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Conspiracy Beliefs in Post-Communist Europe: The Role Of Religiosity, Political Ideology, and Media Trust Among Unvaccinated Individuals

Abstract

RESEARCH OBJECTIVE: This study explores the sociocultural and psychological determinants of conspiracy theory beliefs (CTBs) among unvaccinated individuals in three post-communist countries: Poland, Romania, and Slovenia. The goal is to understand how religiosity, political orientation, media trust, and fear of COVID-19 shape conspiratorial thinking in societies with legacies of institutional distrust and ideological polarization.

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THE RESEARCH PROBLEM AND METHODS: The central research problem concerns the contextual drivers of CTBs in post-communist Europe, where transitional experiences challenge universal explanatory models. The study draws on data from an online survey of 1,641 unvaccinated individuals collected in 2021. Key constructs-including conspiracy beliefs, trust in institutions and media, religiosity, and political orientation-were measured using validated scales and analyzed through multiple regression models.

THE PROCESS OF ARGUMENTATION: The argument integrates historical and structural factors with individual-level predictors of CTBs. It distinguishes between private religiosity and religious practice, analyzes media trust in fragmented information environments, and contextualizes political ideology within the region's post-authoritarian trajectories. The analysis emphasizes how fear, belief, and epistemic orientation intersect in shaping vaccine-related conspiracies.

RESEARCH RESULTS: Findings indicate that higher private religiosity, left-wing political orientation, low fear of COVID-19, and reliance on digital or informal information sources are positively associated with CTBs. In contrast, trust in traditional media, trust in medical professionals, and participation in organized religious practices predict lower endorsement of conspiracies. Slovenia and Poland show the highest CTB levels.

CONCLUSIONS, INNOVATIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS: CTBs in post-communist societies reflect both historical legacies and current epistemic vulnerabilities. Addressing them requires context-sensitive strategies that rebuild institutional trust, support civic engagement, and recognize the social functions of structured belief systems. The study contributes to a better understanding of misinformation dynamics in transitional democracies.

Keywords:

conspiracy theories, religiosity, political ideology, media trust, post-communist Europe

INTRODUCTION

Conspiracy theories (CTs) frequently emerge during times of societal disruption, such as wars, natural disasters, pandemics, or political instability. These beliefs often serve as mechanisms for coping with anxiety, uncertainty, and perceived powerlessness (van Prooijen, 2022). In the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, one of the most pressing challenges for governments was managing vaccine hesitancy and addressing resistance among populations sceptical of

public health messaging. Research on risk perception suggests that individuals with a lower subjective fear of COVID-19 may be more susceptible to rejecting official narratives and adopting conspiratorial worldviews (Pummerer et al., 2021, pp. 49–59).

While these patterns have been extensively studied in Western and Global North contexts, less is known about how conspiracy thinking manifests in post-communist societies, particularly those shaped by historical legacies of authoritarian rule, institutional distrust, and fragmented media systems. Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) exhibited some of the highest levels of vaccine refusal during the pandemic. In many cases, unvaccinated individuals demonstrated persistent resistance to governmental communication efforts, driven not only by perceived inefficiencies or mismanagement but also by deeply rooted scepticism toward institutions. This distrust stems from the legacy of communist-era governance, where public communication was heavily censored, instrumentalised, and decoupled from public accountability (Marková, 2004).

The post-1989 transitions in the region often failed to restore trust in public institutions, particularly among socially or ideologically marginalised groups. As a result, untargeted, top-down communication strategies, common during the pandemic, frequently failed to resonate. Recent research confirms that unvaccinated individuals in CEE countries tend to display both high levels of institutional distrust and elevated susceptibility to conspiracy beliefs, complicating efforts to promote public health compliance (Popa et al., 2022; Slavec et al., 2024).

Compared to Western Europe, conspiracy beliefs are more widespread in the CEE region, where they are shaped by a complex interplay of historical, cultural, and political legacies (Luca, 2017, pp. 279–281). During the communist era, conspiracy narratives were often mobilised by state authorities as tools of ideological control, portraying internal dissent as externally orchestrated, framing the West as a hostile force, and cultivating suspicion toward "enemies of the people" (Astapova et al., 2020). These patterns left a durable cultural imprint: institutional distrust, epistemic scepticism, and a tendency to interpret crises through the lens of hidden agendas. The disorienting post-communist transitions of the 1990s, marked by rapid privatisation and political instability, further reinforced the use of conspiratorial frameworks as cognitive shortcuts for navigating

uncertainty. As shown in recent research, including the project *Conspiratorial Memory: Cultures of Suspicion in Post-Socialist Europe*, such historical experiences continue to shape public attitudes toward truth, authority, and risk (University of Amsterdam, 2023).

Despite the growing scholarly interest in the psychology and sociology of conspiracy beliefs, most empirical research has focused on Western Europe, North America, or the Middle East (Ortmann & Heathershaw, 2012, pp. 551–564; Bilewicz et al., 2013, pp. 821–839; Freeman et al., 2020, pp. 1–30). In contrast, post-communist and post-Soviet societies remain underexplored, despite consistently high levels of CT endorsement. Existing theoretical frameworks – often grounded in liberal-democratic contexts – tend to overlook the specific historical experiences of post-communist countries, where trust in state institutions and the media remains fragile due to decades of authoritarian rule, political propaganda, and the societal disorientation of transition (Marková, 2004; Imhoff & Bruder, 2014, pp. 25–43).

This study seeks to address this analytical blind spot by providing a systematic and culturally contextualized analysis of conspiracy beliefs in Central and Eastern Europe. Drawing on data from an online survey of unvaccinated individuals conducted in Poland, Romania, Slovenia, and Hungary, with the main analytical focus on the first three countries, the study investigates how institutional trust, religiosity, political orientation, fear of COVID-19, gender, and patterns of media consumption influence susceptibility to conspiratorial thinking. By embedding these findings within the broader historical and cultural context of post-communist societies, the study offers nuanced insight into the interaction of structural legacies, institutional dynamics, and individual-level attitudes.

The findings contribute to the empirical mapping of conspiracy beliefs in under-researched regions and offer practical implications for public health policy, risk communication, and the design of culturally sensitive interventions to address vaccine hesitancy and other societal challenges.

This exploratory study is guided by two key research objectives: O1. To provide a systematic analysis of conspiracy beliefs in selected CEE countries, considering the specificity of post-communist countries O2. To analyse how demographic, ideological, and informational variables, including fear of COVID-19, religiosity, political

orientation, gender, and trust in media and experts, shape conspiracy beliefs in Poland, Romania, and Slovenia.

THEORETICAL AND CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Conspiracy theories (CTs) provide simplified, emotionally compelling explanations for complex socio-political events, often attributing them to secret plots orchestrated by powerful elites (Brotherton et al., 2013; Uscinski et al., 2016, pp. 57–71). They frequently emerge during periods of crisis, such as wars, pandemics, or political instability, as individuals seek certainty and control in uncertain situations (Douglas et al., 2017, pp. 538–542). In the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, conspiracy beliefs became particularly salient among unvaccinated individuals, as distrust in institutional authority and reliance on alternative narratives shaped public attitudes toward vaccination (Pummerer et al., 2021, pp. 49–59).

Psychological and Ideological Predictors of Conspiracy Thinking

Several psychological and ideological factors shape susceptibility to CTs:

- Fear of COVID-19 has been identified as a key predictor of conspiracy beliefs. Individuals who express lower levels of fear toward the virus are more likely to endorse CTs, suggesting that risk perception plays a critical role in shaping trust in official narratives (Jolley & Douglas, 2014).
- Religiosity plays a dual role in conspiracy thinking. Intrinsic or private religiosity -understood as the personal internalization of faith as a source of existential meaning - is positively associated with CTBs. In contrast, engagement in organized religious practices (e.g., attending services) correlates with lower CTBs. This distinction echoes classic typologies of religiosity and suggests that institutional religious participation may provide protective socialization mechanisms (Allport & Ross, 1967, pp. 432–443; Swami & Furnham, 2014, pp. 218–236).

- Political ideology is a significant factor. In contrast to Western Europe, where CTBs are typically linked to far-right populism, our data from post-communist CEE countries reveal a stronger association with left-wing orientation. In this context, left-leaning views often reflect anti-elitist, anti-neoliberal, or system-critical attitudes rather than traditional socialist affiliations (Luca, 2017, pp. 279–281; van Prooijen & Krouwel, 2019, pp. 159–163).

The Role of Information Sources and Media Trust

The way individuals consume information significantly affects their likelihood of endorsing CTs:

- Higher trust in traditional media (e.g., TV, newspapers) and medical professionals is negatively associated with CTBs, highlighting the role of institutional credibility in countering misinformation (Ejaz et. al., 2021, pp. 162–178).
- In contrast, greater reliance on digital media, family, and friends as primary sources of information sources is positively linked to CTBs. This pattern reflects the effects of fragmented media environments, personalized content algorithms, and the proliferation of unverified narratives in informal networks (Jin et al., 2024; Dow et al., 2021).
- Institutional distrust, particularly regarding health authorities, amplifies conspiracy beliefs, reinforcing their function as alternative epistemic systems. In the post-communist context, where media systems evolved from centralized propaganda to polarized pluralism, such distrust has deep cultural roots and continues to shape information behaviors (Imhoff & Bruder, 2014, pp. 25–43; Marková, 2004).

Sociocultural Influences on CTs in Post-Communist Europe

The legacy of state-controlled media and political propaganda in post-communist societies has fostered a long-standing culture of distrust toward official narratives. During the socialist era, communication

was heavily censored and infused with ideological dogma, ranging from glorification of leadership to the demonization of the West, often framed as conspiratorial threats against the people. Such narratives not only served as instruments of state control but also normalized a worldview where hidden intentions were presumed (Astapova et al., 2020).

Although democratization brought formal media pluralism, it did not restore institutional trust. Post-communist societies have instead experienced rapid media fragmentation, partisan polarization, and the rise of commercial populist outlets that often replicate conspiratorial rhetoric. In this environment, digital platforms amplify alternative truth claims, while institutional distrust, rooted in both historical memory and contemporary political dynamics, continues to fuel conspiracy thinking in the region.

This framework highlights how psychological (fear of COVID-19), ideological (political orientation, religiosity), and informational (media trust, institutional credibility) factors intersect to shape conspiracy beliefs in post-communist Europe. By recognizing the historical, cultural, and social dimensions of CTBs, this study provides valuable insights into how crisis communication strategies and policy interventions can be designed to counteract misinformation and build public trust in CEE societies. These theoretical considerations inform the empirical model tested in this study, which examines CTBs among unvaccinated individuals in four CEE countries.

Hypothesis

Based on the theoretical framework and previous empirical findings, this study formulates the following directional hypotheses regarding the psychological, ideological, and informational determinants of conspiracy beliefs (CTBs) among unvaccinated individuals in post-communist Central and Eastern Europe:

H 1 : Institutional trust and information sources significantly predict conspiracy beliefs. Lower trust in traditional media and medical experts, combined with greater reliance on digital media and information from family and friends, will be associated with stronger CTBs.

H2: Psychosocial factors predict conspiracy beliefs. Lower fear of COVID-19 and higher private religiosity will be associated with stronger CTBs, whereas engagement in organized religious practices and higher education attainment will be associated with weaker CTBs.

H3: Left-wing political orientation will be positively associated with conspiracy beliefs, reflecting the specific ideological dynamics of the CEE context.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Sample

This study employed a cross-sectional quantitative design to examine attitudes toward vaccination and conspiracy beliefs among unvaccinated individuals aged 15 and above in three Central and Eastern European countries: Poland, Romania, and Slovenia. Data collection was conducted exclusively online in April 2021, using a combination of marketing research panels (to ensure diversity in recruitment) and snowball sampling via social media and mailing lists (to reach vaccine-hesitant populations). April 2021 was selected because it captured attitudes at an early stage of the COVID-19 vaccination rollout in the study countries, when vaccination campaigns were underway, but a large share of the population remained unvaccinated and public debate about vaccination was particularly salient. Panel recruitment was facilitated by established online providers operating in each country. All participants provided informed consent, and participation was voluntary and anonymous.

A total of 1,641 unvaccinated individuals completed the survey: 308 in Poland, 391 in Romania, and 942 in Slovenia. The study cohort comprised 52.2% female and 47.8% male participants, with a calculated mean age of 44.88 years. Poland, Romania, and Slovenia were selected as post-communist EU member states to enable cross-country comparison within a comparable institutional setting, while allowing for variation in key explanatory factors addressed in this study, particularly religiosity and trust in media and institutions. For the regression analyses, we included only countries

with sufficiently large country samples collected in the same period (April 2021).

Given the non-random sampling approach, this study does not claim to be representative of national populations. Instead, it specifically targets unvaccinated individuals as a distinct subgroup of interest. While post-stratification weighting was applied for gender and age, this adjustment does not fully mitigate selection bias inherent to online recruitment methods, including possible overrepresentation of digitally active or ideologically engaged individuals.

The sample initially included respondents from Hungary (N = 83, collected in October 2021); however, these cases were excluded from final regression analyses due to the timing mismatch and limited statistical power.

At the time of data collection, COVID-19 vaccination had become a deeply polarized issue in CEE countries. Targeting unvaccinated individuals thus offered a unique lens into belief systems shaped by institutional mistrust and alternative knowledge structures.

Measures

This study used a structured questionnaire consisting of 30 questions across seven thematic sections, developed on the basis of established literature and aligned with the study's key variables: conspiracy beliefs, trust in institutions and media, religiosity, COVID-19 fear, and sociodemographic characteristics. Multi-item indices were subjected to exploratory factor analysis (EFA) and reliability testing.

The majority of items were evaluated using a 5-point Likert scale, allowing for nuanced assessment of participants' responses. Respondents were identified as unvaccinated through an initial screening question. The main constructs were operationalized as follows:

- Institutional and Media Trust: Trust in governmental institutions, health authorities, traditional media, and alternative sources (e.g., social media, family and friends).
- Conspiracy Beliefs: Measured using the Conspiracy Mentality Questionnaire (CMQ) by Bruder et al. (2013), adapted to the context of COVID-19-related conspiracies.

- Religiosity: Assessed through affiliation, religious practices, and two dimensions of religious orientation: *private/intrinsic* (faith as personal truth) and *organized/extrinsic* (religious participation), following the model by Allport and Ross (1967).
- Fear of COVID-19: Measured via a single Likert-type item on subjective fear of infection.
- Sociodemographic Variables: Included gender, age, education, political orientation (left–right), and self-assessed socioeconomic status.

The instrument also included experimental items on epistemic cognition and susceptibility to misinformation (Sinatra & Lombardi, 2020, pp. 120–131; Šrol et al., 2022), which were not included in the main regression models but offer material for future analysis.

The original questionnaire was developed in English and translated into Polish, Romanian, Hungarian, and Slovenian. Translation fidelity was ensured via back-translation, followed by pretesting (n = 10 per country) to refine both linguistic and conceptual clarity.

Data analysis

To test the hypotheses and address the research questions, statistical analyses were conducted using IBM SPSS Statistics (version 26). A standard significance threshold of $\alpha = 0.05$ was applied, and values in the range of $0.05 < p < 0.1$ interpreted as statistical trend.

The analysis proceeded in three stages. First, descriptive statistics and bivariate analyses (e.g., t-tests and Pearson correlations) were used to examine associations between conspiracy beliefs (CTBs) and sociodemographic, ideological, and psychological variables. Second, exploratory factor analysis (EFA) and reliability testing (Cronbach's alpha) were conducted to validate multi-item indices, including those measuring institutional trust and conspiracy beliefs. A cumulative CTB index was created by averaging standardized items from the adapted CMQ scale.

Third, a multiple linear regression model was constructed to identify predictors of CTBs. The model included eight predictors: fear of COVID-19, private religiosity, religious practices, political orientation, gender, and trust in three information sources (traditional

media, digital media, family/friends). Four control variables were included: age, education, settlement type, and subjective socioeconomic status. Cases from Hungary (N = 83) were excluded due to later collection timing and low statistical power.

Multicollinearity was assessed using VIF and tolerance values, and all continuous predictors were standardized prior to model estimation to allow comparability of coefficients.

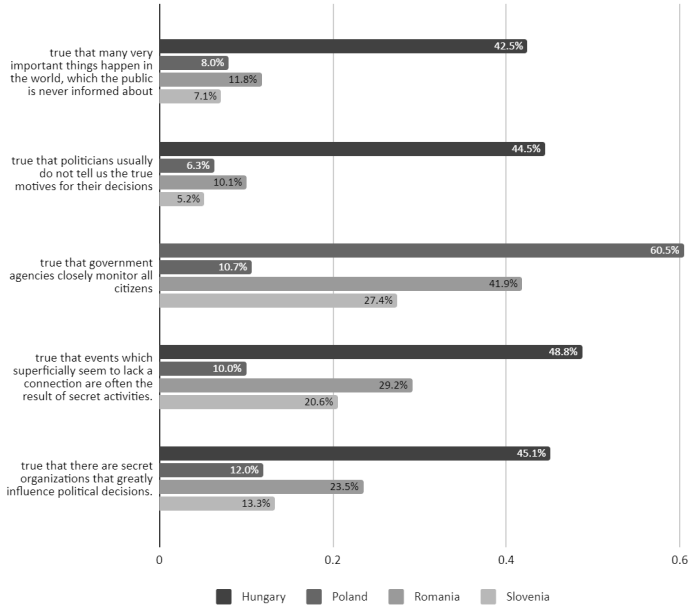
RESULTS

Descriptive Results

Descriptive analyses revealed notable country-level differences in conspiracy beliefs (CTBs) among unvaccinated individuals. As depicted in Figure 1, Slovenia and Poland exhibited the highest average CTB scores, while Hungary recorded the lowest levels, with Romania situated between the two extremes. Among specific conspiracy items, statements such as "government agencies closely monitor all citizens" and "seemingly unrelated events are often connected by secret activities" showed the most pronounced cross-national disparities.

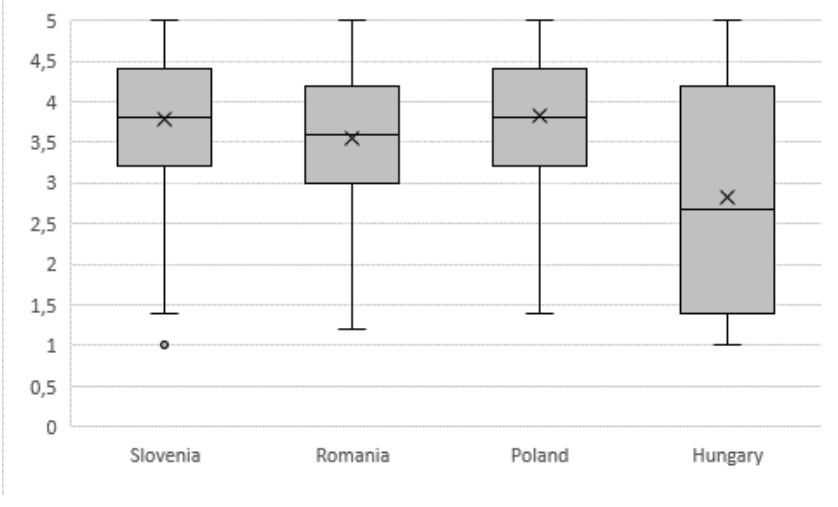
Figure 2 presents the mean cumulative CTB index by country. Although average CTB levels differ across countries, post hoc comparisons using the Bonferroni test revealed no statistically significant differences between Slovenia and Poland. Hungary displayed the highest within-group variability in CTBs, suggesting greater heterogeneity of conspiracy belief endorsement among its unvaccinated population.

Figure 1. Conspiracy Theory Beliefs statement by Country (% Somehow and Certainly True)



Source: own elaboration based on the study.

Figure 2. Mean Cumulative index of Conspiracy theories beliefs by country

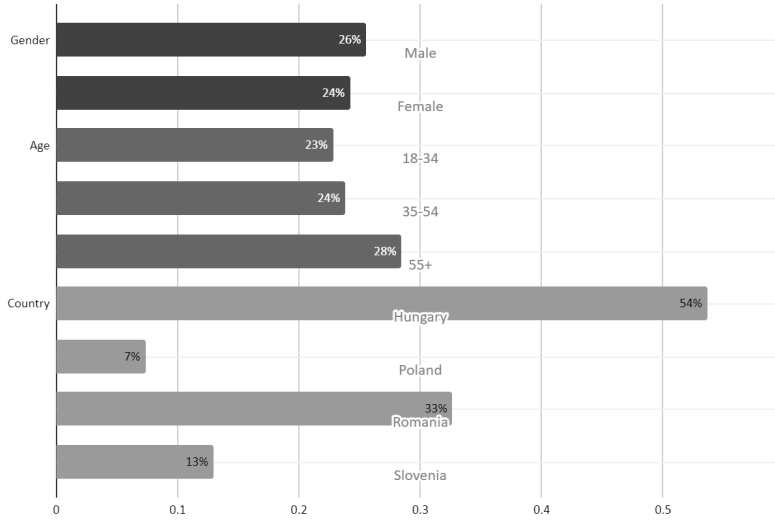


Source: own elaboration based on the study.

Bivariate analysis

Figures 3 and 4 present the results of bivariate comparisons between conspiracy beliefs (CTBs) and key sociodemographic and ideological variables.

Figure 3. Share of respondents who believe at least one conspiracy theory by main variables



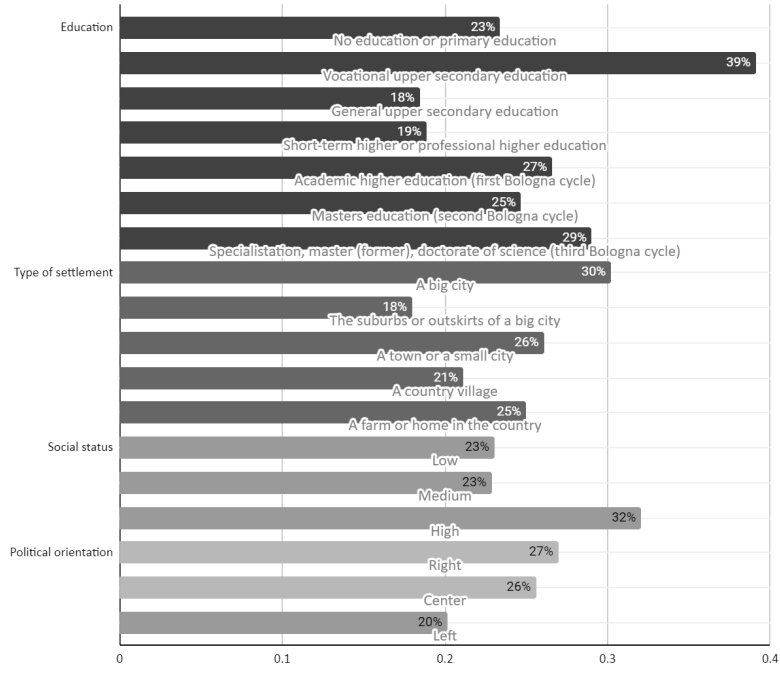
Source: own elaboration based on the study.

Significant differences in CTB scores were observed in relation to education level, urbanization, subjective socioeconomic status, and political orientation. Individuals with general secondary or non-academic higher education levels exhibited the highest CTB scores, compared to those with either lower (primary education) or higher (academic tertiary education) qualifications. This non-linear pattern suggests that moderate levels of formal education may be associated with greater susceptibility to alternative narratives.

Urbanization was also related to CTBs: respondents living in larger cities reported lower CTB scores than those residing in smaller towns or rural areas. Similarly, higher subjective socioeconomic status was associated with lower CTB endorsement.

In terms of political orientation, individuals identifying with the left-wing spectrum demonstrated the strongest CTB endorsement, particularly in Slovenia and Poland. These patterns are consistent with our theoretical expectations regarding the ideological dynamics of post-communist societies.

Figure 4. Share of respondents who believe at least one conspiracy theory by social status



Source: own elaboration based on the study.

The Multiple Regression Model

To test the main hypotheses (H1–H3), a multiple linear regression model was estimated, excluding respondents from Hungary. The model accounted for approximately 15% of the variance in conspiracy beliefs (adjusted $R^2 = 0.153$).

Several significant predictors of CTBs were identified (see Table 2 for full coefficients). Among negative predictors, greater fear of COVID-19 ($\beta = -.083$, $p < .01$), higher frequency of religious practices ($\beta = -.119$, $p < .001$), and greater trust in traditional media ($\beta = -.152$, $p < .001$) and medical experts ($\beta = -.268$, $p < .001$) were associated with lower CTB scores.

Table 1. The Variance of the multiple regression model (without Hungary)

Model Summary	
Model	Adjusted R Square
1	,153
Predictors: (Constant), Slovenia, Q17_pro1 Medical professionals & scientific sources, gend_f Female, Q9_ser At least slightly serious effects of the COVID-19 infection, Q22_2 Age on the day of responding, Q27_cit Living in a town or city, Q28 At the top (10) of the ladder are the people who are the best off, [...]. At the bottom (1) are the people who are the worst off, those who have the least money, least education, worst jobs, or no job. [...], Q29_left, Q11_anx Anxiety (DAS), Q24_hig Higher education, Q17_dme Digital media, Q10_wor At least moderately worried of the virus, rel_ha1 Religious habits new , Q17_fam Family and friends, Q17_tme Traditional media, Poland, rel_in1 Intimate religion new, Q8_yes Had COVID-19 infection, Q11_stre Stress (DAS), Q11_dep Depression (DAS)	

Source: own elaboration based on the study.

Table 2. The final multiple regression model (without Hungary)

Coefficients							
	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients			Collinearity Statistics	
Model	B	Std. Error	Beta	t	Sig.	Tolerance	VIF
Q10_wor At least moderately worried of the virus	-,176	,052	-,083	-3,372	,001	,827	1,209
rel_ha1 Religious habits new	-,079	,021	-,119	-3,776	,000	,507	1,974
rel_in1 Intimate religion new	,122	,020	,195	6,059	,000	,486	2,056
Q29_left	,177	,044	,095	3,977	,000	,888	1,126
Q22_1_gend_f Female	,132	,038	,078	3,419	,001	,963	1,039
Q17_tme Traditional media	-,122	,022	-,152	-5,509	,000	,662	1,510
Q17_dme Digital media	,063	,023	,072	2,751	,006	,743	1,346
Q17_pro1 Medical professionals & scientific sources	-,212	,022	-,268	-9,558	,000	,638	1,568
Q17_fam Family and friends	,082	,019	,108	4,231	,000	,774	1,292
a. Dependent Variable: Q18_cbe1							

Source: own elaboration based on the study.

Conversely, significant positive predictors included higher private religiosity ($\beta = .195$, $p < .001$), left-wing political orientation ($\beta = .095$, $p < .001$), female gender ($\beta = .078$, $p < .01$), and greater trust in digital media ($\beta = .072$, $p < .01$) and information from family and friends ($\beta = .108$, $p < .001$).

These findings confirm Hypotheses H1 (role of trust and information sources), H2 (role of psychosocial factors), and H3 (association of left-wing ideology with CTBs), although the observed gender effect – higher CTBs among women – deviates from some previous literature.

3.4. Hypothesis Evaluation

The regression analysis provides substantial support for the proposed hypotheses.

Hypothesis 1 (H1) was confirmed: Trust in institutions and sources of information significantly predict conspiracy beliefs. Specifically, higher trust in traditional media and medical experts was associated with lower CTB, whereas greater trust in digital media and family/friends predicted higher CTB levels.

Hypothesis 2 (H2) received partial support. Lower fear of COVID-19 and higher private religiosity were significantly associated with stronger CTBs, while greater engagement in religious practices was linked to lower CTB. However, the gender effect observed, higher CTB levels among women, was contrary to initial expectations and warrants further investigation.

Hypothesis 3 (H3) was fully confirmed. Left-wing political orientation was positively associated with conspiracy beliefs, reflecting the specific ideological landscape of post-communist Central and Eastern Europe.

Overall, the findings indicate that psychological, informational, and ideological factors interact in shaping conspiracy thinking in the post-communist context. The patterns observed underscore the necessity of culturally sensitive approaches to understanding and addressing conspiracy beliefs in this region.

DISCUSSION

This study investigated the sociocultural and psychological determinants of conspiracy beliefs (CTBs) among unvaccinated individuals in three post-communist countries: Poland, Romania, and Slovenia. The findings offer empirical support for the hypothesis that trust in institutions, information sources, religiosity, political orientation, and psychosocial factors such as fear of COVID-19 play a significant role in shaping conspiracy beliefs within this regional context.

Consistent with prior research, greater trust in traditional media and medical professionals was negatively associated with CTBs, whereas greater reliance on digital media and informal information sources predicted higher CTB endorsement. These results align with findings that fragmented media ecosystems and online echo chambers amplify distrust and facilitate the spread of conspiratorial narratives (Vosoughi et al., 2018, pp. 1146–1151; Bridgman et al., 2020; Garrett, 2017, pp. 370–376).

As anticipated, fear of COVID-19 emerged as a protective factor against CTBs. Individuals with lower levels of fear were more likely to reject official narratives and endorse alternative explanations, corroborating the patterns observed in prior studies (Pummerer et al., 2021, pp. 49–59; Jolley & Douglas, 2014).

Religiosity displayed a dual effect. While participation in religious practices correlated with lower CTBs, higher private (intrinsic) religiosity was associated with stronger conspiracy thinking. This distinction echoes previous findings that individualized belief systems may act as alternative epistemologies, increasing susceptibility to conspiratorial explanations (Swami & Furnham, 2014, pp. 218–236; Hart & Graether, 2018, pp. 229–237).

A notable regional pattern emerged regarding political ideology. Contrary to trends reported in Western Europe, left-wing political orientation was positively associated with CTBs in our sample. This result likely reflects specific post-communist dynamics, including historical distrust of neoliberalism and disillusionment with political elites (van Prooijen & Krouwel, 2019, pp. 159–163; Astapova et al., 2020).

Unexpectedly, women reported higher CTB levels than men. Although prior studies typically associate stronger conspiracy beliefs

with male respondents (Guess et al., 2019; Biddlestone et al., 2020, pp. 663–673), this deviation may reflect pandemic-specific dynamics, such as heightened perceptions of vulnerability or differences in media consumption patterns among women during the COVID-19 crisis.

The analysis of socioeconomic and educational variables also revealed non-linear patterns. Higher subjective socioeconomic status and urban residence were associated with lower CTBs, whereas education demonstrated a curvilinear relationship: individuals with middle levels of education exhibited higher CTB scores than those with either lower or higher educational attainment. This finding highlights the complexity of cognitive and social factors underlying conspiracy thinking (Douglas et al., 2019, pp. 3–35).

Country-level differences, particularly higher CTBs observed in Slovenia and Poland, likely stem from historically rooted institutional distrust and the enduring influence of religious and community-based knowledge networks. These findings underscore the importance of culturally sensitive strategies in public health communication, tailored to the specific historical and social contexts of Central and Eastern Europe.

While the regression model explained a modest portion of variance in CTBs (adjusted $R^2 = 0.153$), the observed patterns reinforce the multifactorial nature of conspiracy beliefs. Future research should further explore emotional, cognitive, and exposure-related mechanisms underlying CTB formation, especially in transitional societies characterized by persistent distrust.

CONCLUSIONS

This study contributes to a growing body of research on the psychological, ideological, and informational determinants of conspiracy beliefs (CTBs) in post-communist Central and Eastern Europe. Our findings reveal that lower trust in institutions and traditional media, greater reliance on informal digital networks, personal religiosity detached from institutional practice, and left-wing political orientation are significant predictors of stronger CTB endorsement among unvaccinated individuals.

Country-level differences, particularly the higher CTBs observed in Slovenia and Poland compared to Romania, likely reflect the historical and cultural legacies of institutional distrust and the enduring influence of alternative information networks. These patterns emphasize the necessity of culturally sensitive approaches to public health communication that address dominant epistemic sources outside official channels.

While our findings offer valuable insights, they must be interpreted in light of certain limitations, including the non-representative sampling and the modest explanatory power of the regression model. Future research should further investigate the emotional, cognitive, and media-related mechanisms that foster conspiracy thinking, particularly in transitional societies marked by political polarization and historical distrust.

Overall, this study highlights the complex interplay of psychosocial, ideological, and informational factors in shaping conspiracy beliefs and underscores the importance of contextually grounded strategies to rebuild public trust and resilience against misinformation.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

Several limitations of this study should be acknowledged. First, although data were collected in four Central and Eastern European countries, the final regression analyses included only Poland, Romania, and Slovenia. The Hungarian sample was excluded due to smaller size and delayed data collection, which may limit the generalizability of findings across the broader CEE region.

Second, the focus on unvaccinated individuals, while methodologically justified by the research aims, restricts comparisons with vaccinated populations. Future studies should incorporate broader sampling frames to allow a more comprehensive analysis of ideological and informational predictors across different groups.

Third, the non-probabilistic, online sampling approach introduces potential selection biases. Although post-stratification weighting was applied to adjust for gender and age, participants may overrepresent digitally active or ideologically polarized individuals, thereby limiting generalizability to the full populations of the surveyed countries.

Finally, the cross-sectional design precludes causal inference. Longitudinal research is needed to explore the dynamic relationships between trust, media consumption, political ideology, and conspiracy beliefs over time, particularly during periods of societal upheaval.

Despite certain limitations, this study provides significant insights into the socio-psychological mechanisms underlying conspiracy beliefs in post-communist societies and underscores the necessity of culturally sensitive approaches in combating misinformation and fostering trust.

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