

Plotting against Our Nation: COVID-19, Nationalisms, and Conspiracy Theories in Five European Countries

Siniša Malešević, Gordana Uzelac, Sarah Carol & Lea David

1. Introduction

Many commentators have identified both conspiracy theories and nationalisms as being prevalent during the COVID-19 pandemic (Bieber 2022, Mylonas and Whalley 2022)¹. Although nationalisms and conspiracy theories have received great deal of scholarly attention there is very little analysis of their relationships. The available research indicates that many conspiracy theories deploy nationalist rhetoric and that some nationalist discourses use the familiar *topoi* of conspiracy theories (Malešević 2022; 2020, Rieger 2021). However, we still lack more specific knowledge about which forms of nationalism are more prone to conspiratorial thinking. Since nationalism is an ideological practice that appears in a variety of guises and can easily accommodate different political projects it is important to explore in greater detail when, why and how conspiracy theories underpin specific nationalist projects and vice versa. Hence this paper analyses the relationships between nationalist ideologies and conspiracy theories in times of pandemic. We aim to identify the social profile of conspiracy theorists in five European countries (Germany, England², Ireland, Sweden, and Serbia) by exploring the proclivity towards conspiracy theories across several socio-demographic variables such as age, gender, education, ethnicity, religious orientation, professional status, and political preferences. The paper also investigates the intensity and character of beliefs in conspiracy theories relating to the origin of COVID-19. We analyse the relationships between different nationalist orientations and the intensity of belief in the conspiracy theories. We differentiate between strong, medium, and weak forms of conspiratorial thinking and explore how each of these categories relate to different forms of nationalism. Drawing on the grounded nationalism approach (Malešević 2022, 2019, 2013) we articulate a model for the study of nationalist conspiracies that focuses on the three layers of analysis: the micro-interactional context, the organisational capacities, and the ideological penetration. This model is then applied to data collected through the online survey in five European countries with an aim to explain differences in the types of nationalism and their relationship with the conspiracy theories.

¹ We would like to thank the three anonymous reviewers for their excellent comments on the early draft of this paper.

² Since UK health policies are devolved England, Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland have instituted different rules during the covid 19 pandemic. This included different lockdown regulations, advice on working practices and mask mandates among others. To avoid these internal complexities and differences this project focused on England as the largest political entity in the UK. For more information about these different policies see: <https://www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/article/explainer/coronavirus-lockdown-rules-each-part-uk>.

There are four key working hypotheses of this study that are derived from the preliminary analysis of existing literature on nationalism and conspiracy theories: 1. the respondents who are more inclined to believe in the strong version of conspiracy theories also share a primordialist view of nationhood (H1); 2. the respondents who describe themselves as being politically right-wing are more likely to believe in the strong version of conspiracy theories (H2); 3. the respondents who self-identify as being more religious are also more likely to believe in the strong version of conspiracy theories (H3); 4. the respondents who subscribe to the constructivist view of nationhood are less likely to believe in the strong versions of conspiracy theories (H4).

The first part of the paper provides a brief and critical literature review on the conspiracy theories and nationalism and then articulates an alternative model for the analysis of nationalist conspiracies (sections 2-4). The second part offers information on methodology, case justification and operationalisation of the key concepts (5-6). The third part of the zooms in on the wider context of COVID-19 (section 7). We provide here some country-specific data from the qualitative segment of this study to illustrate the typical conspiracy theories for each of the five countries analysed in the paper (section 7.1). The fourth part brings together the key findings from the quantitative part of the study (sections 8 and 9). The final part interprets the survey data through the prism of the theoretical model deployed in this study (section 10).

2. Conspiracy Theories

The overwhelming majority of scholarship on conspiracy theories focuses on the psychological or historical aspects of this phenomenon. The dominant psychological approaches often interpret conspiracy theories through the prism of specific emotional or cognitive factors that appeal to personalities prone to the conspiratorial thinking. The emphasis is on the three key motivational processes that foster belief in conspiracies: 1) understanding incomprehensible and ever-changing social environment; 2) feeling safe, secure and in control of the social environment; and 3) attaining and upholding a positive self-image. Hence the belief in conspiracy theories helps simplify complex and contradictory realities, it reduces uncertainty, protects established beliefs from disconfirmation and provides meaning for disconnected and random events (Douglas & Leitte 2017; Bilewicz, et al 2013; Brotherton and French 2014). A strong belief in conspiracies also provides a sense of certainty for some individuals. The research indicates that anxiety and powerlessness are linked strongly with conspiratorial thinking (Grzesiak-Feldman, 2013; Abalakina-Paap, Stephan, Craig, & Gregory, 1999). Thus, belief in conspiracies helps some individuals gain a degree of autonomy by identifying the recognisable culprits and by attributing intent and agency to the contingent events. Finally, a commitment to conspiracy theories is also shaped by one's sense of self-worth. Propagating conspiracies helps individuals and groups increase a sense of self-worth by attributing blame to evil others. By relaying on the ideas that specific events are product of secret plots of powerful and malevolent people the believers in conspiracies are able to maintain a sense of being morally superior individuals (Cichocka, Marchlewska, & Golec de Zavala, 2016).

The historical scholarship explores the transformation of conspiracy narratives and practices through time (Knight & Butter 2021; Fenster 2008; Coward & Swann 2004). Some authors aim to show that 'belief in conspiracy theories has been prevalent throughout human history' (van Prooijen & Douglas 2017:323) while others argue that conspiratorial thinking is a

distinctively modern phenomenon associated with the rise of the public sphere, high levels of literacy and mass culture (Oberhauser 2021; Byford 2011). The historians who see conspiracies as trans-historical experience have explored the role of conspiracies in the classical antiquity (Roisman 2006, Pagan 2004), and the early modern period (Zwierlein 2013) while the modernists have focused more on developments in the post-revolutionary France (Tackett 2000), 19th century Europe or and 20th century US (Konda 2019, Butter 2014, Oberhauser 2020). Recent historical research has highlighted the changing character of conspiracy theories. For example, Butter and Reinkowski (2014) show how conspiratorial thinking was more prevalent in the first than the second half of 20th century US while in the Middle East the conspiracy theories have become more popular in the second half of the 20th and beginning of the 21st century.

The psychological and historical research helps us explain some aspects of this phenomenon. However, these perspectives generally do not engage with the wider social processes that make conspiracy theories possible and appealing to different social strata. Whereas psychological research tends to overemphasise individual motivations much of historical scholarship is narrowly centred on the individual case studies without attempting to identify some general processes that shape conspiratorial thinking and actions. This is an area where sociological analysis can make a significant contribution.

Nevertheless, sociologists have only recently started analysing conspiracy theories in a systematic way (Nefes & Romero-Reche 2021; Boltanski 2014; Asadi 2010). The starting proposition of most sociological research is that conspiracy theories are form of knowledge claim that has to be analysed in a similar way to other types of knowledge (i.e. science, historical narratives, religion, myth, or indigenous knowledge). This principle goes back to the classical texts in the sociology of knowledge where the focus is on the social foundation of ideas and beliefs (Manheim 1936, Merton 1957). In this context conspiracy theories are to be analysed as a particular form of relatively systematic belief system. Since both sociology and conspiracy theories aim to make sense of the world, they can be perceived as competing paradigms of explanation. As they both offer a particular theory of society Boltanski (2014) conceptualises conspiracy theory as a form of ‘lay sociology’. Nevertheless, unlike the contemporary sociological theories which emphasise contingency, randomness, and the processual character of social change nearly all conspiracy theories focus on identifiable agents, pre-determined actions, and sinister plots. As Barkun (2003) points out the narrative structure of most conspiracy theories is almost identical: they all invoke the following three principles: a) ‘everything is connected’, b) ‘nothing happens by chance’, and c) ‘things are not what they seem to be’.

The sociological studies explain the contemporary rise in the conspiratorial narratives by focusing on the wider social changes. Hence Bronner (2015, 2016) argues that the unprecedented development and use of information technologies including mobile phones and social media together with the existence of the public sphere with protected free speech has generated ‘the liberalisation of the cognitive market’. This concept stands for a market ‘where cognitive products are traded such as assumptions, beliefs, knowledge, which can compete against one another, or exist in situations of monopoly or oligopoly’ (Bronner 2016:54). However, the proliferation of conspiracy theories is also linked to other structural processes. For example, in his analysis of conspiracy theories in 22 societies across the globe Bronner and his collaborator found that conspiratorial narratives are prevalent in social orders characterised

by the low level of democracy, high unemployment rate and high levels of corruption. In these environments the level of public trust is usually very low (Cordonier, Cafiero & Bronner 2021). Other sociologists have explored how the loss of trust in experts, academics, mass media and politicians together with the ever-increasing complexity of social and political events and processes has generated greater support for conspiracy theories whereby they operate as ‘complexity-reducing strategy’ (Renard 2015). The newly emerging sociological research on conspiracies is illuminating and useful in helping us understand the social dynamics of conspiracy theories. However, this scholarship has little to say about the relationship between nationalism and conspiracy theories³.

3. Nationalism

In a similar way to the study of conspiracy theories nationalism is a multidisciplinary and vibrant field of research. The classical approaches in the nationalism studies were mostly focused on the two main questions: How old are nations and nationalisms? And which factors have played the central role in making nationalism so prevalent in the modern world? The key representatives of the modernist approaches such as Gellner (1983), Anderson (1983) and Hobsbawm (1990) have argued that nationhood had little if any political resonance in the pre-modern world where the central pillars of group identification were religion, status, lineage, clan, kinship or locality. The traditional world of empires, patrimonial kingdoms and city-states prioritised aristocratic lineage and inherent status markers over cross-class solidarity that characterises modern day nation-states. Hence nationalism is a form of political legitimacy that becomes dominant only under the modern conditions – with the rise of modern state, spread of capitalism, industrialisation and urbanisation, the standardisation of vernacular languages, the development of state-run educational systems and the dramatic increase in the literacy rates across societies (Gellner 1983, Anderson 1983). For modernists the rise of nationalism is a by-product of economic and political changes and as such this ideology makes sociological sense only in modern world. In direct contrast ethno-symbolists such as Smith (1986), and Hutchinson (2017) insist that nations do not emerge *ex nihilo* but are product of the long-term cultural development. They argue that many contemporary nations have historical cultural cores around which variety of nationalist movements have emerged. In Smith’s (2003) view nations have ethnic origins that in some instances such as with Jews, Armenians, Japanese or Chinese can be dated to thousands of years. In this understanding nations and nationalism develop on the cultural foundations of pre-modern *ethnies*. Unlike modernists who emphasise a sharp break between the traditional and modern world for the ethno-symbolists it is the continuity in the cultural sphere that is central. This cultural continuity between traditional *ethnies* and modern nations is maintained through shared cultural resources: myths, including the myth of common descent, collective memories of past events (ethno-history) and common values and beliefs. Thus, popular appeal of nationalist

³ There have been several recent publications that have focused on the relationship between nationalism and conspiracy theories in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic (Zhai & Yan 2023; Jia & Luo 2023 and Rieger 2021). However, these studies tend to focus on a single case study and do not engage with the sociological theories of nationalism.

movements resides in their ability to invoke these tangible cultural links with the ethnic ancestors.

The recent scholarship on nationalism has focused more on how national idioms and practices persist in the contemporary contexts. The starting point of this research was Billig's (1995) notion of banal nationalism which centred on the habitual reproduction of nation-centric images and practices in everyday life. Instead of exploring the aggressive rhetoric or violent displays of nationalism in times of conflict this approach shifted the gaze towards less visible instances of banal production of nationalist tropes – from the way how weather reports are framed and displayed to the unconscious reproduction of national symbols in cuisine, postal stamps, coins, or sporting events. The scholars of everyday nationhood such as Fox and Miller-Idriss (2008) and Skey (2011) have analysed number of processes through which nationalism becomes normalised and naturalised in everyday life. As Fox and Miller-Idriss (2008) show everyday nationalism is discursively constructed and reproduced through variety of routine practices including the everyday conversations, consumption practices and ritual performances. More recently Wimmer (2018) has developed a synthetic approach that aims to incorporate the historical focus on nation-formation with the analysis of how nationalism operates in the contemporary world. Hence Wimmer (2018) explores the dynamics of nation building across the world and argues that the spread of civil society organisations, linguistic assimilation, and the state's ability to generate public goods together with the lack of political exclusion are likely to foster greater national cohesion. In this understanding nationalism is tied to the state development and is shaped by geopolitical realities as well as by the internal political processes..

The classical and contemporary scholarship on nationalism is useful for understanding how nation-centric ideas and practices have become embedded in modern institutions and in the everyday life of billions of individuals throughout the globe. Nevertheless, since these approaches do not focus much on the conspiracy theories it is necessary to bring together these two research literatures and develop an integrated theoretical model

4. Analysing Nationalist Conspiracies: An Alternative Theoretical Model

Obviously, many conspiracy theories focus on other topics than nationhood, such as economy, science, health, sport, or culture. Nevertheless, once nationalism has become the dominant operative ideology of modern era the nation-centric conspiracies have proliferated and even those conspiracies that are not nominally centred on nationhood often tend to incorporate nationalist rhetoric. For example, the COVID-19 pandemic has given rise to many conspiracy theories focused on science, health sector, political institutions, and private business corporations, yet many of these conspiratorial narratives often invoke nationalist principles. The identified 'conspirators' and 'plotters' might come from the world of business (Bill Gates, George Soros), or science and medicine (doctors, epidemiologists, or vaccine producers) but their alleged scheming plans are often framed as a threat to one's nation (Malešević 2022, Bieber 2022). For instance, in many conspiratorial discourses Soros is regularly blamed as the 'puppet master responsible for helping Hungary's enemies', 'a traitor to the United States', or 'enemy of the people' (Folk 2021).

To explore this relationship between nationalism and conspiracy theories further we will articulate an alternative theoretical model that draws on the grounded nationalism approach

(Malešević 2022, 2019, 2013). In this perspective nationalism is a historically grounded phenomenon the intensity of which is determined by variety of organisational, ideological, and micro-interactional processes. The proliferation of nationalist ideas and practices is dependent on the existence of coercive-organisational capacities of states and other entities, and on the ability of these organisations to ideologically penetrate the social order. The strength of ideological and organisational power is also reliant on their envelopment within the networks of micro-level solidarities. Hence the historical and contemporary rise and fall of nationalism is shaped by organisational, ideological, and micro-interactional grounding. Thus, our focus will be on the three processes that affect both nationalism and conspiracy theories: a) the dynamics of micro-solidarity and the wider micro-interactional contexts, b) the organisational capacities of entities involved, and c) the ideological penetration of these discourses.

The micro-interactional context: Although some individuals are more prone than others to believe in conspiracy theories, these theories are generated, reproduced, and maintained in the collective rather than individual settings. The backbone of most conspiratorial activity are conspiracy communities composed on small number of active participants and a larger audience that is highly receptive to these activities (Phadke et al 2021, Klein et al 2019, Sunstein and Vermeule 2009)⁴. For example, in their analysis of longitudinal data from 56 conspiracy communities Phadke et al (2021:1) show that ‘dyadic interactions with members of the conspiracy communities and marginalization outside of the conspiracy communities are the most important social precursors to conspiracy joining’. Furthermore, the conspiracy communities play a decisive role in keeping individuals committed to the conspiratorial beliefs even when such beliefs are incontrovertibly proven to be false. As conspiracy communities provide emotional support, moral guidance, and reputational pressure to committed individuals they are often difficult to leave. As Sunstein and Vermeule (2009) argue these communities generate the environment of ‘emotional snowballing’ whereby one’s reactions to negative emotions create more of such emotions. Hence confronting the members of conspiracy communities with evidence that challenges their beliefs is likely to make them even more hostile towards the outsiders and more committed to their conspiracy communities. Similarly, nationalism is a doctrine and a practice that is most influential when embedded deeply in the networks of micro-level solidarity (Malešević 2019, 2013; Dunbar 2021). Individuals often espouse strong nationalist beliefs when their close friends and family members share such beliefs. Moreover, nationalism is also habitually reproduced through everyday face to face interactions in familiar settings. From watching the Olympics or football world cups with the friends, to having the 4th July family barbeques in the US or taking a part in events celebrating Queen’s birthday in the UK and so on. Hence both nationalism and conspiracy theories are grounded in the micro-world. The information that underpins one’s attachment to the nation as well as one’s commitment to conspiratorial thinking are shared and reproduced in the micro-social contexts – local community, work colleagues, family, friends, and the social media groups. This is not to say that nationalism and conspiracy theories are the same or that they have the equal degree of influence on individuals. Obviously, there is a clear asymmetry here

⁴ Obviously, the conspiracy communities are not fixed and permanent groups but are highly dynamic entities that wax and wane as social environment changes. The membership of these communities oscillates and is impacted by the wider social processes (Sunstein and Vermeule 2009).

as conspiracy theories appeal to relatively small number of individuals while nationalist discourses are much more prevalent throughout modern societies. The point is that they both can have lasting impact only when they are embedded in the micro-world.

The organisational capacities: Although micro-level solidarities are crucial for the persistence of particular beliefs, they are unlikely to have a wider reach without the organisational shells that can channel, disseminate, and coordinate such ideas and practices. Hence neither nationalist ideas nor conspiracy theories can be disseminated without specific social organisations such as the state, political parties, social movements, pressure groups or ad hoc associations. Since nationalism is a doctrine that legitimises the very existence of nation-state its proliferation remains wedded to the organisational power of the modern state. Nationalism is so potent in the modern world precisely because it is directly or indirectly promulgated by the institutions of the nation-state including the educational system, mass media, judiciary, police, military, welfare offices and so on (Gellner 1983, Anderson 1983, Malešević 2017). The nation-state dominates the organisational space – it controls the national borders, and the main institutions, it establishes and polices rules and regulations, and it also possesses the administrative apparatus and huge personnel. In addition, as the scholars of everyday nationhood show nationalism is also embedded in daily practices outside of the state – from organised civil society groups, social movements, informal associations to the small-scale networks of individuals engaged in rituals that perform, enact, or celebrate nationhood (Fox 2017). The proliferation of conspiracy theories is also dependent on the existence of organisational structures. However, as many conspiracy theories directly challenge the existing governments, they tend to be promoted more outside of state institutions – within civil society groupings, social media networks, political parties, social movements and so on. In some cases, particularly in the authoritarian contexts, the state infrastructure can be used to disseminate conspiracy theories about involvement of other governments in the elaborate plots to harm ‘our nation’ as has recently been the case in Russia, China, and Iran (Bieber 2022; Malešević 2022). During the Trump presidency several government officials including Trump and his family members have promoted variety of conspiracy theories including QAnon, Deep State, the Great Replacement, Pizza gate and other conspiracies (Mylonas & Whalley 2022). Nevertheless, the nationalist centred conspiracies usually have wider reach than most non-nationalist conspiracies as they utilise familiar nationalist tropes that appeal to the wider audience. The idea that one’s nation is special and in some sense superior to others is a theme present in many mainstream narratives that are reproduced in the educational system, mass media or the wider public sphere. The conspiratorial discourses usually build on these tacit idioms to promote more radical claims about external and domestic threats. In this context both the state institutions and the non-state organisations become important vehicles of nationalist conspiracy diffusion.

The ideological penetration: Nationalist conspiracies could not be effective without specific social organisations involved in their dissemination and their embedment in the micro-level solidarities. However, what also matters is the content of ideological narratives. Nationalist conspiracies appeal to their audience by invoking specific moral, emotional or interest driven parameters of behaviour. They depict the history, present and future of one’s nation through the images of victimhood, sacrifice, bravery, or treachery. Drawing on the familiar tropes of national exceptionality, uniqueness, and moral superiority – the idioms already reproduced in the mainstream outlets – they tend to radicalise the conventional narratives of nationhood by identifying the specific ‘plotters’ who are scheming to destroy ‘our nation’. In these narratives

the traditional nationalist myths are re-articulated so as that they link the historical enemies of the nation with the specific contemporary villains and to project a historical continuity between various secret plans that threaten ‘our nation’. Hence it is no accident that in many nationalist conspiracies the same imagined agents are identified as a continuous national threat – the Jews, the illuminati, the Free Masons, the Jesuits, the Muslims and so on. The fact that 1903 anti-Semitic forgery ‘The Protocols of the Elders of Zion’, a conspiracy invoking the plot of Jewish global domination is still widely published and circulated indicates how persistent and lasting are many conspiracy theories (Malešević 2022, Byford 2011). More recently the explicit antisemitism or anti-Muslim rhetoric has been partially tempered with coded language that either targets specific individuals (i.e. George Soros, or the Rothschilds as the code for Jews) or particular cultural practices (promoting Judeo-Christian civilization or secular tradition as the code targeting Muslims). Despite the sheer diversity of nationalist conspiracies throughout the world they share similar ideological precepts identified by Barkun (2003) and now only applied to the nationhood: all the actions in the plots to harm or destroy our nation are connected, nothing in these plots against our country happens by chance and the peaceful coexistence of nations is a ploy to hide the true plans of destruction.

Before we explore how these three processes work in practice it is also important to provide information on methodology and to contextualise nationalism and conspiracy theories in the environment of COVID-19 pandemic.

5. Methodology and Case Justification

The data analysed in the paper are gathered as a part of the large-scale project ‘World problem, national solutions: The impact of national past on behaviour during the pandemic’ funded by SFI and HRB in the Republic of Ireland (Carol et al 2023). The data was collected by IPSOS Geneva who recruited respondents via online access panels in five countries: England, Germany, Sweden, Ireland, and Serbia. The sampling frame was based on the national statistics from the most recent censuses in each country. The quota sample was used that is representative in the distribution of age, gender, region and education across all five countries. The main characteristics of the sample by country, age, sex, and level of education are given in the Table 1. The fieldwork was completed between 8th and 30th of March 2021: N=7000 with 6,821 valid cases analysed. The sample size for large countries such as Germany and England was 2000 each and for the remaining three smaller states the sample size was 1000 each. The aligning of the sample and population on key variables was carried out using RIM (Random Iterative Method) weighting (Carol 2023). The questionnaire consisted of 31 questions and the standard socio-demographic variables. The Likert type scales were used to measure nationalist orientations. The qualitative data, including several open-ended questions, was also collected in this project. However only small segment of this data is presented here with an aim of illustrating the typical conspiracy theories that have circulated in the public sphere of the five countries analysed.

The case study justification provided here compares five European countries in terms of their ICU beds per 1,000 people, stringency index, health expenditures as a percentage of GDP⁵, the levels of public protest against COVID19 measures and the prevalence of conspiracy theories in the public sphere. The countries included in the study are Germany, Ireland, England, Serbia, and Sweden. The case study is comparing five European countries: three EU members (Germany, Ireland, and Sweden), one ex-EU member (England) and one non-EU member (Serbia) in terms of their ICU beds per 1,000 people, stringency index and health expenditures as a percentage of GDP.

Firstly, the study compares countries regarding the number of ICU beds per 1,000 people in each country. According to the World Bank data⁶ Germany has the highest number of ICU beds per 1,000 people at 6.01, Ireland and England have middle numbers at 2.69 and 2.42 respectively and Sweden has the lowest number at 1.9⁷. This suggests that Germany has a higher capacity to handle critically ill patients than the other countries.

Secondly, the study compares the countries based on their stringency index. The stringency index measures the strictness of government restrictions and policies implemented to slow the spread of COVID-19. According to the stringency index in Our World in Data⁸ Serbia has the highest stringency index at 96.3, followed by Ireland at 90.74, England at 79.63, Germany at 76.85 and Sweden at 64.81. This suggests that Serbia had the strictest restrictions and policies to slow the spread of COVID-19.

Thirdly, the comparison is made in terms of health expenditures. Our World in Data⁹ shows that Germany's health expenditure as a percentage of GDP is 9.83%, Sweden's is 9.22%, England's is 7.84%, Serbia's is 5.32% and Ireland's is 4.98%. This suggests that Germany and Sweden have higher investment in their healthcare systems compared to the other countries.

Finally, as this paper focuses only on nationalism and conspiracy theories two additional case justifications are provided: the countries are chosen according to the scale of the COVID-19 public protests relative to their size and the prevalence of conspiracy theories in the public sphere (Carnegie Protest Tracker 2023; der Zwet et al 2022) Both of these indicators are crucial in tracing the dynamics of nationalist orientations and their relationship with the conspiratorial thinking in England, Germany, Ireland, Serbia and Sweden.

The study received approval for exemption from full ethical review by the Human Research Ethics Committee at University College Dublin (HS-E-21-11-Malesevic).

6. Operationalisation

⁵ These datasets are publicly available. Our case study justification was made for the entire project 'World problem, national solutions: The impact of national past on behaviour during the pandemic'.

⁶ <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SH.MED.BEDS.ZS?locations=RS-DE-SE-GB-IE>

⁷ No data available for Serbia.

⁸ [https://ourworldindata.org/covid-stringency-index#:~:text=The%20stringency%20index%20is%20a,100%20\(100%20%3D%20strictest\).](https://ourworldindata.org/covid-stringency-index#:~:text=The%20stringency%20index%20is%20a,100%20(100%20%3D%20strictest).)

⁹ <https://ourworldindata.org/grapher/public-health-expenditure-share-GDP-OWID?country=SWE~IRL~SRB~GBR~DEU>

Since our focus is on the two areas of study, nationalism and conspiracy theories and their relationships, it is necessary to operationalise both concepts. In this project we have conceptualised nationalism as ‘an ideology that rests on the popularly shared perceptions and corresponding practices that posit the nation as a principal unit of human solidarity and political legitimacy’ (Malešević 2013: 75). To adequately measure different aspects of nationalism we have selected variables that measure different attitudes towards national history and the key nationalist principles. The attitudes to national history as framed as the perceptions of national past relating to the origins and longevity of one’s nation (duration of the past), the role of the nation (function of the national past) and the meaning of the nation (essence of the national past). These three areas of analysis are operationalised through the typology of national history which draws conceptually on the leading theoretical approaches – primordialism (Gat, Grosby), ethno-symbolism (Smith, Hutchinson), modernism (Gellner, Anderson) and constructivism (Hobsbawm, Brubaker) (Ozkirimli 2017). Hence different positions towards national past (duration) are articulated through the following statements: the history of my nation is as long as the history of the world (primordialism); my nation is one of the oldest in the world (ethno-symbolism); the history of my nation starts with the beginning of the modern world (modernism); And some parts of our national history are invented by people in recent times (constructivism). The function and essence of the national past is operationalised through the following statements: many bad things that happened to my nation in the past are deliberately omitted from our current history textbooks; stories from the past of my nation help us remember who we are; and the history of my nation is an accurate record of events.

We have also identified the central principles that underpin most nationalist ideologies. These principles are derived from Smith’s (2010, 2003) work and are formulated as follows: 1. the world is naturally divided into nations; 2. if they wish to be free, people must belong to a nation. 3. loyalty to a nation is more important than other loyalties; and 4. each nation should have an independent state.

The conspiracy theory is defined as a covert plot involving individuals, groups, nations, social organisations or supernatural forces who aim ‘to usurp political or economic power, violate rights, infringe upon established agreements, withhold vital secrets, or alter bedrock institutions’ (Douglas et al 2019:4). To better differentiate between the existing conspiracy narratives we distinguished strong, medium, and weak versions of conspiracy theories. The main criteria used for this typology is the level of plausibility, the prevalence of specific conspiracies and the existing validations of such typologies¹⁰. Hence the popular conspiracy theories that rely on the claims that have not even a vague link with the factual reality were categorised as strong conspiracy theories. In this category we included conspiracies blaming the following individuals and groups as the key agents responsible for the creation and global spread of COVID-19 – Bill Gates, George Soros, companies installing the 5G masts, Jews, Muslims, and immigrants. The medium level of conspiracy theory relates to the agents that have no direct proven involvement but might be indirectly held responsible for certain policies

¹⁰ The distinction between these three versions of conspiracy theory draws on the existing theoretical models and empirical research that differentiate between the strong and weak forms of conspiratorial beliefs (see Wang & Kim 2021; van Prooijen 2020; Müller 2016). We have just expanded this standard distinction into the three rather than only two categories (strong, medium, and weak) to capture the intensity and complexity of these beliefs. Of course, such theoretical models can never be free from bias.

that might have hypothetically contribute to the spread of the disease – USA, Russia, scientists, God. Finally, the weak version of conspiracy theory relates to agents/structural processes that could be associated with the negative consequences of the pandemic but there is no empirical evidence that these forces have deliberately created and spread the pandemic: capitalism, as socio-economic system that privileges profit maximisation over human health and China as a country from which the pandemic originated.

7. Nationalism and COVID-19: The Social Context

The sudden and global spread of the COVID-19 pandemic had a profound impact on everyday life. The pandemic has instantly affected the entire world and has changed the patterns of behaviour for billions of individuals. Yet, despite this global character the responses to the pandemic were distinctly national in two principal ways: a) every government adopted different policies of containment and population control and b) the citizens of individual nation-states responded differently to pandemic situation. The actions of individual governments including their capacity and will to quickly close state borders, stop travel between countries, police their populations and introduce draconian lockdown measures clearly indicates that nation-states still possess enormous organisational power in the contemporary world. The spread of COVID-19 has resulted in the rise of nation-centric policies with governments of most states prioritising their own citizens when purchasing medical equipment, arranging health care, financing research, acquiring, or distributing vaccines or COVID-19 tests. For example, in the first months of the pandemic many European governments have struggled against each other to acquire as many ventilators, intensive care units and other medical necessities as possible to save their own citizens (Dettmer 2020). Furthermore, many governments have introduced various welfare and economic measures to protect their citizens such as providing payments to the companies that had to close during the lockdowns, and to those workers who could not access their places or work or have lost their jobs (Bieber 2022; Antonsich 2020). The parliaments of many states were also involved in sanctioning new regulations and laws that have centralised the decision-making and have introduced new policies to protect their citizens. Nevertheless, the concrete measures and policies taken by world governments were very different with some states choosing radical approaches with rigorous and prolonged lockdowns such as Ireland or Philippines while others opting for short or mild policies of pandemic containment such as Sweden or Tajikistan. While some countries such as Austria mandated the use of high-quality masks everywhere other such as Sweden resisted such measures (<https://ourworldindata.org/policy-responses-covid>).

In addition to different state policies the civil societies across the globe also reacted differently to the pandemic. What was common to these reactions is the shared sense of nation-centred solidarity. In most societies COVID-19 situation generated expressions of national unity and solidarity with the victims of pandemic, their families, and the front-line workers. In this context one could witness variety of large-scale rituals of national unity throughout the globe (Antonsich 2020; Goode et al. 2020). Nevertheless, the practices organised to celebrate or commemorate these individuals were rather different across the countries. For instance, in Italy many radio stations broadcasted ‘the stories of ordinary and famous Italians who directed their courage and inventiveness towards helping the nation fight the virus’, emphasising that ‘the others cannot understand all this because . . . they are not Italians’ (Antonsich 2020:1). During the lockdowns in China and Spain many people were involved in spontaneous singing of

patriotic songs from their balconies (Langlay & Coutts 2021). In the UK, India, France, Spain, and the Netherlands the citizens were involved in nation-wide campaign that celebrated the sacrifices of the front-line workers in the hospitals. These daily rituals were regularly framed in nation-centric language such as ‘Clap for our Heroes’ or ‘Clap for our Carers’ in the UK (Hurst 2020). Some initiatives of solidarity by ordinary people have received the nation-wide attention and have become ritualistic events such as 99-year-old WWII veteran captain Tom Moore walking 100 laps in his garden to support the HNS and in this process collecting £32 million (Murray 2020).

The pandemic has also generated proliferation of many conspiracy theories across the globe. As soon as the pandemic started in Wuhan, China the social media and other outlets were awash with conspiracy theories about the origin of the COVID-19. Most conspiratorial narratives depicted the pandemic as a form of biological weapon that was deliberately created in the lab. In some such narratives the members of the Chinese government were identified as the ‘secret plotters’ while in other conspiracy theories the culprits were elsewhere – from the US government or US private corporations to Russian or even Israeli government officials. US corporations and their key representatives were particularly targeted by conspiracists with Bill Gates and Microsoft and George Soros and Soros Fund Management often identified as the main culprits behind the COVID-19 virus. Very early into the pandemic Bill Gates was singled out as the principal financier of the UK based Pirbright Institute which was alleged to be a place where the virus was artificially produced. The Microsoft corporation was also depicted as the main culprit behind the plot to ‘inoculate’ global population with trackable microchips and Gates had to address this conspiracy on several occasions to demonstrate that neither he nor Microsoft are involved in microchipping (Malešević 2022). Many YouTube videos and twitter accounts were made to spread this conspiracy. Similarly, George Soros was identified as the owner ‘the WuXi PHARMA LAB located in Wuhan, China where COVID-19 was developed and conveniently Broke Out’ (Funke 2020). This misinformation was also circulated widely on various social media platforms. Other conspiracy theories have focused on the 5G mobile networks with the popular allegations that they are the main transmitters of the virus. This conspiracy theory, disseminated to the hundreds of millions of viewers around the globe was based on the idea that COVID-19 was a product of wireless technologies and electromagnetic fields (Destiny 2020).

Although all these conspiracies were focused on a global problem, the pandemic, and many had a global reach they often had different national framing. For example, in the US, UK and many European countries Chinese government was designated as the main culprit of conspiracy, in the rest of the world the representatives of other nation-states were blamed. Hence the conspiratorial discourses in China and Russia often described the onset of the pandemic as the ‘Anglo-Saxon Revenge’ claiming that COVID-19 virus was created and spread by the US government as a secret biological weapon against China (or Russia and China) (Turp-Balazs 2020). In other countries the Deep State conspiracy was invoked to proclaim ‘domestic traitors’, ‘spies’, ‘fifth column’ as being behind the pandemic. For instance, the high circulation tabloids in Serbia such as *Informer* and *Srpski Telegraf* have published numerous articles invoking variety of conspiracies such as that ‘new corona virus has been created in the laboratory so as to weaken Chinese economy that is expanding’, of ‘the virus was manufactured in the American labs to target China, India, some African countries and all those who cannot accept American hegemony and dominance including Latin Americans, Arabs and Slavs’ or ‘The West is preparing a biological war against Slavs and against Chinese

aiming to reduce the world population to 500 million people' (Marković 2020). As the pandemic continued to spread with the several waves of intensive infections followed by numerous lockdowns and social restrictions the nationalist conspiracy theories have become even more popular. The development of new technologies including the mass scale use of social media has contributed substantially to the proliferation of conspiracy theories with nationalist content. These conspiratorial narratives have also galvanised new social movements centred on protesting against the COVID-19 measures introduced by the governments.

7.1. The Conspiracy Theories in Serbia, Ireland, England, Germany, and Sweden: The Qualitative Responses

In the five countries we explore here the main conspiracy theories had very different framings. These differences can be tracked in the conspiratorial narratives that permeate some mass media and social media in Europe (Bieber 2022, Mylonas and Whalley 2022, Rieger 2021). This is also reflected in different conspiratorial discourses that emerge in the qualitative responses to our survey¹¹.

The Serbian sample stands out in the popularity of different conspiracy theories about the pandemic. Many of the main villains identified by the Serbian respondents are linked with the specific conspiracies. Some conspiracies centre on government's collusion with the external forces: 'the government, Gates, and Soros. The mentioned culprits are only interested in money' or 'WHO, which has completely failed, and is obviously controlled by the world powers like Soros and Gates'. However, in most cases the dominant conspiratorial narrative focuses on the external threats to Serbia. In many cases the main national threat is identified in powerful countries that bombed Serbia's cities in the 1999 Kosovo war – NATO, US, or 'the globalists'. So, one can read these nationalist centred conspiracy theories: 'USA and Bill Gates'; 'The virus was imposed for economic and political reasons. Of course, I am angry at the globalists' or 'NATO', 'Creators of the virus. I am disappointed as I feel that we are guinea pigs being tested and experimented on' or 'the USA and all its scientists and rich people who rule the world and live in the United States, of course' or 'foreign factor, world oppressors'.

Although conspiracy theories among the Irish respondents were less prevalent than in the Serbian case, the conspiratorial thinking was still more visible here than in the other three countries. The main villains were again Soros, Gates, and the deep state. However as in the Serbian case many conspiracies were focused on the perceived threats to the nation. These threats were articulated in two principal ways: the historical national enemies and the profit-seeking corporations. Thus the blame for the spread of COVID-19 is attributed to the political actors such as 'The English government', 'The British'; 'The Chinese government' or 'Northern Ireland' but also to 'All media, world bank, Vatican, Switzerland & Washington DC' or 'the Bilderberg Group'; 'Billionaires like Jeff Bezos', 'the USA CIA Government' or 'the EU'. The economic actors that feature in most conspiracies are international organisations and foreign private corporations: 'WHO and ...drug producers', 'pharma and those rolling out the vaccines', 'scientists who created the virus' or 'global mega businesses, the New World Order cabal'. Thus, here again nationalism underpins many conspiracy theories.

¹¹ This section draws on the single open-ended question from our survey: 'Who were the main villains of the COVID-19 pandemic?'.

The respondents in England, Sweden and Germany were less inclined to invoke conspiracy theories and would often blame the conspiracy theorists themselves for the proliferation of the pandemic. However, there was still a substantial number of individuals in all three countries who relied extensively on the nation-centric conspiracies to make a sense of the COVID-19. Thus, in Germany Soros, Gates, industrialists, politicians, and pharmaceutical companies were associated with profiting from the pandemic: ‘Soros, Gates’, ‘the pharmaceutical industry’; ‘people making even more money out of the crisis, people knowingly spreading lies’, ‘the people, especially politicians, who are making money from Covid’. Globalisation and capitalist economy are also blamed by some: ‘Capitalism and globalisation’; ‘Capitalist bastards who lined their own pockets as a result of the situation’. Nevertheless just as in Serbia and Ireland many conspiracies had a strong nationalist expression with the focus either on the external threats or domestic enemies such as immigrants: ‘Governments working on biological substances designed to be used against other countries’, ‘China, and uneducated, bestialised, ignorant Moslem and Eastern European immigrants and asylum seekers in Europe because of their defiance of the coronavirus restrictions and spreading the virus in the form of ‘super spreader’ events because of their large-scale weddings, not wearing masks, large family gatherings, despite coronavirus’ or ‘China, immigrants, cultural enemies of the West’.

Similarly in England the principal targets of conspiracies were either the global economic agents or groups perceived to be a threat to the nation. The main economic forces were associated with big private corporations: ‘Big business who have profited from this’; or ‘Bill Gates, The Rockefeller Foundation, World Health Organization, World Economic Forum and Claus Schwab’. The national threats often include foreign actors such as EU, China, WHO while domestic enemies appear in the guise of ethnic and religious minorities and the liberal or left wing ideas: ‘Protestors, Black life matters protestors and people arranging and involving themselves in raves, ‘The World Health Organisation, the Chinese scientists who developed the virus’, ‘The EU, Kier Starmer, the so-called "woke" mob’; or ‘immigrants’; ‘Muslims’; ‘Big Pharma’.

The Swedish respondents also invoke similar conspiracy theories where the focus is on the profit maximisation or the national threats. So some conspiratorial views centre on the ‘Big Pharma’: ‘The pharmaceutical industry has died cheap and effective medicines just to get people onto the vaccination carousel’; ‘Globalists, the world’s elite Media The pharmaceuticals industry Corrupt politicians Corrupt “scientists” and doctors’; or ‘the vaccine producers’; ‘those who have spread the virus from the start: China / Soros’; ‘ Bill Gates’, ‘capitalism and its followers who are in their pockets’. Alternatively, the pandemic is perceived to be a plot involving minorities or external governments: ‘Migrant groups’; ‘China and the capitalists’; ‘Muslims’ or ‘Those who demonstrated in the BLM movement’, ‘Immigrants, do not understand the rules / recommendations. Thus, despite individual differences between the countries there is a common thread that binds many conspiracies and that is nationalism.

8. The Social Profile of Conspiracy Theorists: The Analysis of Descriptive Statistics

In this section we firstly present the general descriptive statistics focusing on the attitudes to the COVID-19 pandemic and then provide more elaborate statistical analyses on the relationship between beliefs in different conspiracy theories and nationalist ideologies.

The data indicates that most respondents do not believe that COVID-19 virus has been artificially manufactured (44.6 %). However, in all five countries many respondents believe that the virus was a human artificial creation. Furthermore, in one country (Serbia) very large majority of respondents (over 80%) believe that virus has been manufactured artificially. Irish sample also has a large number of people who share this belief (38%) while in other three country samples numbers are lower but still substantial: Germany 30%, England 26% and Sweden 24%. (Graph 1).

When asked more specifically about the main responsibility for virus a majority of respondents selected either “no-one” or “China” as the key offender. The Serbian respondents were less inclined to blame China with only 15% supporting this view. The no-one category was popular in Germany and England (over 40%), Ireland and Sweden (31% and 34% respectively) but not so much in Serbia (26%). (Graph 2). However, when this data is analysed as a binary with respondents’ answers grouped as no one vs. someone is responsible the results indicate majority across all five countries supporting the view that someone is responsible for the spread of the virus (on average 63.50%). There is also clear divide here. Just over a half of respondents in Germany and England identify someone as responsible, in Serbia, Ireland and Sweden that percentage goes from two thirds to three quarters of respondents. (Graph 3).

To gauge the spread of conspiratorial beliefs the question was asked about the responsibility of specific individuals, groups, organisations, processes, or supernatural beings for the spread of the virus. The data show high diversity of answers ranging from no-one and China, to the USA, Russia, Bill Gates, George Soros, 5G masts, Jews, Muslims, Immigrants, Scientists, God, Capitalism, or somebody else. Nevertheless, when these answers are categorised in terms of strong, medium, and weak conspiracy theories there are clear difference across the five countries (Graph 4). Even though the strong and medium conspiracy theory discourses are the minority view across the board Serbian and Irish population are more inclined towards these views compared to other three countries. In Serbian case 14% of the sample expresses belief in strong version of conspiracy theory which blames Soros, Gates, Jews, Muslims, immigrants or 5G masts for the spread of the pandemic. This view is also quite widespread in Ireland. In contrast this strong version of conspiracy theory is less popular in England, Germany and Sweden. Serbia and Ireland are also ahead of others in the popularity of the medium version of conspiracy theories (blaming USA, Russia, scientists, or God). In other three countries there is not much support for this view either. In contrast England, Sweden and Germany are ahead in the category of no belief in conspiracies. The category of weak conspiracy theory (i.e. blaming capitalism or China) has proved popular across the board with Sweden, England, and Germany heading the list (Graph 4).

The analysis of socio-demographic variables with the three types of conspiracy theories points out to visible differences across the country samples. Strong version of conspiracy theory is positively associated with religion in Serbia, England, and Germany while ethnicity is a statistically significant variable in relation to strong conspiracies in Sweden, Ireland, and Germany. Age is positively correlated with the strong conspiracy theories in England and Ireland. Being in full employment and having high income are also linked with the strong version of conspiracy theory in the case of Ireland while in Germany profession and higher degree of education

are statistically significant in this respect. In Swedish case gender stands out as male respondents were more inclined to believe in strong form of conspiracies (Table 2).

When zooming in on the link between the conspiracy theories and socio-political factors one can notice a general trend across all five country samples: very religious and more right-wing respondents are more inclined to believe in the strong conspiracy theories. These statistically significant results for religious commitment range from 7.42% in Ireland, 6.88% in Serbia, 5.23% in Germany, 3.75% in Sweden to 3.73% in England. For the right-wing political orientation results are also statistically significant and they range from 7.59% for Ireland, 6.75% for Sweden, 6.41% for Germany, 5.96 for England and 5.82% for Serbia (Table 3).

Our analysis has also focused on the link between different sources of information and one's commitment to conspiracy theories. The analysis of data indicates that the local community, work colleagues and the people followed on social media are the most common sources of information for those who subscribe to strong versions of conspiracy theory. Social media is significant in all five countries. Work colleagues also feature prominently as the main source of information linked to strong conspiracies in the three countries: Ireland, Germany, and Sweden. Local community is another important source of information for conspiracy theorists in Ireland, Germany, and Sweden while the anti-establishment media sources are significant for strong conspiracy theory attitudes in Germany, Sweden, and England. The information provided from the national leaders and experts appears to be linked with strong conspiratorial thinking only in the case of Sweden and Germany (Table 3).

9. Nationalism and Conspiracy Theories

To explore the relationship between nationalism and conspiratorial thinking we have conducted several different analyses. The principal component analysis was undertaken on the 'perceptions of national past' (Table 4). As explained above this category of analysis was composed of three groups of statements focusing on the duration, role/function/essence of the nation and the specific nationalist views. This analysis has generated four distinct nationalist orientations which have been termed here primordialism, nation-centric view of the world, historicism, and constructivism (all relevant statistics are presented in Table 4).

Primordialism includes high agreement with the statements emphasising primeval origins of one's nation, that the nation has experienced traumatic history which has been deliberately omitted from the textbooks, and that one's nation is much older than other nations.

Nation-centric view of the world is centred on the statements that describe the world as it has been naturally divided into nations, that loyalty to one's nation should override other group loyalties that each nation should have a state of its own and that belonging to a nation is a sign of one's freedom.

Historicism is expressed in the variables that invoke the importance of national history such as that events from the past are important for remembering what nation represents or that history of one's nation represents and accurate record of events.

Constructivism comprises statements that invoke the modernity of nations and the role different political actors had in inventing elements of national history (Table 4).

These four nationalist orientations are differently spread across the five country samples and are also differently linked with the conspiratorial thinking. A multiple regression analysis is conducted for each country where conspiracy theories variable is treated as dependent ordinal variable – from strong to no conspiracy theory – and nationalist orientations as

the predictor set. The analysis is controlled for religious and political orientations. Hence in Germany one can detect three distinct nationalist orientations: the nation-centric view of the world, primordialism and constructivism with the first two being linked with the stronger versions of conspiracy theory and the last one with the weaker conspiracy theory. In the case of England there are only two discernible orientations: the nation-centric view of the world, which is linked with the stronger version of conspiracy theory and constructivism which is not significant factor for conspiracy theories. In the Irish case primordialism is linked with the stronger conspiratorial thinking while the other detectable orientation, constructivism, just like in England, has no link with the conspiracies. Serbia and Sweden show similar trend: there are three distinct nationalist orientations in both cases: primordialism, the nation-centric view of the world and constructivism. While the first two are linked with the stronger versions of conspiracy theories in both countries, constructionism in Serbia is not a significant factor for conspiracy theories, while in Sweden that concept also has a positive effect on stronger forms of conspiracy theory (Table 5).

10. The Nationalist Conspiracies in Five European Countries: Back to Theory

The data collected and analysed in this study show clearly that the COVID-19 pandemic had different impact on the popular beliefs across the sample populations of the five countries surveyed. While in England, Germany, Sweden, and Ireland most respondents do not believe that the pandemic was artificially created this is not the case in Serbia where over 80% of the surveyed view the COVID-19 as something that was deliberately manufactured. Nevertheless, even in the other four countries a large number of respondents subscribe to this conspiratorial view, ranging from between one quarter and one third of the sample in Sweden, England, and Germany to 38% in Ireland. Moreover only 44.6 % of all respondents across all five countries believe that the COVID-19 virus was not artificially created and further 30.4% are not sure. When asked specifically about responsibility of different agents the majorities in all five countries tend to blame someone rather than no one (graph 3). Hence a degree of conspiratorial belief looms large across the surveyed population.

To probe the content and intensity of these beliefs we differentiated between the strong, medium, and weak versions of conspiracy theories. The data analysis indicates that the belief in strong and medium forms of conspiracy theories is more present in Serbia and Ireland than in the other three countries. While in Serbia more than 40% of respondents believe in strong or medium version of conspiracies in Ireland this involves almost one third of the respondents. In contrast in Germany, England and Sweden the belief in strong and medium version of conspiracy theory affects much smaller number of respondents although weak version of conspiracies was widespread throughout all five cases. Even though it is difficult to identify a social profile of a typical conspiracy theorist that would apply to all five cases it is clear that religion and political orientation are statistically significant across all five countries. Thus, respondents who describe themselves as very religious and right wing are more likely to believe in strong versions of conspiracy theory.

The data analysis also indicates that the different forms of nationalism are strongly linked with the variety of conspiracy theories. The principal component analysis has generated four distinct nationalist orientations which have been termed here: primordialism, the nation-centric view of the world, historicism, and constructivism. The sample populations of the five countries differ substantially in their nationalist preferences. For instance, primordialism is a pronounced orientation in Serbia, Ireland, Germany, and Sweden but has no resonance in England. Similarly, the nation-centric view of the world is present in England, Sweden, Germany and Serbia but not in Ireland. Different nationalist orientations underpin strong, medium, and weak conspiratorial beliefs. Out of four distinct nationalist orientations generated through factor analysis only two tend to be highly linked with the strong forms of conspiracy theories- primordialism (in Serbia, Ireland, Germany, and Sweden) and the nation-centric view of the world (in Serbia, England, Sweden, and Germany). In direct contrast constructivism and historicism are negatively correlated with the conspiratorial beliefs.

What these findings indicate is that some forms of nationalism are more prone towards conspiratorial beliefs than others which is in line with what we originally hypothesised (H1). It is clear that there is an ‘elective affinity’ between both primordialism and the nation-centric view of the world and the strong versions of conspiracy theory. It is also clear those individuals who describe themselves as more religious and more right-wing were deeply sympathetic towards these forms of nationalism and conspiratorial belief systems. This is also in line with our hypotheses (H2 and H3). Such findings can be explained through the prism of the grounded nationalism perspective and the three processes outlined in the first part of the paper: a) the dynamics of micro-solidarity, b) the organisational capacity and c) the extent of ideological penetration (Malešević 2020, 2019). Firstly, the survey results show that the majority of individuals who share such beliefs are deeply grounded in their local communities. For example, for many of these respondents the main source of information are their micro-groups – the local community (Ireland, Sweden, England), the work colleagues (Germany, Ireland, Sweden) or the social media which often involves Facebook or Twitter friends, family members, or neighbours (Germany, Ireland, Serbia, Sweden, and England). As emphasised earlier social media is also a key arena for development of conspiracy communities where individuals receive emotional support and reinforce their beliefs. Nationalism too is embedded in the everyday life of the micro-level interactions. This is particularly the case with primordialism and the nation-centric view of the world as these orientations are reproduced habitually among the close friends, kinship, and peer groups. The ideas that one’s nation is as old as the world or that the world is naturally divided into nations are views that are usually acquired in the face-to-face settings of kinship networks, family units, friendships, or neighbourhoods. The key nationalist principles often emerge as a form of tacit knowledge attained through the banal experiences of everyday encounters in the micro-group settings (Fox 2017; Billig 1995).

Secondly, our data indicates that the spread of nationalist ideas and strong conspiratorial thinking requires a substantial degree of organisational capacity. It is no surprise that most respondents subscribe to the primordialist and the nation-centric view of the world as these views are constantly reproduced in the educational systems, mass media and the public sphere of individual nation-states throughout the world (Malešević 2019, Wimmer 2018, Anderson 1983, Gellner 1983). Both the state institutions and much of the civil society sector invoke the image of one’s nation as an entity that has always existed or that this is a normal, nature and optimal form of group identification. The public space is dominated by organisations that perpetuate these primordialist or traditional nationalist views of the nation on an everyday basis. There is

only very small number of social organisations in Serbia, Ireland, Germany, and England that challenge such hegemonic interpretations of nationhood. In contrast the leading state organisations, with partial exception of Serbia, contest the strong and medium versions of conspiratorial thinking about COVID-19. Since the strong conspiracy theories directly challenge governments' policies and their interpretations of reality the governments tend to perceive the conspiracy communities as a potential threat to the social order. This is particularly the case when the groups of organised conspiracy communities are involved in protests, attacks on government buildings and similar events (der Zwet et al 2022). Hence, the size and strength of organisational capacity impacts profoundly on ability of different social groups to influence the wider population. In this context the states have the decisive advantage to much smaller units of conspiracy communities. Consequently, while the nationalist discourses permeate public sphere this is much less the case with the strong version of conspiracy theories which, with the partial exception of Serbia¹², are associated with the marginal groups in each country.

Thirdly, the survey findings suggest that primordialism and the nation-centric view of the world are widely shared orientations among the respondents. This is not a surprise as both the state and civil society in the contemporary world perpetuate views that nations are immemorial and natural forms of collective identification. Thus, the ever-present ideological penetration of nationalist idioms and practices that has been initiated in the early 19th century has become an organisational norm in the 21st century world (Wimmer 2018, Gellner 1983). The key nationalist tropes of victimhood, sacrifice, treachery, or bravery are regularly invoked and reproduced in the educational system, mass media and the public sphere and this has particularly been visible during the COVID-19 pandemic. The governments of most states have appealed to the nationalist principles to justify variety of unprecedented decisions such as introducing protracted lockdowns, closing the state borders, halting the travel in the air, on the seas and on land, and imposing the compulsory health related measures such as masks, two-meter distancing, testing and vaccinations. The radically changing state policies were regularly justified using the recognisable idioms of protecting 'our people' – from saving our elderly, ill and vulnerable to protecting the nation as a whole. Guided by the nationalist principles the governments have also prioritised the care and protection of their own co-nationals. The idea of 'protecting our people' resonates well with the public as it taps into the widely shared views that everybody is a member of a primordial and natural form of a grouping called nation and that one's loyalty and attachment with the nation supersedes other forms of collective identification. These views were not only promulgated from the state, but they were also reproduced by the civil society and ordinary individuals. The relatively spontaneous rituals that glorify national solidarity such as 'Clapping for our Heroes', singing patriotic songs from the balconies and similar practices that have proliferated throughout the globe only indicate how deep is ideological penetration of nationalism in everyday life. Hence it is no surprise that many conspiracy theories rely on these recognisable nationalist idioms and often depict 'the conspirators' as evil foreigners or unassimilated Others in our midst – Soros, Gates, Jews, Muslims, immigrants etc. In this sense strong conspiratorial views do not necessarily challenge the established nationalist narratives. Instead, they only aim to radicalise the existing nationalist interpretations of reality. This is apparent in the fact that in all our five cases the strong version of conspiracy theories is fully aligned with the primordialist and the traditional nationalist orientations. Obviously only minority of those who subscribe to the primordialist, and the nation-centric views are prone

¹² The Serbian case indicates clearly how the organisational power of the nation-state can be used effectively to enhance the conspiratorial thinking in the public sphere.

towards beliefs that Soros or Gates have manufactured COVID-19 virus. However, those that share such conspiratorial views do see their nations as immemorial, normal and natural forms of collective identity. In contrast as the constructivist or modernist understandings of nationhood challenge the notion of immemorial and natural communities they do not resonate well with the wider audience and particularly have no link with the conspiratorial views. This finding confirms our hypothesis 4 (H4).

Finally, the differences between countries require some explanation. It is obvious that respondents from Serbia stand out in terms of their beliefs. This high preference for the nationalist conspiracy theories is a product of protracted unstable post-communist and post-war environments. Other post-communist societies are also characterised by relatively low level of trust in the state institutions and scientific authorities (Sapsford et al 2015). In addition, Serbia was involved in several wars in the 1990s that have left a strong legacy of distrust in the state but also foreign countries. The 1999 Kosovo war has inspired strong anti-western and particularly anti-American attitudes which feed into general animosity and distrust towards everything that comes from the West. Furthermore, many conspiracy theories are disseminated in the high circulation mass media while government officials either display ambivalent attitudes towards these conspiratorial messages or even support such ideas (Stojanović 2020). The state also has a high level of corruption and a low level of democracy (Welzel et al 2018). In this sense Serbia fits into the model identified by Bronner et al (2021) where conspiracy theories proliferate in the environments where there are weak democratic institutions, high unemployment rate and high levels of corruption. Although no other country in our study resembles Serbia Ireland also has a relatively large number of respondents who are inclined to believe in strong or medium versions of nationalist conspiracy theories. This can be explained in part through the intensive modernisation that Irish society has been experiencing since 1990s. This accelerated modernisation has transformed Ireland from being an underdeveloped agricultural society into a high tech oriented neoliberal global economy (Garvin 2003). These changes have generated a pronounced social divide that exists in Ireland between tradition and modernity. Hence mostly elderly and deeply religious population distrusts the direction the Irish state has been taking over the last several decades and are more prone towards conspiratorial thinking. Thus, in Serbia and to a lesser extent in Ireland nationalism is more linked with the strong versions of conspiracy theories. Although the populations of Germany, England and Sweden seem to also be just as prone towards nationalism the dominant nationalist orientations are less shaped by strong conspiratorial values.

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