

POLITICAL POTENTIAL OF CONSPIRACY THEORIES. A STUDY OF POLAND AND SLOVENIA

The year 2020 has become an unusual year for societies because of the extremely difficult and new pandemic situation that all countries have had to face. The pandemic has affected almost every area of people's lives. The restrictions imposed by governments have significantly limited constitutional civil liberties, generating reactions important from the point of view of the political system and built on the wave of the emotions associated with the pandemic – fear, anger, exasperation and helplessness. New social movements have begun to emerge and existing ones have started to become active, channelling these emotions and ensuring the fulfilment of needs whose satisfaction was undermined. This project focuses on a particular section of these bottom-up initiatives, namely movements based on conspiracy theories. Conspiracy theories are defined as explanatory beliefs about a group of actors that collude in secret to reach malevolent goals. In times of crisis, people are more likely to support such theories. This way of thinking clearly works in situations that are difficult to explain and do not provide acceptable solutions to an overwhelming situation in a foreseeable perspective.

The pandemic situation has activated most strongly three movements based on conspiracy theories, to be studied in the presented project: (1) anti-COVID; (2) anti-5G; and (3) anti-vaccine. What connects them is the SARS-CoV-2 virus. In the case of anti-COVID movements, its appearance triggered a wave of speculation addressing various aspects, starting from doubts about the source of the virus, and going as far as challenging its very existence. The work on the vaccine and the perspective of mass vaccinations (also mandatory according to some proposals) have given the anti-vaccine movements new energy. The development of the 5G technology, on its part, has been the reason for accusing it of causing the pandemic as such and of the health impacts identified with COVID-19.

The purpose of the grant is to investigate the political potential of conspiracy theorists. From the point of view of the party system, we will be interested in whether these initiatives will be adapted politically. If this is the case, we want to investigate the personal, social and systemic sources of their political appeal, and if they remain outside the realm of relevant politics, we intend to investigate the reasons for the failure to tap their potential. It should be emphasised that most empirically documented effects of conspiracy theories are related to behaviours being their logical consequence, for example the refusal to have children vaccinated is a response to the theory that vaccines have undisclosed harmful impacts on health. On the other hand, as far as the impact on the party system is concerned, the consequences (or the direction) of other conspiracy theories, concerning for instance the purported implantation of microchips with COVID vaccines or the intentional creation of the SARS-CoV-2 virus in a medical laboratory, are unknown.

The research will be conducted in a comparative perspective. Poland and Slovenia have been chosen due to their different political and social references, taking into account in particular the size and the social structure of both countries. Poland is the largest, and Slovenia is the smallest country among the post-communist states in Central Europe. Poland is a country with a homogeneous ethnic structure, while the role of national minorities is much greater in Slovenia. Finally, due to its geographical location, Poland seems to draw much more interest on the part of Russia, which informally supports movements based on conspiracy theories, treating them as a tool for the internal destabilisation of countries. This will make it possible to investigate whether the factors identified diversify the existence and the political prospects of such movements. The research will be carried out in the years 2022–2025. This is a time of intense electoral activity both in Poland and in Slovenia, which we suppose will support the achievements of the project's objective. Elections in Slovenia: presidential (2022); parliamentary (2022); local government (2022) European Parliament (2024). Elections in Poland: parliamentary (2023); local government (2023); European Parliament (2024), presidential election (2025).