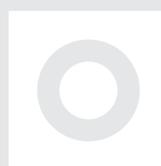




# Voices of Central and Eastern Europe



Czech  
Republic



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# Introduction

Researchers looking into the issue of disinformation have recently begun to shift their focus from conspiracy theories themselves, their content and propagators, to the audience that listens to them. In the Czech Republic, however, this debate has remained restricted to tracking how various conspiracy theories resonate throughout society.<sup>1</sup> While this research does allow us to say that there are people who believe in conspiracy theories within Czech society, it remains impossible to further define their character traits or attitudes. Significant progress in the search for answers to these questions was achieved by a study from the STEM company, focusing on the profiles of individuals actively spreading disinformation.<sup>2</sup> One of the key findings of this research was that disinformation is shared by various types of people with diverse motives. This may include senior citizens attempting to maintain social contact by resending chain emails, young people sharing content on social networks to gain attention, or middle-aged people who share these articles in an attempt to preserve their social status.

This paper's aim is to elaborate on the debate outlined above by describing the profile and attitudes of people with tendencies to believe conspiracy theories. Our findings derive from the study *Voices of Central and Eastern Europe*, conducted by GLOBSEC which focuses on the attitudes of Central Europeans towards democracy, the media and conspiracy theories.<sup>3</sup> Our report works exclusively with data collected in the Czech Republic, which therefore must be

considered by any subsequent attempt to generalise its findings.

The text is divided into three parts. It begins with a description of the tested theories and research methodology. The second part expounds on the characteristics of social groups displaying higher tendencies to believe conspiracy theories and introduces the political and social attitudes of this part of the population. The final chapter summarises the conclusions of the research and presents recommendations for further research as well as communication with people who have tendencies to believe in conspiracy theories.

<sup>1</sup> For example, <https://www.mvcr.cz/cthh/clanek/vyzkum-verejneho-mineni-k-problematice-dezinformaci.aspx>  
<sup>2</sup> <https://www.stem.cz/siritele-dezinformaci/>  
<sup>3</sup> <https://www.globsec.org/publications/voices-of-central-and-eastern-europe/>

# Tested theories and methodology

The study, *Voices of Central and Eastern Europe*, collected information on the degree to which respondents agreed with seven conspiracy theories. As illustrated in the chart below, the respondents' attitudes towards individual conspiracy theories varied. They differed not only in terms of the level of agreement with individual theories, but also in the percentage of respondents willing or able to say what their opinion about a given theory is. On average, the number of people who expressed no opinion was between one-sixth and one-third of respondents, which demonstrates how differently conspiracy theories resonate in the public debate.

The data show a correlation between the belief in conspiracies. In other words, those who believe in one conspiracy are more

likely to believe in others. For instance, people who were convinced that the terrorist attacks of September 11 were organised by the US government were twice as likely to believe other theories than the rest of the population.

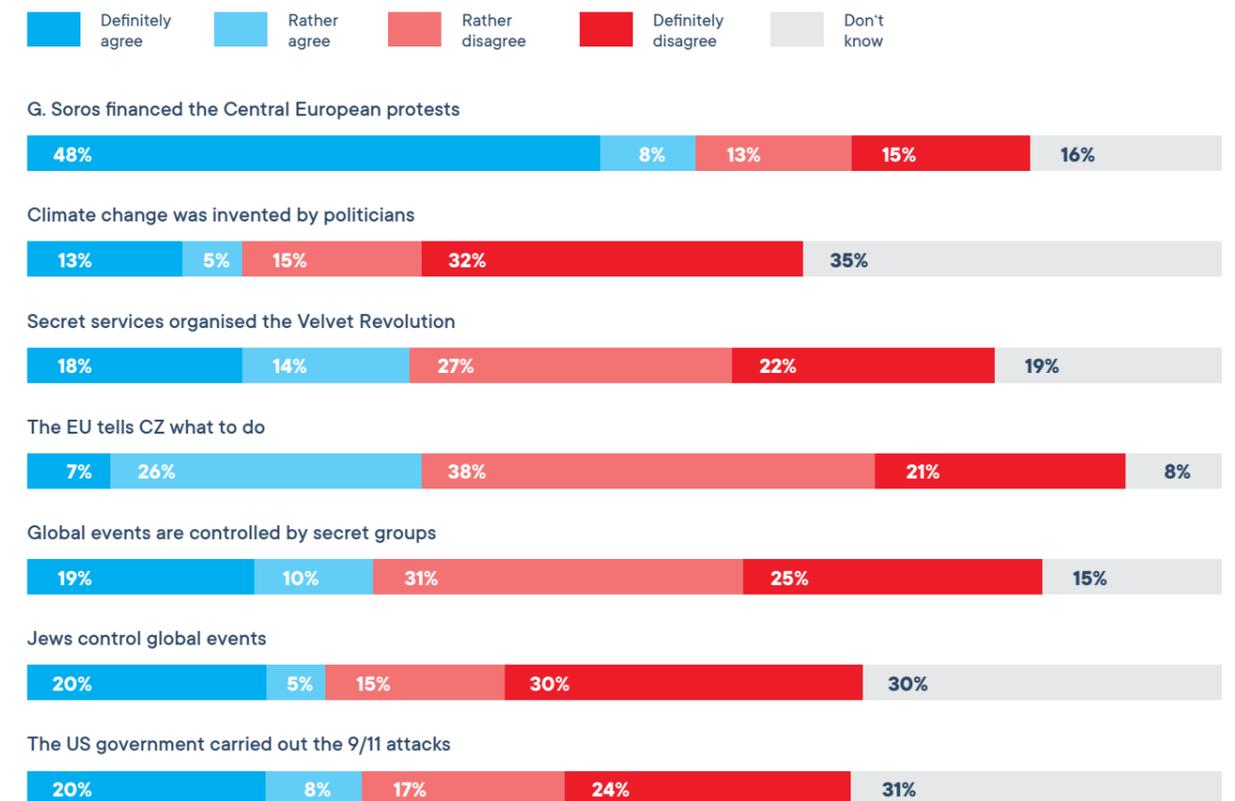
This suggests identifying general characteristics of people with a tendency to believe conspiracy theories is worth exploring. However, the reader should bear in mind that it is a simplification. The conclusions offered at the end of our study should therefore not be seen as an exhaustive characterisation of all people who accept conspiracies, but more as a set of traits and convictions that tend to distinguish these people from the general population.

<sup>4</sup> The full wording of the questions asked about conspiracy theories is provided in the Appendix.

## In order to determine relevant characteristics, the authors applied the following criteria:

- The group of people believing a certain conspiracy theory (after combining the answers "definitely agree" and "rather agree") differs from the average population by more than 5% in given characteristic.
- The difference from the general population in a given characteristic shows up in four or more of the tested conspiracy theories.

## Chart 1: Respondent attitudes towards tested conspiracy theories<sup>4</sup>

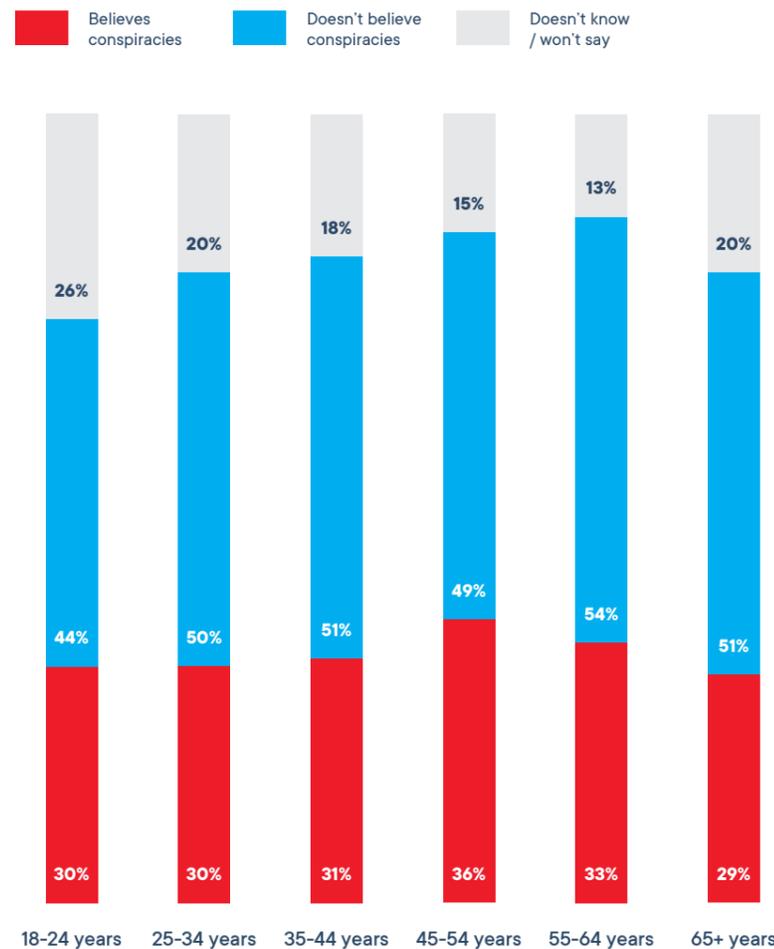


# Personal characteristics of people who believe in conspiracy theories



This research did not confirm the commonly held theory that disinformation and manipulation is more likely to be believed by young people and seniors. On the contrary, it showed that the tested conspiracy theories were more likely to be believed by middle-aged people (45–54 years). Conversely, none of the age groups displayed a higher level of resistance to conspiracies. Age can therefore not be considered a factor sufficiently explaining the likelihood of a person's belief in conspiracy theories.

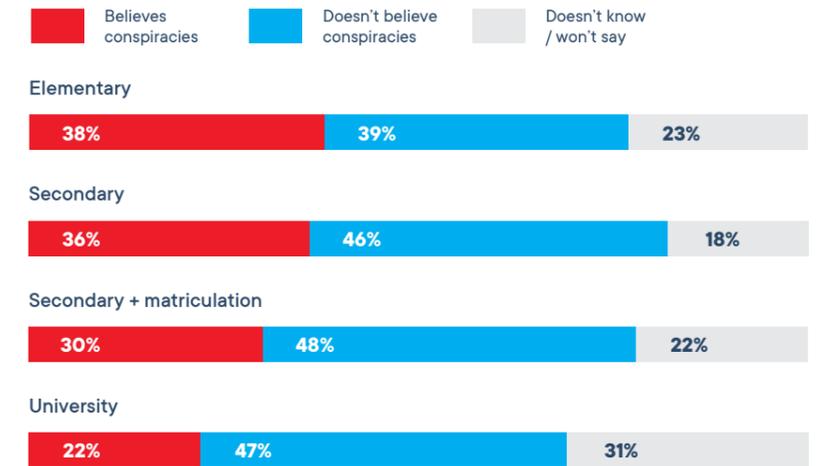
**Chart 2: The influence of age on the belief in conspiracy theories**



An interesting link between an individual's highest achieved educational level and his/her belief in conspiracy theories was demonstrated. People with only elementary or secondary education displayed a greater level of agreement with the tested theories. On the other hand, people with a university degree were more likely to express an ambivalent attitude (don't know/ won't say) towards the tested conspiracies than the average.<sup>5</sup>

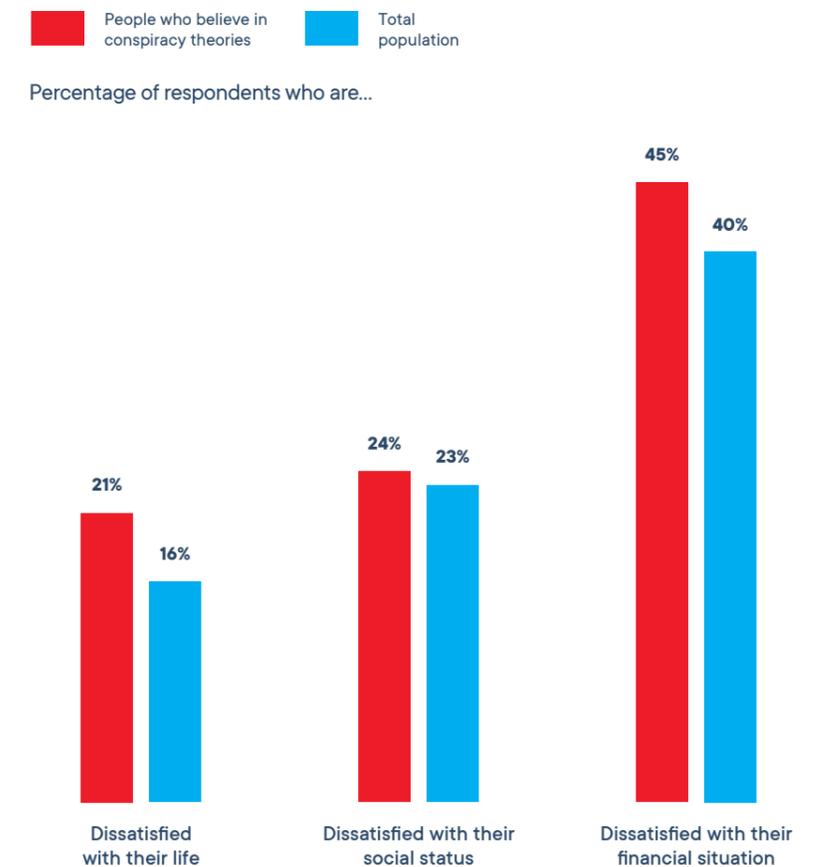
<sup>5</sup> "I don't know" answers: this data may be biased by also including the group of individuals who did not answer the question at all.

**Chart 3: The influence of the level of attained education on the belief in conspiracy theories**



Belief in conspiracy theories is also somewhat influenced by the region in which a given person lives. In Prague, for instance, the ratio of people believing the tested theories was lower than the average of the whole population; conversely, in Central Moravia and Moravian-Silesian regions it was higher. The type of residence (rural, urban) had no effect on belief in conspiracies. The authors, however, note that the findings on the influence of location on the belief in tested conspiracy theories should be treated with caution and the specifics of the given regions and causal relationships between them and popular attitudes must be studied further.

**Chart 4: The influence of satisfaction with one's own life, social and financial situation on the belief in conspiracy theories**



People who believe in conspiracy theories were more likely to express dissatisfaction with their own life and financial situation. They were also more likely than other demographic groups to believe that migrants were favoured in the society over others. Conversely, people who were satisfied with their own financial situation were – similarly to those with a university degree – more likely to answer "I don't know" or refusing to respond to the tested theories. These findings point to a possible link between an individual's economic situation and the degree to which they believe in conspiracy theories.



# Views of people who believe in conspiracy theories towards politics and society

The economical and social deprivation of some people who believe in conspiracy theories is reflected in their views of democratic political systems, as these people were more likely to claim that the current political system does not take the needs of people like them into account and, thus, it does not matter who holds power in the government. They also showed some inclination towards having a certain portion of their civil rights taken away in exchange for improvements in their financial situation. Their distrust did not, however, lead to a complete rejection of democracy but rather to a lack of interest in it. These people, for example, did not prefer the rule of a strong and decisive leader but were generally unable to decide whether democracy or dictatorship was better.

Chart 5: Perceptions of the political system and beliefs in conspiracy theories

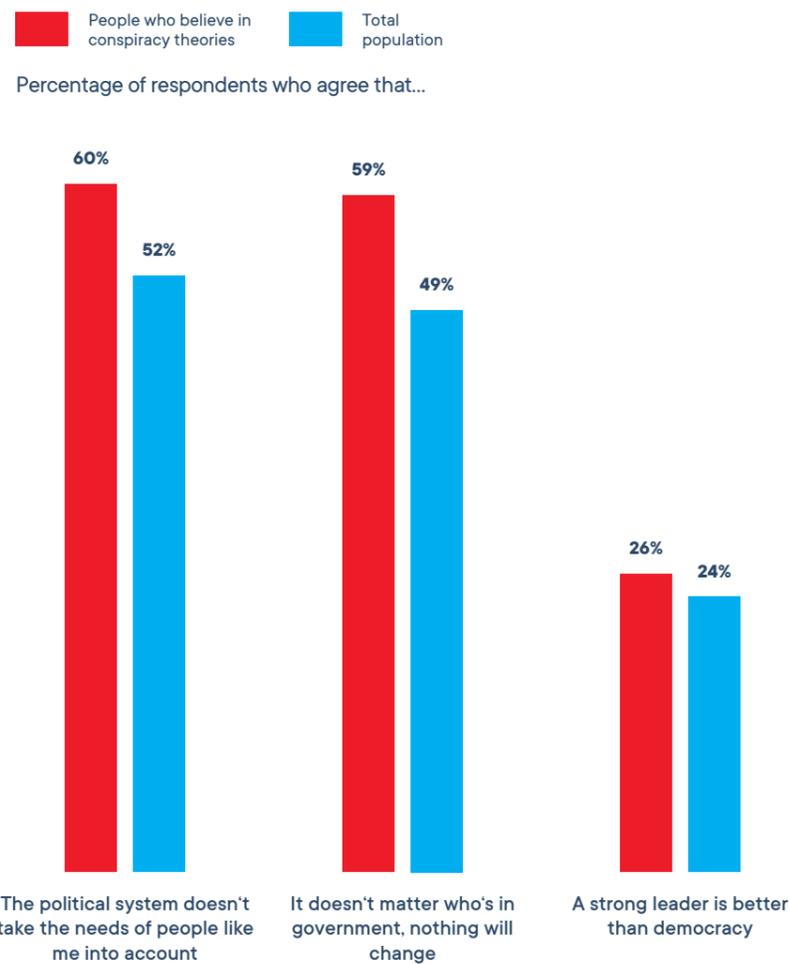


Chart 6: Belief in conspiracies and traditional values



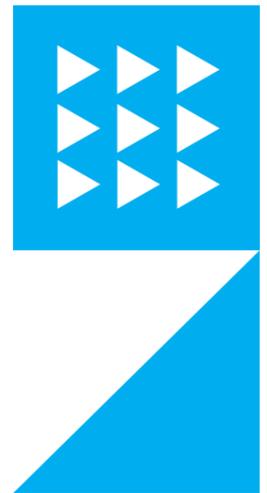
Traditional values are also important for people who believe in conspiracy theories, and they were more likely than the rest of the population to consider partial restrictions on certain civil liberties in exchange for their preservation. At the same time, these people felt traditional values were threatened by Western civilisation, the European Union and migration. This group's feeling that their values were being threatened corresponded with their view that the Czech Republic has always been persecuted in the past and that its citizens were unable to control the direction of the country.

The above-mentioned views were, however, projected onto everyday politics in various ways. Perhaps surprisingly, people who believe in conspiracy theories did not display a higher level of distrust in the current government than the general population. Trust in President Miloš Zeman was actually higher than average for this group. Concerning their participation in social life, people who believe in conspiracy theories could be divided into two groups. One group openly declared they would not vote in the elections, reflecting the above-mentioned detachment from political life. The other, more politically mobilised, group reported that they would be voting for parties with extremist tendencies – the right-wing SPD and the left-wing KSČM.

One surprising finding was that people who believe in conspiracy theories did not display a greater level of distrust towards mainstream media, although this should be understood within the context of the high level of distrust towards mainstream media found in the research overall.<sup>6</sup> Some of the findings, however, point to a low level of understanding of the functioning of the media among people who believe in conspiracies. For instance, they were unable to answer the question of whether

the mainstream media is free or not, or, to a larger extent, thought it was controlled by the United States of America.

<sup>6</sup> 69% of respondents answered that they did not trust at all, or rather distrusted the mainstream media.





# Summary and recommendations

The findings reported above should be seen only as initial contributions towards the debate surrounding groups susceptible to believing in conspiracy theories and disinformation, which is only just getting started in the Czech Republic. For this reason, they should be subjected to further testing and research.

Despite the fact that this study dealt with people who believe in conspiracy theories as a homogenous group, it is necessary to keep in mind that these are (perhaps significantly) diverse individuals. Hasty generalisations might lead to inaccurate statements, and so it is necessary to further study the differences between people who believe in individual conspiracy theories.

Heterogeneity can also be counted among the reasons that lead people to believe conspiracy theories. That is why the public debate should avoid any simplifying narratives about less intellectually capable or manipulated individuals. This perception is not only misleading but dangerous, as it has a potential to further polarise public debate.

Socio-economic factors play a considerable role regarding the belief in conspiracy theories. As a result, reactions to the phenomenon should not be limited to proving the falseness of certain claims (fact-checking) but should also deal with the structural problems and social inequalities that create the environment in which conspiracies thrive.

People who believe in conspiracy theories are concerned over the loss of traditional values, which they consider to be under threat from mostly external actors. It is through the debate about these values – in particular their role and transformation in the 21st century – where it might be possible to bring this group back into the public debate.

Apart from individuals susceptible to believing in conspiracies, we should also study the attitudes held by the rest of society. This paper has repeatedly proven that the “silent majority” has often no clear opinion on any given issue, which makes them far from immune to any potential manipulation.

Despite being a popular suggestion, education itself does not provide a universal answer to countering conspiracy theories. Education in certain areas however – such as an explanation of the function of the media and journalistic work – may help certain people re-evaluate their current positions.

People who believe in conspiracy theories are typically disconnected from political life, which they consider irrelevant to the quality of their own life. Politicians should not neglect this group of voters, because they represent, among others, a potential electorate for extremist parties.

# Appendix

## Tested conspiracy theories:

- The terrorist attack on the World Trade Center in New York in 2001 was planned and conducted by the American government, not Al-Qaeda.
- Jews have too much power and secretly control governments and institutions around the world.
- World affairs are not decided by elected leaders but by secret groups aiming to establish a totalitarian world order.
- The EU and Brussels dictate to the Czech Republic what to do, without Czechs having any chance to influence it.
- The Velvet Revolution in 1989 was not the result of mass protests but was planned ahead of time by the secret services.
- Climate change is not happening, the data are being intentionally falsified by our governments.
- Protests against the government in the Czech Republic, Slovakia and Hungary over the previous years were financed by George Soros.

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More information about the research can be found in the comparative English version [Voices of Central and Eastern Europe](#).

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