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CONSPIRACY BELIEFS ACROSS EUROPE

“Scientists manipulate evidence, and a small secret group of people is responsible for making all major decisions in world politics...” The latest European Social Survey sheds light on the widespread prevalence of conspiracy beliefs.

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The European Social Survey (ESS) is one of the world's largest and most important comparative studies of societal attitudes. Surveys are conducted in dozens of European countries at the same time, gathering data from large and representative samples of their populations. Respondents from all the participating countries answer identical questions, presented in their native languages. These surveys take place every two years, and one of their distinguishing features is a strong commitment to ensuring methodological precision throughout the research process, following strict procedures – from translating the questionnaires into the different national languages, to selecting participant samples, training interviewers, implementing the survey in the field, and finally, processing the collected data. This not only ensures the ESS's role as a valuable data source but also establishes methodological benchmarks for similar survey research. Moreover, in line with the principles of open science, the survey's data are freely accessible to all interested researchers.

Among the leading topics addressed in the recently-concluded tenth round of the survey was conspiracy thinking. Participants from 31 different European countries (not only EU member states) were asked to what extent they agreed with selected statements

indicative of conspiracy thinking. The survey also examined how such beliefs might influence behaviors, especially regarding adherence to measures aimed at mitigating the COVID-19 (C-19) pandemic, and sought to identify factors contributing to the rise of conspiracy thinking. However, it is important to bear in mind that the scope of this study is quite broad, with conspiracy thinking being just one of many topics explored.

The decision to include questions relating to conspiracy thinking was driven by multiple factors. Firstly, there was a desire to gauge the prevalence of this phenomenon across different European countries. Secondly, researchers wanted to better understand the social implications of conspiracy-oriented thinking. Of particular interest was whether such beliefs might lead to a refusal to follow official recommendations (from authorities on various levels) designed to cope with crisis situations. As the survey was carried out in the latter stages of the C-19 pandemic (the second half of 2021 and first half of 2022), the questions also touched upon pandemic-related issues, including people's willingness to get vaccinated. The assumption was that conspiracy thinking might manifest as resistance to vaccination.

A staged pandemic?

This edition of the European Social Survey (ESS) posed the question: “How much do you agree or disagree with the following statement: coronavirus is the result of deliberate and concealed efforts of some government or organization?” Respondents had the option to answer this question by choosing



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from the following responses: (1) strongly agree, (2) agree, (3) neither agree nor disagree, (4) disagree, (5) strongly disagree. Among Polish participants (a sample size of 2,065 individuals), 26% agreed with this statement, with 8% strongly agreeing. Conversely, 33% of respondents disagreed. Should those percentages be viewed as large or small? To put them into context, let's compare Poland's responses to those from other European nations.

Residents of Scandinavian countries showed the least agreement with this perspective, notably Swedes (7% agreement), Norwegians (8%), Icelanders (10%), and Finns (11%). Similarly, this viewpoint was relatively rare in Western European countries, such as the Netherlands (10%), Germany (13%), and Belgium (16%). On the opposite end of the spectrum were residents of the Balkan Peninsula. Over half of the respondents in Bulgaria (58%) and North Macedonia (52%) shared the belief that the coronavirus is the intentional result of actions on the part of some government or organization. In countries like Serbia (38%), Croatia (38%), Slovenia (35%), and Slovakia (39%), more than one-third of respondents agreed with this sentiment. As for Poland, in this comparison it falls at the European median – with the proportion of those endorsing conspiracy theories in Poland akin to that found in the UK, Italy, Ireland, or Estonia.

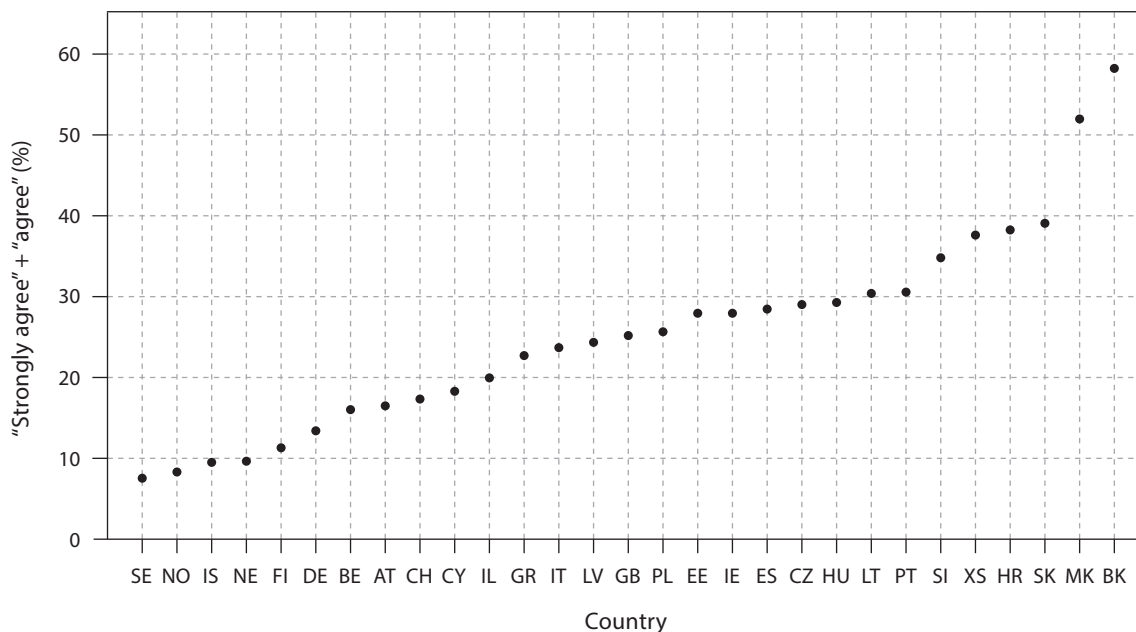
Manipulative scientists

Two additional questions focused on general conspiracy theories, not specifically related to C-19. Respondents were queried on their level of agreement with the statements: “Groups of scientists manipulate,

fabricate, or suppress evidence in order to deceive the public” and “A small secret group of people is responsible for making all major decisions in world politics.” In Poland, 27% of respondents agreed with the first statement (with 6% agreeing strongly), while 31% disagreed (8% strongly). A significant portion of Poles had no definitive stance on this issue, with 42% not expressing any clear opinion. Concerning the second statement, which referred to a secretive group making the most critical global political decisions, a larger share of Poles concurred. The existence of such a group was acknowledged by 37% of respondents (with 10% agreeing strongly), whereas 22% of Polish respondents disagreed (7% strongly). The remaining 41% were undecided on the issue.

The distribution of general conspiracy theories in Europe to some extent mirrors the patterns seen with C-19 related conspiracy theories. Such opinions are least prevalent in Scandinavian and Western European countries, such as Sweden, Norway, Finland, Iceland, as well as Germany, the Netherlands, and Austria. Conversely, they are most widespread in the Balkan countries and Slovakia. Portugal also notably harbors a relatively high occurrence of general conspiracy-mindedness. Note that the disparities between countries at the spectrum's extremes, regarding the presence of conspiracy theories, are quite stark! For instance, in Sweden, Norway, and Germany, the percentage of those agreeing that scientists fabricate evidence stands at 6%, 14%, and 13% respectively, while in countries like North Macedonia, Bulgaria, and Croatia, the figures soar to 52%, 49%, and 39%. The belief that the world is controlled by a small, secretive group is held by just 7%, 11%, and 12% in Sweden, Norway, and Germany

Coronavirus is the result of deliberate and concealed efforts of some government or organization



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 - IE – Ireland
 - IS – Iceland
 - IL – Israel
 - LT – Lithuania
 - LV – Latvia
 - MK – North Macedonia
 - DE – Germany
 - NO – Norway
 - PL – Poland
 - PT – Portugal
 - XS – Serbia
 - SK – Slovakia
 - SI – Slovenia
 - CH – Switzerland
 - SE – Sweden
 - HU – Hungary
 - GB – United Kingdom
 - IT – Italy

respectively, as opposed to as much as 60%, 57%, and 51% in North Macedonia, Bulgaria, and Croatia. Thus, in Scandinavian countries, conspiracy theories are relatively minimal, existing within a certain segment of their societies but not widely endorsed. The situation in the Balkans is starkly different, with a majority or near-majority of the population in countries there concurring with these beliefs – indicating that, within the Balkan context, skepticism towards conspiracy theories is a minority viewpoint. As for Poland, it again occupies a middle ground in Europe in terms of general conspiracy theories. However, it’s noteworthy that in terms of belief in an alleged small, secretive group dictating global politics, Poland aligns more closely with Balkan countries than with Western Europe.

Consequences of conspiracy thinking

As I previously mentioned, the ESS study not only aimed to gauge the prevalence of conspiracy thinking but also sought to explore the consequences associated with this mindset. Specifically, the ESS data sheds light on the link between conspiracy thinking and the avoidance of C-19 vaccinations. Across the countries studied, this correlation was consistently strong and positive. The greater an individual’s endorsement of conspiracy theories, the lower their likelihood of being vaccinated. For instance, in Poland, the likelihood of receiving a C-19 vaccine among those who rejected conspiracy theories stood at over 90 percent, whereas it dropped to 65 percent among those who embraced such views. This straightforward finding underscores

the profound impact conspiracy thinking can have on how societies function, particularly during times of threat when adherence to official health guidelines is critical.

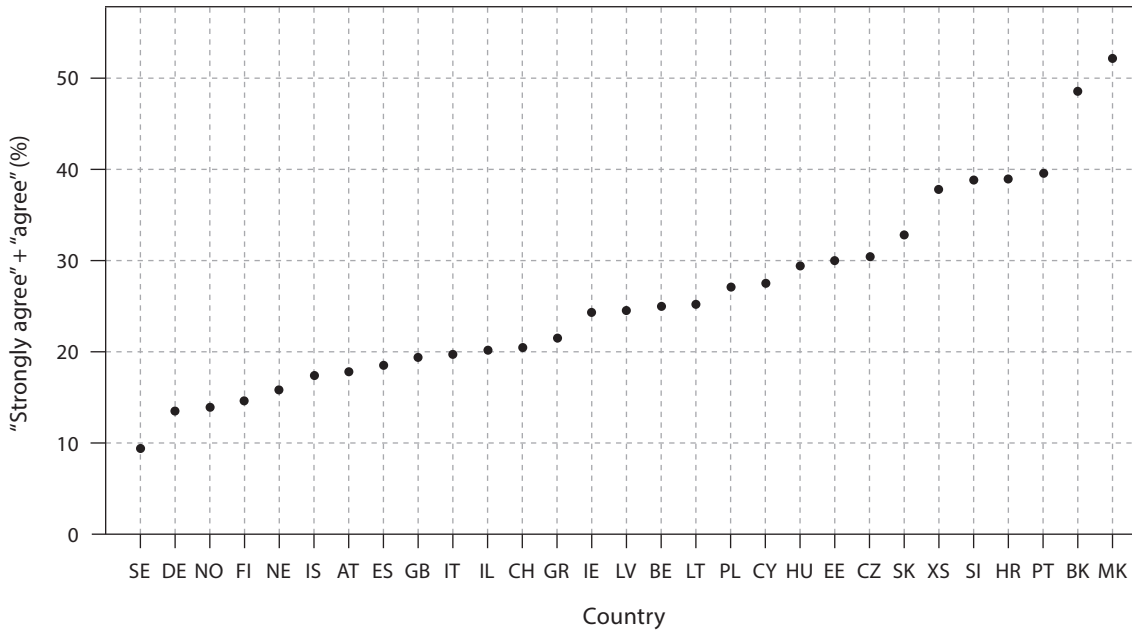
Another aspect that ESS data allows us to examine is the factors that contribute to the emergence of conspiracy thinking. One theory suggests that such thinking may originate from a deep-seated distrust in political institutions, the state, and scientists. This theory has also been validated by the ESS findings.

The need for greater science outreach

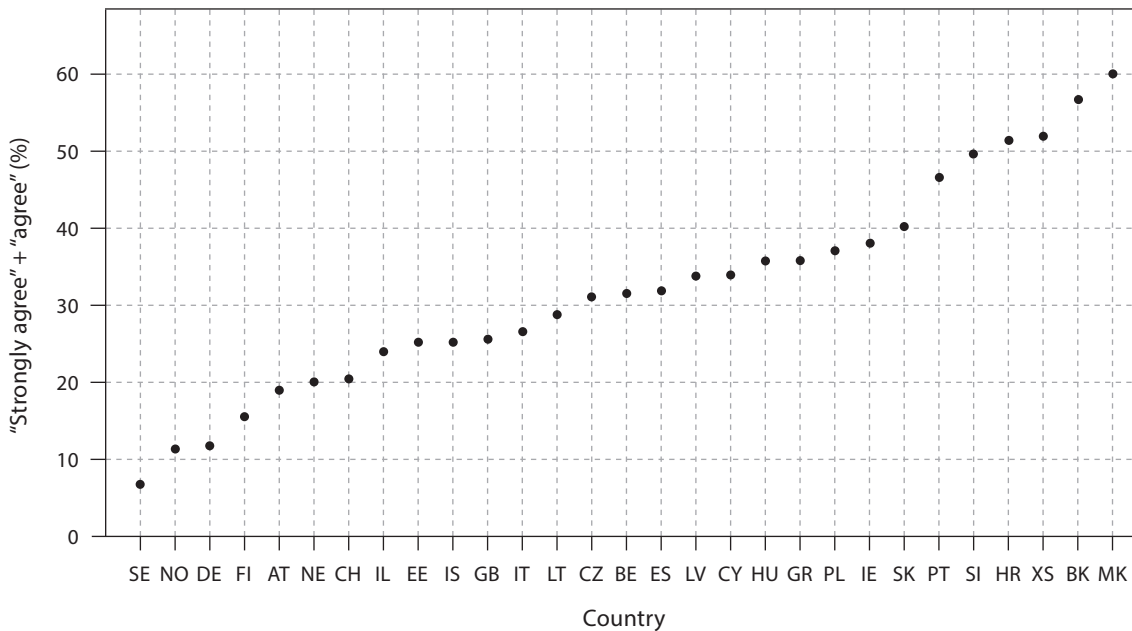
What’s surprising in the above analysis is the substantial popularity of conspiracy theories. It’s important to note that these views are not represented in mainstream media; that is, they don’t make their way into leading television broadcasts, online portals, or magazines. Instead, they emerge organically within informal settings like discussion forums, social media groups, and independent streaming channels. Despite their non-mainstream status, over a quarter of the Polish population shows an inclination to entertain these theories. Poland, however, is not alone in this; there are several other countries where the proportion of the population receptive to conspiracy theories is even greater.

It’s reasonable to question whether the conspiracy beliefs highlighted in the study hold enough sway over Europeans to shape their thinking and worldview, or if these opinions were perhaps somehow elicited (maybe even provoked) by the interview context and the spe-

Groups of scientists manipulate, fabricate, or suppress evidence in order to deceive the public



A small secret group of people is responsible for making all major decisions in world politics



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cific questions asked. However, the analyses we've discussed suggest that these beliefs do indeed play a significant role in how individuals function within society. For instance, they lead to a disregard for certain societal norms, such as a resistance to vaccination.

The widespread acceptance of conspiracy theories might, in part, be blamed on scientists themselves – due to an insufficient degree of public awareness of science. When scientists fail to make enough efforts to demystify complex realities for the broader, non-academic public, to explain findings from rigorously conducted research, conspiracy theories can

find fertile ground. In the absence of scientific explanations, the void can often be filled by oversimplified and misleading concepts that explain the world in an easy-to-understand and enticing way, often with a hint of sensationalism.

In Poland, the survey is conducted by a consortium of three institutions: the Institute of Philosophy and Sociology, Polish Academy of Sciences (consortium leader), the Institute of Sociology at Maria Curie-Skłodowska University, and the Institute of Sociology at the University of Łódź. The project is funded by the Polish Ministry of Science and Higher Education.

Further reading:

More about ESS:
<https://ess.ifispan.pl/>