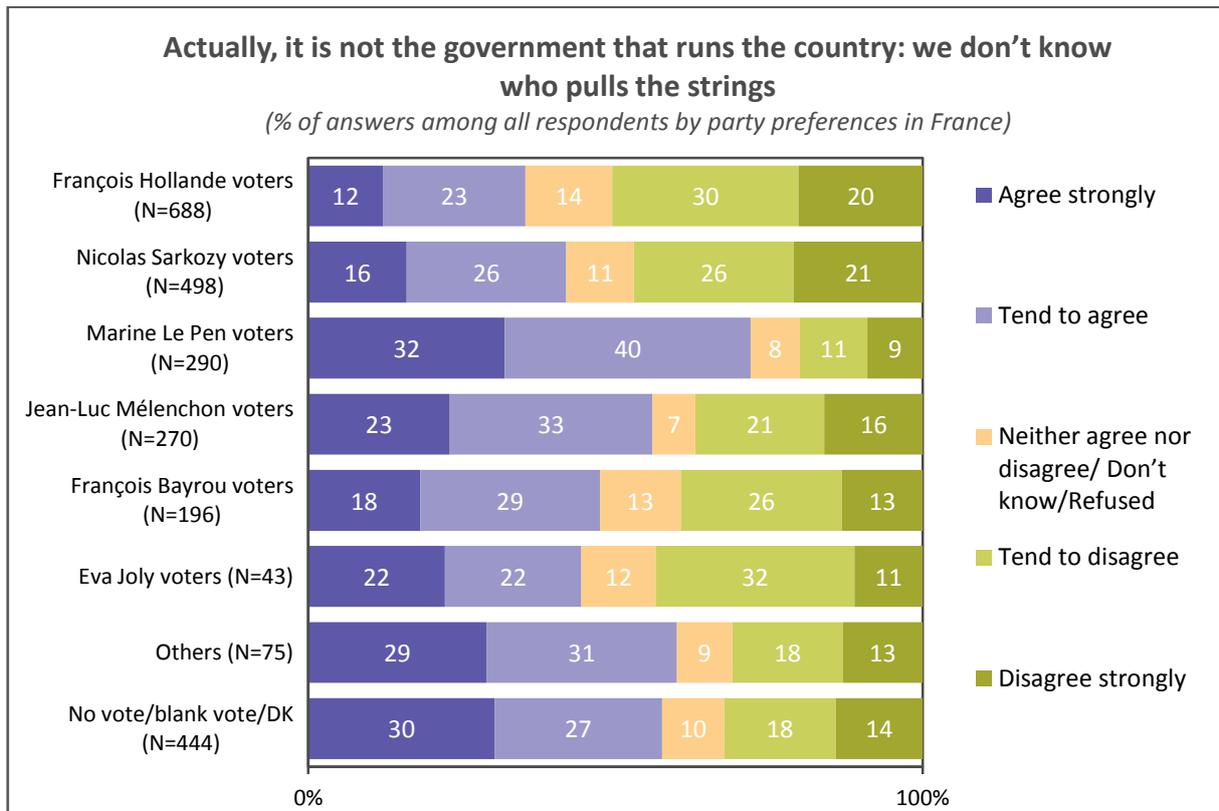
Source: Political Capital

**Figure 2. Party preference by agreement or disagreement with the statement ‘Actually, it is not the government that runs the country: we don’t know who pulls the strings’. Slovakia**



Source: Institute for Public Affairs

**Figure 3. Party preference by agreement or disagreement with the statement ‘Actually, it is not the government that runs the country: we don’t know who pulls the strings’. France**



Source: Counterpoint

Turning to the question that asks who is in control of the country, in Slovakia we find that 43 per cent of nationalist voters believe that ‘other countries that try to dominate Slovakia’ are controlling the country from behind the scenes (the percentage is lower among other groups). Nationalist voters are also more likely to believe that ‘large TV networks and newspapers’ are operating from behind the scenes.

In Hungary, Jobbik voters are the strongest advocates of conspiracy theories (including anti-Semitic conspiracy theories). In the Hungarian sample, conspiracy theorising appears to be strongly connected to anti-Semitism and other forms of prejudice. For the Hungarian radical right, anti-Semitic conspiracy theories play an ‘axiomatic’ role: they are taken as the final explanation for the world’s problems.<sup>27</sup>

In France we find a link between Front National support and agreement with conspiracist statements. This is particularly pronounced in the French case with respect to both ‘other countries that try to dominate France’ and ‘some religious groups’ – we find for instance that 33 per cent of Marine Le Pen supporters believe some religious groups are pulling the strings, compared to 20 per cent for the whole sample.

This comparison across the three countries points to the deep relationship between populism, conspiracy theories and democracy. In the introduction, we outlined the three-part structure of conspiracy theories: the three roles of the conspirators, the duped public, and the enlightened few. Populism is a complex concept and its definition has sparked much academic debate. But it can also be analysed through a three-part structure, with each role mapping onto an equivalent role for conspiracy theories: the corrupt elite

<sup>27</sup> Péter Krekó, ‘The empire of conspiracy’, Searchlight Magazine

(mapping onto conspirators); the virtuous people who they fail to represent (mapping onto the duped public); and the populists (mapping onto the enlightened few).<sup>28</sup>

As we argued for conspiracy theories, populism contains a democratic critique of contemporary political institutions. Just as believers of conspiracy theories argue that the government has failed in its democratic duty, populist leaders decry corrupt practices and call for democratic procedures that bypass representative institutions, intending to entrust power directly in the hands of ‘the people’. Conspiracy theories and populism share a moral component.

## A false corrective

We emphasise that these moral critiques do not make conspiracy theories or populism benign democratic forces. Catherine Fieschi’s analysis of populism notes that:

*Because it refers to notions of democratic accountability, populism is deeply related to democracy. And yet we should not mistake it for democracy—it is, as Margaret Canovan so aptly put it, something that grows ‘in the shade of democracy’, and that feeds off the dysfunctions of democracy, while rarely acting as the corrective which it claims to be.*<sup>29</sup>

The same applies to conspiracy theories. The conspiracy theories about the role of government we have discussed in this report are dependent on democratic principles and accordingly attract those who are frustrated with the government’s failure to live up to these principles. But this does not mean that conspiracy theorists have the answers to these problems. Many conspiracy theories are relentless in their targeting of minority groups – take for instance the ‘Eurabia’ conspiracy theory, which asserts that European governments are deliberately and covertly encouraging the growth of Muslims and Islam in Europe, or the conspiracy theory, popular with the Hungarian radical right, that powerful Jews are secretly orchestrating crimes committed by Roma in order to destabilise Hungary.<sup>30</sup> These conspiracy theories spread fear and suspicion towards targeted minorities and undermine the principle that we treat each other with equal concern and respect.<sup>31</sup> It is hard to treat someone with equal concern and respect if you suspect them of secretly holding enormous power, particularly if you believe they are using that power malevolently.

But even if we put aside xenophobic conspiracy theories, there is a more general difficulty with the conspiratorial mindset or, correspondingly, the populist mindset. As the above quote from Catherine Fieschi notes, while populism reflects the ‘dysfunctions of democracy’, it is not a constructive force – it may highlight problems but it also undermines the legitimate functioning of government through a simplistic and divisive form of politics. This is also true for conspiracy theories. In the introduction we defined the conspiratorial mindset as a firm belief that conspiracy theories can be used to explain all sorts of events and decisions. With this in mind, someone who adopts the conspiratorial mindset will tend to have a deep-seated suspicion of all political representatives. While some scepticism towards those in power is healthy, the danger of the conspiratorial mindset is that it incapacitates – its suspicion towards the political class (and others deemed to be powerful) undermines constructive solutions to democratic problems. For this reason, we warn against the conspiratorial mindset as a positive way to approach politics.

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<sup>28</sup> Counterpoint, ‘Conspiracy theories: a literature review’

<sup>29</sup> Fieschi, ‘Who’s afraid of the populist wolf?’

<sup>30</sup> Krekó, ‘Jobbik needs Jews to run the world’

<sup>31</sup> See Dworkin, *Taking Rights Seriously*

In this section we have discussed the moral component of conspiracy theories. There are two sides to this. First, similar to populism, conspiracy theories about the role of government are moral stances about the deficiencies of contemporary democracy. The prevalence of conspiracy theories is therefore a signal that perceptions of the quality of a country's democracy are dangerously low. Second, an obsession with conspiracy theories – characterised by the conspiratorial mindset – is itself an unconstructive option to the democratic issues exposed. In some cases, the conspiratorial mindset can even lend itself to xenophobia and anti-Semitism. The conspiratorial mindset is both symptomatic of deep problems with democracy and itself a problem that democracies need to face.

## SECTION 5: CONCLUSION

Throughout this report, we have argued that the current period of transition in Europe has resulted in increased uncertainty about collective identities and a perceived loss of control. These are in turn the ideal conditions for the proliferation of conspiracy theories about the role of government. We have also argued that these conspiracy theories should be taken seriously; that they potentially pose serious moral problems that need to be addressed, both by those in power and in civil society more broadly.

In light of this, we need to develop an appropriate response to the conspiratorial mindset. There are two potential routes to take. One is to address particularly noxious conspiracy theories head on; to undermine and debunk the theories and dissuade the believers. The other is to challenge the conspiratorial mindset by addressing the deeper considerations focused on in this essay: political transitions, perceived loss of control, institutional distrust, and populism.

On the face of it, neither alternative is ideal: the first route lacks sophistication and texture, while the second route appears to be too grand and abstract to be workable. But there may be a way of taking the most promising aspects from both routes. By following the first route and at the same time accounting for the other factors considered in the second, debunkers can add texture to their arguments against xenophobic or misleading conspiracy theories. Simply condemning the Eurabia conspiracy theory can often backfire. Often this approach side-tracks the most well-meaning conspiracy theory sceptics into long, fruitless debate. But if debunkers in their arguments also channel their awareness of the relevance of European transitions and the discomfort they have caused; and if they take into account the deeply held moral component of conspiracy theories and their relationship with institutional distrust, then we think they are likely to receive a far more sympathetic hearing. Appreciating the roots of dangerous conspiracy theories can also play a role in short-circuiting them.

The next stage of the project tests this approach through a series of workshops with journalists, practitioners and students in France and Hungary. We hope that the final stages of the project will highlight more proposals for building an effective response to the conspiratorial mindset.

## ANNEX: METHODOLOGIES OF THE THREE SURVEYS

### France<sup>32</sup>

The fieldwork for the survey was carried out by the company OpinionWay over the period 10-29 May 2012, shortly after the French Presidential election, using CATI (Computer Assisted Telephone Interviewing). OpinionWay interviewed a representative sample of 2504 people aged over 18 on the electoral register. The quotas used for the sampling were age, gender and the occupation of the head of household. The sample was stratified by region and size of the commune.

The survey asked two questions about conspiracy theories. The first question asked whether the respondent agreed or disagreed with the statement ‘Actually, it is not the government that runs the country: we don’t know who pulls the strings’ [‘Ce n’est pas le gouvernement qui gouverne la France ; on ne sait pas en réalité qui tire les ficelles’] with the options ‘strongly agree’, ‘tend to agree’, ‘neither agree nor disagree’, ‘tend not to agree’ and ‘strongly disagree’. If a respondent spontaneously said they didn’t know or refused to answer the question, the answer was coded as ‘don’t know’ or ‘refused to answer’ respectively.

The second question asked “among the following groups, which ones are, according to you, those who control France from behind the scenes?” [‘Parmi les groupes suivants, quels sont pour vous les groupes qui manœuvrent la France dans les coulisses?’] with the options ‘international finance’ [‘la finance international’], ‘some religious groups’ [‘certains groupes religieux’], ‘other countries that try to dominate us’ [‘d’autres pays qui cherchent à nous dominer’], ‘large TV networks and newspapers’ [‘les grandes chaînes de télévision et la presse écrite’] and ‘secret groups such as the Freemasons’ [‘des groupes secrets comme les Franc-Maçons’]. The list of options was first read out to the respondents. Each option was then repeated in turn, allowing the respondent to choose an option if they agreed with it. Each option was then coded as ‘true’ or ‘false’ in the dataset depending on the respondent’s answer. Multiple options were allowed. If a respondent spontaneously suggested a different conspiracy theory, this was coded under the ‘other’ option. If a respondent disagreed with all the options, the respondent was coded under the ‘none’ option. If a respondent spontaneously said they didn’t know or refused to answer the question, this was coded under the ‘don’t know’ or ‘refused to answer’ option respectively.

### Hungary

The research is based on an online survey by Tárki conducted between July 4 and 17, 2013. The sample was provided by Tárki’s 8,000-member e-mail data base (respondents had given their addresses at an earlier in-person poll). The sample received after the polling was post-weighted based on age, sex, education and type of settlement, with reference to Tárki’s 3-month combined Omnibusz database of Internet users aged 18 or older (they constitute 58 per cent of the adult population). Taking this group as the population for the survey, the new database of 1,000 people can be regarded as representative.

It is important to note in connection with the methodology that, on the one hand, sampling was not random, as from the population only those 8,000 people in the database could participate. On the other hand, due to the online nature of the survey, the socio-demographic profiles of the individuals could not be checked.

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<sup>32</sup> The data for the post-electoral research on the presidential election of 2012 was generated by CEVIPOF. The research was carried out by OpinionWay. The data will be held for consultation at the Sciences Po Centre for Socio-Political Data.

When comparing this representative survey with the whole adult population, it has to be considered that in the Internet representative sample, the young are overrepresented, while those over 60 only constitute 9 per cent of the people polled. As for the highest qualification, there is a significant difference in the distribution of the sample. Compared to the full adult sample, in the population using the Internet, the proportion with only primary school (1-8) education is one sixth; the proportion of those who finished secondary school is two and a half times larger, and the proportion of those with a university degree is one and a half times larger. Based on earlier research, both these background variables strongly influence opinions related to anti-Semitism.

The nature of the Internet sample is also important. A comparison of Tárki's earlier polls shows that frequent Internet users are slightly more tolerant than average, so we have no reason to suppose that the data about anti-Semitism presented here has a strong upward bias.

## Slovakia

The fieldwork data collection has been carried out by the agency Media Research SLOVAKIA, Ltd., using CAWI methodology (an online questionnaire). The sample was of N=1000 respondents, representative of the adult (18+) Slovak population. The sampling procedure was quota sampling. The survey was conducted in July 2013. Addressed respondents were taken from the Slovak national panel, a database of about 10,000 active respondents.

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