ON CONSPIRACY THEORIES AND DISINFORMATION AS THREATS FOR THE SECURITY OF THE STATE[1]

Radoslav IVANČÍK

ABSTRACT

The issue of conspiracy theories and disinformation is today not only the subject of numerous lay and professional discussions, but also the subject of security scientific research, as their dissemination is an inseparable part of information and psychological operations conducted by state and non-state actors to influence social discourse in an attacked society. Conspiracy theories and disinformation therefore represent one of the serious security threats for every democratic state, because their spread significantly disrupts the functioning of a democratic society, threatens ongoing democratic processes and undermines the principles on which democratic states are built. State and non-state actors abuse the current information and communication ecosystem and, to achieve their political, ideological, economic and other goals, they use various Internet portals and a wide range of social networks to spread conspiracy theories and disinformation. Their mass use makes their spread easier than ever before. This is also why the author's goal, using relevant methods of scientific research, is to contribute to the developing academic debate and to the deepening of theoretical knowledge about conspiracy theories and disinformation as threats to security of the state.
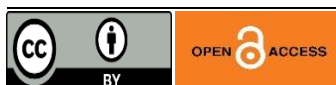
INTRODUCTION

Dynamic development in the field of information and communication technologies, the emergence and development of various digital platforms, web portals, applications and modern communication devices, together with the mass expansion and use of the Internet and social networks, have led to the creation of an information and communication ecosystem that is constantly developing very progressively.

On the one hand, this development brings a new range of possibilities to improve, speed up and improve the quality of communication and searching, receiving, creating and spreading information, but on the other hand it also brings a wide range of possibilities to abuse new, modern technologies, systems, devices, media and social networks for spreading various false, misleading, altered, distorted, untrue and/or completely fabricated information, news and stories in the form of various conspiracy theories and disinformation (Cíchová – Šišulák, 2019; Hajdúková et al., 2023; Ivančík, 2024; Zachar Kuchtová; 2022; Andrassy – Grega, 2015; Ivančík – Müllerová, 2022). Although their spread in some cases is just ill-conceived entertainment with the aim of making a joke at someone's expense or political satire, or is the result of ordinary human mistrust and doubt, in the vast majority of cases it is a carefully thought-out activity of state and/or non-state actors for the purpose of achieving predetermined political, ideological, economic and other goals (Ivančík, 2022; Hajdúková – Šišulák, 2022; Dušek – Kavan, 2024; Ivančík, 2023; Andrassy, 2022; Zachar Kuchtová, 2024).

Such activities and developments threaten the security of individuals, social groups and society. Many people - especially those who primarily use the Internet and social networks for communication and searching, receiving and sharing information - are strongly influenced by the misleading, distorted, altered, false or completely fabricated information, news and stories spread on them. These people are – in addition to several dangers and risks consisting, for example, in the theft and misuse of personal data and sensitive information, in the possibility of exposure to cyberbullying, harassment, insults, intimidation or blackmail, the development of addiction and depression, in the threat of mental health, in the reduction of the quality of interpersonal relationships, etc. – much more exposed to manipulation and influence through widespread conspiracy theories and disinformation. Under their influence, they gradually experience increased polarization and radicalization of opinions, support for manifestations of extremism, populism or xenophobia and/or growth of political, racial, ethnic or religious intolerance.

In order to contribute to the developing academic discourse and to the deepening of theoretical knowledge about conspiracy theories and disinformation as widely and often discussed phenomena of contemporary modern human society, and at the same time to point out the increasing risks and threats of their spread (especially through a wide network of various internet portals and social networks) on the security of a democratic society, respectively a democratic state, the author of the presented study deals with the issue in question. As part of the interdisciplinary research carried out, he uses relevant scientific theories, methods and concepts, mainly the analytical-synthetic method, theoretical, content, qualitative and comparative analysis, the theory of group polarization, the scientific method of studying documents, the method of theoretical generalization of knowledge, as well as other suitable methods and approaches. He is also based on published research and works of several domestic and foreign authors and current information from verified sources.

1 THE EFFECT OF ECHO CHAMBERS AND FILTER BUBBLES ON THE SPREAD OF CONSPIRACY THEORIES AND DISINFORMATION THROUGH THE INTERNET AND SOCIAL NETWORKS

Echo chambers and filter bubbles, which are two concepts very closely related to the way people interact and seek, receive and share information on the Internet and social networks, play – in line with group polarization theory[2] – a significantly negative role in the spread of conspiracy theories and misinformation and their impact on people.

Echo chambers represent an environment in which individuals' beliefs and opinions are reinforced through repeated interactions with other people who hold similar opinions or attitudes. This phenomenon usually occurs in groups or communities, where their members assure each other of the correctness of their opinions and confirm their positions. Echo chambers are characterized by:

a) homogeneity of opinions – members of the echo chamber share similar beliefs and opinions, which leads to the strengthening of these opinions and attitudes,

b) strengthening of beliefs – members of the echo chamber listen to the same opinions repeatedly, making their beliefs stronger and less prone to change,

c) social interaction – echo chambers are formed through social interactions, such as discussions on social networks, various online forums or group chats.

Echo chambers thus serve as mechanisms that reinforce prevailing group views and subsequently push the ideology of the entire group to more extreme and radical positions (Cinelli et al., 2021; McDonald, 2022; Gao et al., 2023).

Filter bubbles represent an environment in which algorithms and personalized services on the Internet and social networks filter and modify the content that is displayed to the user, based on his previous behaviour, preferences and interests. This process can gradually lead to the fact that the user is shown only those information and opinions that confirm his existing beliefs. Filter bubbles are characterized by:

a) personalization of content – algorithms use data on previous user behaviour to customize content, which may lead to the display of only that information that is consistent with the user's previous interests, opinions or purchases,

b) limiting the diversity of opinions – due to the personalization of the content, the user may see less diverse opinions and information, which may ultimately significantly limit his ability to see things from different points of view and form an objective opinion,

c) automated process – filter bubbles are the result of algorithmic decisions, not the users' own active choice.

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[2] The theory of group polarization is a concept used mainly in social psychology, which describes the tendency of groups to make decisions that are more extreme than the opinions of individual members of the group before starting the discussion. In other words, when people gather and discuss a certain opinion or position, their final shared opinion or position tends to be much more radical or extreme than the original opinions of individual group members (Nickerson, 2023).

On the basis of the above, it can be concluded that practically any opinion or attitude can be reinforced in the user by means of filter bubbles in such a way that only the information that supports his opinion or attitude is continuously presented to him. All contradictory information is systematically hidden from him using algorithms. When making any decision or forming an opinion, the user is relatively effectively manipulated by the fact that only part of the information is provided to him. This gives him the illusion of free choice or his own decision, but in reality, this is not the case (Hrčková, 2021; TechTarget, 2023; Bhalearo, 2023).

The key differences between echo chambers and filter bubbles, in terms of the mechanism of their creation, are that while echo chambers are created primarily through social interaction and active search for like-minded people, filter bubbles are created automatically through the algorithms used, which adapt content based on previous user behaviour and preferences. From the point of view of sources of information restriction, the basic difference is based on the fact that while in the case of echo chambers the restrictions are caused by the selection of people with whom the users themselves decide to interact, in the case of filter bubbles the restrictions are caused by preset algorithms that decide what content is displayed to the user. In terms of the level of control, the basal difference is based on the fact that while with echo chambers users have more control over who they interact with and what content they consume, this is not the case with filter bubbles. Their users have much less control over what is shown to them because the content is selected by the algorithms used (Flaxman et al., 2016; Brest, 2020; Chinyanganya, 2022).

In addition to the above, although echo chambers and filter bubbles are different concepts, they can overlap and reinforce each other. For example, algorithms can create a filter bubble by only showing content from like-minded people, which can in turn create or reinforce an echo chamber. Unfortunately, both of these concepts have serious adverse consequences not only for how people acquire, process, and share information, but also for forming their own opinions, their actions, behaviours, reactions, decision-making, and overall ability to think critically (Arguedas et al., 2022; Talamanca – Arfini, 2022).

The primary problem is that communication within different social groups is often one-way within a group of like-minded people. Social media users often respond exclusively to content that is consistent with the views and attitudes presented within a given group or community. On online social networking platforms, a user's personal inclination towards a particular topic can then be recognized in several ways, for example by the content they follow or by the range of recommendations presented by other users. Reliable sources of information are thus very often buried by fake clickbait[3] content.

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[3] Clickbait is a term used to describe online content that is designed to attract as many clicks as possible. This type of content often uses sensational or misleading headlines and images to pique curiosity and get users to click on a link. Although clickbaits usually attract a lot of attention, they often have very little informational value and can be considered unethical or misleading. The hallmarks of clickbait include: (a) sensational headlines that are often exaggerated, dramatic or shocking to arouse curiosity; (b) misleading information where the headline or introductory text suggests something that is not true or misrepresents the fact in order to attract as many

All of this makes it easier to connect people who believe the conspiracy theories and disinformation being spread. In addition, their dissemination today is greatly facilitated by the fact that such content is no longer spread orally in secret closed meetings or in the form of illegally printed literature, but these old ways have been replaced by modern communication tools on social networks (Enders et al., 2023).

2 THEORETICAL DEFINITION OF CONSPIRACY THEORIES AND DISINFORMATION

Since the issue of conspiracy theories and disinformation is today the subject not only of professional but also of numerous social discussions, in which many times there is a wrong definition, understanding or differentiation of individual terms, in the interest of successful implementation of scientific research and achievement of set research goals, it is necessary to have accurate definition of basic terms. The following subsections therefore define both key terms of this study – conspiracy theories and disinformation.

2.1 Conspiracy theories

Conspiracy theories have become one of the phenomena of contemporary modern human society in recent years. It would be difficult to find someone who has not met at least two or three of them in the past few years, but usually more. Conspiracy theories naturally existed in the past, but due to technical possibilities, they were not as widespread and popular as they are today. However, with the dynamic development of our civilization and technical/technological progress, primarily in the context of the x-fold expansion of the availability and possibilities of Internet connection and the massive use of a wide range of social networks and their interactive platforms, their mass dissemination, sharing, and better "visibility" gradually became much easier. faster circulation and increased popularity. The aforementioned - together with the growing number and expanding scope of topics that conspiracy theories relate to - has led to the fact that researchers' efforts to understand them have increased significantly, especially in the last decade, and conspiracy theories have become the subject of scientific research within several scientific disciplines.

In terms of defining them, the minimalist definition states that *"a conspiracy theory is a theory that involves a conspiracy"* (Pauly, 2022, p. 4). A somewhat broader definition refers to a conspiracy theory as *"a theory or explanation whose main component is a conspiracy among a group of actors"* (Pauly, 2022, p. 1). A slightly more extensive, but still rather weak, understanding of conspiracy theory is Keely's (1999, p. 116), according to which *"a conspiracy theory is an explanation of an event by the causal action of a group of people acting in secret"*.

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clicks as possible; (c) emotional manipulation, using emotionally charged themes such as fear, anger, shock or curiosity to elicit a response and get people to click; (d) incomplete information, where headings may be incomplete or intentionally vague, forcing the reader to click on a link to obtain complete information; (e) engaging images and graphics that arouse curiosity or shock (Hughes, 2022).

Keely later added to this definition that the group is small and powerful and has nefarious intentions. Although these additions create a better picture and a stronger definition of a conspiracy theory, they remain epistemically neutral, that is, they do not state that such an explanation of an event is implausible or otherwise problematic.

Similar definitions can be found in dictionaries and encyclopaedias. For example, the Oxford Dictionary (2023) characterizes a conspiracy theory as *"the belief that a secret but powerful organization is responsible for an event"*. The Cambridge Dictionary defines it as *"the belief that an event or situation is the result of a secret plan created by powerful people."* In the Encyclopaedia Britannica, the phrase conspiracy theory is defined as *"a theory that explains an event or situation as the result of a secret plan, usually by powerful people or groups."* Byford (2011, p. 21) similarly defines conspiracy theories, according to which they are *"attempts to explain the main causes of significant social and political events and circumstances by claims of secret plans by two or more powerful actors."*

As part of the research of conspiracy theories, definitions from other authors can also be found in the scientific literature. For example, Swami and Furnham (2014, p. 220) define them as *"a set of unfounded beliefs that lead a person to believe that the root cause of a certain event is a conspiracy of several cooperating actors, with a clear goal, often illegal and covert"*. Brotherton et al. (2013, pp. 12-13) characterize them as *"unverified and remarkable conspiracy claims that: a) defy a more plausible account; b) presuppose, in terms of their content, extraordinary malice and skill on the part of the conspirators; and c) are, in the sense of epistemic reasoning, based on evidence that is considered by legitimate epistemic authorities to be of poor quality and resistant to questioning or correction"*.

The above definitions of conspiracy theories differ only in certain small details. All of them uniformly aim to explain significant events with serious impacts on society, which are supposed to be behind a small, secretive and powerful group of people, to which Douglas et al. (2019, p. 5) also include the possibility that such a powerful actor is the country's government. Uscinski (2019, p. 48) goes even further when he states that scientists, non-governmental or religious organizations, or even foreign governments can be considered actors of the conspiracy. In addition to this clarification, he adds that *"conspiracy theories can explain events that have already happened, are happening now, or are yet to happen."*

Barkun (2013, pp. 3-4) adds three key characteristics of conspiracy theories in the context of the above definitions:
a) Nothing happens by chance: This perspective claims that the world works on purpose, rejecting the notion of accidents or coincidences. According to this view, all events are carefully planned and executed.
b) Nothing is as it seems: Conspiracy theorists believe that malevolent forces are constantly trying to deceive society. As a result, what may seem harmless is seen as a looming threat to world order.

c) Everything is connected: Based on the first two characteristics, this aspect assumes that seemingly disparate events and phenomena throughout history are inter-connected and form a coherent pattern that can only be discerned by diligent investigation.

Since conspiracy theories include all kinds of false, inaccurate, misleading, altered, distorted and/or fabricated information created, presented and disseminated with the intention of causing harm to the public or some social group, or for the purpose of obtaining political, financial or other profit, among conspiracy theories and disinformation there is a significant correlation. Both use false content, and both can harm an individual, a group, a community or in some cases an entire society. In addition, conspiracy theories can serve as a form of "legalization" of disinformation. With the method of telling conspiracy stories, disinformation becomes more interesting, more attractive, more receptive, more accessible and more viral compared to simple fake content. They support false claims, arouse emotions and shape experiences in relation to various significant political and social processes, phenomena or events.

2.2 Disinformation

From the point of view of definition, even in the case of disinformation, there is currently no single, unified and generally accepted definition of it, and therefore we can come across a relatively large number of definitions in the literature, differing primarily in the industry or area of society in which the disinformation occurs, or they apply. Despite their greater or lesser difference, the common feature of all used definitions is the fact that it is a deliberate modification of the provided information with the intention of influencing, deceiving or misleading the addressees of this information.

According to the Short Dictionary of Hybrid Threats (2023): *"Disinformation is verifiably false, misleading, or manipulatively presented information that is intentionally created, presented, and disseminated with the clear intent to deceive or mislead, cause harm, or secure some gain (for example, political or economic). Disinformation often contains an element that is obviously true, which gives it credibility and can make it more difficult to detect. Disinformation does not include inadvertent reporting errors, satire and parody, or biased reporting and commentary that is clearly marked as such."*

In the Encyclopaedia of Sociology (2017), disinformation is defined as *"any distorted, false information, used with the aim of influencing an individual or a certain group of people in a certain desirable way. Most of the time, it is mainly about creating a good or bad impression about a person, event, work, phenomenon, negotiation, etc. in the interest of political, ideological or even purely private interests. It is often aimed at influencing public opinion, while it may have already been created with such an intention, but it may also arise accidentally or for another purpose, which may not be explicitly disinformation (e.g. when*

it is caused by tearing a certain announcement out of its original context or placing it in other context)".

According to the Action Plan for Combating Disinformation, which was prepared jointly by the European Commission and the European External Action Service at the level of the European Union (hereinafter referred to as "EU") and which was subsequently adopted by the European Parliament, *"disinformation is provably false or misleading information created, presented and disseminated for the purpose of economic gain or deliberate deception of the public and may cause public harm"* (European Commission, 2018). The key element that is emphasized in this context in the document in question is intention. The North Atlantic Treaty Organization (hereinafter referred to as "NATO") views disinformation as *"the deliberate creation and dissemination of false and/or manipulated information with the intent to deceive and/or mislead, with disinformation actors seeking to deepen divisions within and between allied countries and undermine public confidence in elected govern-ments"* (NATO, 2020).

In the scientific and professional literature, one can come across several other definitions of the term disinformation, especially from authors who deal with the issue in their research or works. Based on the content analysis of several works, it can be generally concluded that individual authors generally characterize disinformation as *"false, inaccurate or misleading information that is deliberately disseminated in order to achieve mainly political, economic or other goals"* (Freelon - Wells, 2020; Wardle - Derakhsham, 2017).

From the point of view of the spread of disinformation, the expansion of the availability of the Internet and the mass use of social networks have given modern propagandists a very effective tool for the spread of disinformation. Information, and therefore also disinformation, can be spread by basically anyone at any time, while their truth or credibility of the spreader is not subjected to more or less any opposition or control. Disinformation spread in this way reaches any corner of the world practically at the same time and can spread like a global virus. In addition, they are quite often and deliberately created in such a way that this dissemination is even more supported, for example by using various sensational claims or extreme feelings, which are intended to arouse interest in such information in the reader (Shu et al. 2020, p. 4).

3 USE OF CONSPIRACY THEORIES AS DISINFORMATION MEDIA

Conspiracy theories and disinformation can have different uses and focuses depending on the target audience. In this context, it is true that they have a much greater destructive potential in those societies that are deeply polarized than in societies that are not so divided. A particularly suitable additive for the spread of conspiracy theories and disinformation in such communities is precisely the ambiguity that occurs in each of the groups or communities in a polarized society.

For this reason, actors who spread conspiracy theories and disinformation work very intensively to prolong such a state in society in order to ensure the longest possible duration of their effect. At the same time, they realize that the more support the conspiracy theories and disinformation spread by them get from the population of the affected society, the sooner they will achieve their predetermined political, ideological, economic or other goals.

In addition to disinformation, the so-called "information laundering". This is the process of legitimizing false, misleading or deceptive information through a network of intermediaries who gradually apply a set of techniques aimed at distorting it and hiding the original source (Rodríguez, 2020). Such information is gradually enriched and over time it becomes a conspiracy theory. That is why Kelly et al. (2024) refer to them as "deliberately false information that has been created to resemble legitimate news and gain maximum audience attention". The method of "laundering information" is used by several "formers of public opinion" who operate on Internet platforms and social networks. These "opinion makers" can be real people or hidden identities behind an account on Facebook, Instagram, Telegram, Twitter (now X), TikTok or another social network.

In the literature, such individuals are referred to as trolls. Authoritarian regimes such as Russia, Iran, China or Saudi Arabia have become the main troll powers in the social media sphere. They operate the so-called troll farms providing jobs to local residents whose role is to manipulate ongoing discourse and abuse freedom of expression (Rainie - Anderson, 2017). What puts them in the category of so-called "opinion makers", is their availability and influence on the audience (Rodríguez, 2020). Their opinion forming methods are very effective because different "opinion makers" focus on different topics in order to achieve the same goal. It is relatively easy to identify especially those trolls who talk about traditional values, children's rights, the danger of migrants, LGBTI persons, the "expansion" of NATO and similar narratives. However, when all these narratives are combined in the matrix of narrative analysis, they all evoke deep anti-European sentiments in society (Bateman - Jackson, 2024).

In conducted influence operations[4] using disinformation to support the spread of conspiracy theories, the primary goal is to clearly identify the "bad guys", or "those who are responsible". For example, during the Covid-19 pandemic, there were claims in China suggesting that the virus may have originated in the United States, when on March 12, 2020, Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman Zhao Lijian said on Twitter: "It could also have been the US military that brought the epidemic to Wuhan", thus directly influencing the formation of the conspiracy theory (Westcott - Jiang, 2020). Subsequently, Covid-19 began to be talked

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[4] An influence operation is a coordinated, integrated and synchronized activity with the aim of influencing the attitudes, behaviour or decisions of a target group of people so that they are in line with the interests and goals of the actor (SIS, 2023). Influence operations are the coordinated, integrated, and synchronized application of national diplomatic, information, military, economic, and other capabilities that are used in peacetime, crisis, conflict, and post-conflict situations to support an actor's interests and objectives and to influence attitudes, behaviour, and decisions. target audience (Brangetto – Veenendaal, 2016).

about as a biological weapon, and this narrative later developed into anti-vaccination campaigns involving both traditional and modern conspiracy stories (Saiful et al., 2021).

Conspiracy theories and disinformation regarding the coronavirus spread rapidly, fuelled by government-backed campaigns from Russia, Iran, and China that blamed and attacked the United States as the source of the pandemic (Tucker, 2020). It is noteworthy that these campaigns only targeted vaccines from Western manufacturers such as Pfizer/BioNTech, Moderna, AstraZeneca or Janssen, and not Russian and Chinese vaccines from Moscow's Gamalev Institute or Chinese companies Sinopharm and Sinovac. Anti-vaccination campaigns and stories about biological weapons were other aspects of information operations aimed at undermining trust in European democratic societies. As a result, many citizens of Central and Eastern European countries believed conspiracy theories and disinformation about the origin and spread of the coronavirus (for example, how the number of deaths from the coronavirus is artificially overestimated, how information about serious adverse effects of vaccination is deliberately withheld, or how nanoparticles get into our bodies with vaccines, through which governments will monitor us and control society, etc.) (graph 1). The spread of such conspiracy theories subsequently stimulated numerous protest demonstrations in several European countries against vaccination, but especially against the measures taken to protect public health. Conspiracy theories can thus be considered as a certain form of disinformation carrier whose purpose is to influence the target audience and induce the desired behaviour and reactions in them (European Commission, 2020; Aïmeur et al., 2023, Enders et al., 2023).
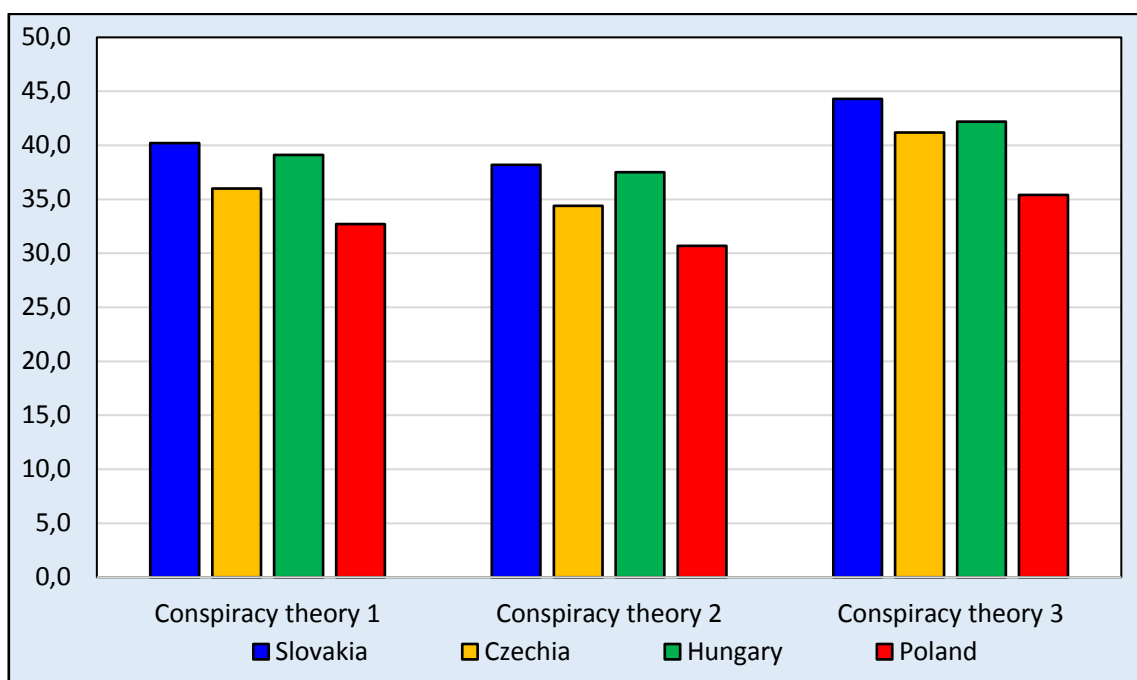
Graph 1 Trust of the residents of the V4 countries in conspiracy theories regarding Covid-19 (in %)
Source: Slovak Academy of Sciences, 2024

Note:
Conspiracy Theory 1: The Covid-19 pandemic was part of a larger plan to control society.
Conspiracy Theory 2: During the coronavirus pandemic, reports of the death toll from Covid-19 were artificially overestimated.
Conspiracy Theory 3: During the pandemic, information about the serious harmful consequences of vaccination against the Covid-19 disease was deliberately withheld.

To supplement the information regarding the data from graph 1, it can be stated that 56% of respondents in Slovakia consider at least one of these conspiracy theories to be true (28.9% of respondents consider all three theories to be true), in the Czech Republic 54% (all three theories is considered true by 23.7% of respondents), in Hungary as well as in Slovakia 56% (25.8% of respondents consider all three theories to be true), and in Poland 48% (all three theories are considered true by 20.6% of respondents). At the same time, it is true that young people under the age of 30 and university-educated respondents believe the least in conspiracy theories about the pandemic, while those research respondents who subjectively describe their household income situation as bad believe the said conspiracy theories the most. In terms of political preferences in Slovakia, the Czech Republic and Poland, agreement with conspiracy theories about the pandemic is significantly related to the declared electoral support of individual political camps. While in Slovakia the voters of the current coalition believe significantly more in the conspiracy theories in question, in the Czech Republic and Poland the voters of the current opposition. In Hungary, voters of the government movement do not differ significantly from voters of other political parties and movements (SAV, 2024).

4   CONSPIRACY THEORIES AND DISINFORMATION AND THEIR IMPACT ON SECURITY OF THE STATE

Although traditional security threats still exist, hybrid threats are currently more prevalent (Lisoň – Fidler, 2022), which also includes the spread of conspiracy theories and disinformation within the framework of conducting cyber, information and psychological operations against the attacked society (Ivančík, 2023). For example, in the context of the illegal Russian military aggression against Ukraine, it can be observed that the Russian Federation makes full use of disinformation and conspiracy theories to influence the public discourse about Ukraine (Türk – Loewen, 2022). An example can be the fact that in several European countries – due to the presence of Russian propaganda – a full social consensus was not reached regarding the introduction of sanctions packages against the aggressor regime in the Kremlin (EU, 2024). This only confirms that "public opinion" - influenced by the spread of various conspiracy theories and disinformation - "can really be a weapon and at the same time ammunition for this weapon" (Vilmer et al., 2018).

The responsibility for making political decisions is – or at least should be – fully in the hands of those who make decisions (government, parliament, etc.), but in no case should we underestimate the social environment influenced by widespread conspiracy theories and disinformation (Colomina, 2022).

If the ability to make competent decisions by responsible state bodies and institutions is impaired, the security of the state is also impaired (Belan – Uchaľ, 2018). It is defined precisely by the ability to implement decisions and measures in the field of state security in accordance with national interests and values. If we look at the provisions of the Treaty of Westphalia from 1648, which presents the state as a dominant representative in international relations and practically limits its existence only by the power of other states, we come to the conclusion that states exist only as long as they can guarantee their existence and autonomy by their own power (Mann, 1984; Barker, 1990; Paterson, 1992). It is this postulate about the existence of the state that is undermined by the spread of disinformation and conspiracy theories and directly affects the loss of state autonomy and the overall security of the state[5] (Colomina, 2022).

CONCLUSION

Conspiracy theories and disinformation currently represent one of the biggest security threats for every democratic state, because their spread significantly disrupts the functioning of a democratic society, threatens democratic processes, undermines the principles and principles on which a democratic society is built, leads to a decrease in trust in democratic institutions , causes uncertainty, mistrust, fear and chaos among people, increases the polarization of society, supports populism, radicalism, extremism, xenophobia and political, racial, religious and ethnic hatred, thereby directly undermining the security of the state and making the state vulnerable to external influences. Over time, the attacked state loses its decision-making sovereignty and gradually becomes a puppet in the hands of the aggressor state.

State actors, as well as non-state actors, to achieve their stated political, ideological, economic and other goals through spread of conspiracy theories and disinformation, currently primarily use various Internet portals and a wide range of social networks.

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[5] In the professional literature, several existing definitions of security of the state refer to it as the ability to preserve its sovereignty, decision-making autonomy and physical integrity, to maintain its economic relations with the rest of the world under reasonable conditions, to protect its nature, institutions and establishment from outside interference, on the ability to control borders; or as the state's ability to protect the vital values and interests of society alone or together with other states or organizations from external and internal threats and to create conditions for the political, economic, social and cultural development of society. Or they define the security of the state as a state when the state does not have to sacrifice its legitimate interests to avoid war and is able, if attacked, to maintain them by war. And they also define it as the absence of threats to acquired values and the subjective absence of fear that these values will be attacked. (Romm, 1993; Watson, 2008; Stuart, 2009; Koudelka, 2016; Hofreiter – Šimko, 2024)

These, especially in recent years, represent one of the most dynamically developing segments within the communication and information technology sector. Over the course of a few years, they have undergone many significant changes. From small, scattered local community websites, several have evolved into consolidated companies with global reach and influence. Due to their mass use, they have a huge impact on human behaviour, actions, thinking and reactions.

With the development of interactivity and functions of individual social network platforms, the motivations of users to engage in discussions on social networks have also changed over time. The original, purely "social" motivation has been replaced by other motivations, such as the search for information, the provision of which has brought these platforms much closer to traditional media. In this information and communication ecosystem, a dramatic change has gradually occurred, which can be called the weaponization[6] of social networks, which means the transformation of social networks into a battlefield where hostile hybrid activities aimed at target audiences and carried out in the gray zone between peace and war take place.

Due to their exceptional properties, such as global reach, high availability, low costs, huge volume and speed of information exchange, and to some extent still relatively high anonymity of information spreaders and their users, social networks are attractive to a wide range of state and non-state actors with hostile agendas, which also include the spread of various conspiracy theories and disinformation. Paradoxically, what was initially a great advantage has become a visible weakness. Platforms that were born as "social" have become the site of a large number of activities, many of which are clearly anti-social in nature.

Based on the above, social networks can be called, from a certain point of view, a battlefield where there is an intense battle for the hearts and minds of people. It is a battlefield where various military, but above all non-military strategies and tactics can be observed and the use of tools such as – in addition to conspiracy theories and disinformation – also propaganda, hoaxes and/or fake news, threatening opponents, mobilizing supporters, coordinating actions and activities etc. The dynamic development of modern information and communication technologies, systems and devices play an extremely important role, thanks to which all these activities are easier, faster and more efficient.

In this context, the question arises as to what a democratic state can do, what measures it can take to be able to effectively and efficiently counter hostile activities on the Internet and social networks and, in general, hybrid threats directed against it, since adversaries do not follow the same legal rules and ethical principles as democratic societies and do not even share the same democratic values.

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[6] Weaponization is a term denoting the use of non-military means as weapons to achieve power goals. When a social network or information space is weaponized, it involves attacking the target group with hostile information, mobilizing members of the target group, as well as conducting information operations with the aim of influencing the behaviour, attitudes, moods and opinions of the target group. (NBÚ, 2024)

Moreover, while adversaries in the form of various state and non-state actors are cunning, fast, flexible and adaptable due to the special nature of their organization, establishment and functioning, democratic states and institutions are obliged to follow legal procedures, usually with lengthy decision-making processes.

Social networks, as it turns out, today represent a very effective and efficient tool for manipulating the population on a mass scale. Their current mass use makes it easier than ever for state and non-state actors to spread conspiracy theories and disinformation in order to reach their political, ideological, economic and other gaols. This is also why it is very important not only to continue research in this area, but to deepen it even more. The achieved research results should contribute to making it impossible to use or abuse social networks as a hybrid weapon to influence people's thinking, actions, behaviour and reactions and to disrupt and threaten the democratic processes taking place in a democratic society.

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Col. GS (ret.) Assoc. Prof. Dipl. Eng. Radoslav IVANČÍK, PhD. et PhD., MBA, MSc.
Academy of the Police Force
Sklabinská 1, 835 17 Bratislava
tel.: 09610 57490
e-mail: radoslav.ivancik@akademiapz.sk