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# ANTI-SOROS CONSPIRACY RHETORIC IN SLOVAK PARLIAMENTARY DISCOURSE: ACTORS, NARRATIVES, AND IMPLICATIONS<sup>1</sup>

L'ubomír Zvada\*

## ABSTRACT

This paper contributes to the very up-to-date topic of conspiracy theory. The main goal of this study is to analyse the main 'anti-Soros' narratives within Slovak parliamentary discourse. Due to qualitative content analysis, based on N=84 parliamentary speeches and comments, the author detected four main narratives that included several conspiracies. Four concrete narratives: (1) influence on Slovak politics; (2) delegitimisation of political opponents; (3) the anti-Semitic conspiracy ground; (4) the supporter and organiser have instrumentalised George Soros to their rhetoric while combining classical conspiracies narratives. The final narrative (5) condemnation of anti-Soros rhetoric, which represents de facto only founded counter-narrative and was significantly minor. In this context, and keeping in mind that anti-Soros discourse was four times bigger than the discourse condemning the use of this rhetoric, the author argues that the continuance of this dividing verbiage based on legitimising conspiracies could contribute to further polarising Slovak politics and society. On the other hand, the popularity of conspiracy theories must lead social scientists to (re)think even more about the mainstream discourses created over the last thirty years, which conspiracy narratives naturally oppose. It should also lead to examining the actors who set the principles and boundaries of mainstream discourses.

**Key words:** conspiracy theory, Slovak politics, Soros, discourse, narratives, parliamentary debates, CAQDAS, MAXQDA, qualitative content analysis, far-right, rhetoric, speech.

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## Introduction

As **Uscinski**, a leading scholar on conspiracy research stated: "conspiracy theories are a timely and timeless subject, but recent events highlight their timeliness" (Uscinski, 2019, p. 23). If we consider conspiracy theory/theories (hereafter CT/CTs) as a new phenomenon, a typical phenomenon of 'our age', or an exclusively Western phenomenon, we fail. Firstly, some studies focused on CT confirmed historical epochs such as the ancient Roman Empire, the later Stuart period, or the 1789 French revolution had been affected by conspiracies (Pagán, 2008; Knights, 2004; Campbell, 2004; Aston, 2004). Secondly, several studies investigated CTs across continents (see, e.g., Uscinski - Parent, 2014; Yablokov, 2018; Butter - Reinkowski, 2014; Astapova et al. 2021). Moreover, every continent or broader geographical space has a varying of level CT belief and preferred conspiracy; e.g., the USA has its own popular conspiracy such as "QAnon" (Russonello, 2021) or "Birtherism" (Sawyer, 2020); from the Ottoman Empire to modern-day Turkey, we can also detect old-fashioned anti-Semitic conspiracies which still persist (Nefes, 2013; Baer, 2013). Above all, the post-Soviet landscape, or the Central and Eastern Europe region (hereafter CEE), has its own specific conspiracies. In Czechia, Poland, Hungary and Slovakia, a popular conspiracy narrative about the 1989 revolution narrates that the collapse of these communist regimes was just a "foreign plot" (Panczová - Janeček, 2015; Krekó, 2019; Kofta - Soral, 2019). Thus, conspiracies are neither an exclusive element of traditional Western thought nor exclusively Western; as such, CTs existed, exist, and will exist without time and geographical exemption.

What has dramatically changed regarding CTs is the ability for them to spread. On the one hand, the discovery of the "World Wide Web" or so-called "New Media" has dramatically acted in favour of CTs and their spread. This impact was and still is visible during the COVID-19 pandemic (Douglas, 2021; Romer – Jamieson, 2020; Gruzd-Mai, 2020). If we consider that there is a positive connection between "crisis time and belief in conspiracy theories" (van Pooijen & Douglas, 2017), it is not surprising that CTs are currently circulating. Since 2008, when the global financial crisis erupted, a globalised world without an exemption of CEE went through several other important crises like the Eurozone financial crisis related to the Greek bankruptcy, the 2015 migration crisis, or the recent 2020 COVID-19 crisis. The CEE's political systems were then subject to a "hurricane season" (Haughton - Deegan-Krause, 2015) of authoritarian and

populist leaders, whose 'seductive lure'<sup>2</sup> seemed like an antithesis to contemporary liberal democracy based on political tools which undermined and delegitimised the results of free and democratic elections, political opponents, minority rights, free press, education, and the willingness to tolerate political violence (Levitsky-Ziblatt, 2018). More or less, authoritarian and populist politicians across the world, have incorporated CTs as a political tool for their rhetoric and used them in broader political discourse (Silva-Vegetti-Littvay, 2017; Kalmar, 2020; Plenta, 2020; Yilmaz-Shipoli, 2021). Slovakia is no exception.

According to accessible sociological data gathered in 2014, almost half of respondents (45.4%) had agreed or somewhat agreed with the statement that "the reality is usually different than it seems, powerful secret groups move the world according to a secret scenario" (Klobucký, 2014). Meanwhile, according to the 2020 public poll<sup>3</sup> presented by the Globsec - a Slovak-based think-tank - 60% of Slovaks agreed or somewhat agreed with the statement: "World affairs are not decided by elected leaders but by secret groups aiming to establish a totalitarian world order". Moreover, Slovakia reached more than a 50 % degree of prominence of five of the six postulated conspiracies in the survey, which was by far the highest within CEE countries (Globsec 2020).

This study analyses one of the most internationally dispersed conspiracy theories about **George Soros**, and it is focused on Slovak parliamentary discourse. The name of this US-Hungarian businessman and philanthropist was used, in a limited space, within Slovak political discourse much earlier than 2010. For example, democratic centre-right politician and former finance minister, **Ivan Mikloš** used **Soros'** speculative transactions in the stock market as an example of where no financial or any other laws were broken, contrary to **Ján Počiatek's** machinations during the setting of the central parity of Slovak crowns to Euro in 2008 (Balogová 2018; Hospodářské Noviny 2018). On the other hand, the authoritarian politician and former Prime minister, **Vladimír Mečiar**, abused **Soros'** financial influence on Slovak politics and Slovak civil society in the 1990s. According to **Mečiar**, **Soros** - through his non-governmental organisations (NGOs) influenced the HZDS<sup>4</sup> defeat in the 1998 parliamentary election (Sme, 2008; Soros in Sme.sk, 2001; Tamkin, 2020).

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<sup>2</sup>Applebaum's metaphor for authoritarian leaders is used in her book *Twilight of Democracy: The Seductive Lure of Authoritarianism* (see Applebaum, 2020).

<sup>3</sup>It included Baltic States, Visegrád states, Bulgaria, Romania, and Austria.

<sup>4</sup>Hnutie za demokratické Slovensko, Movement for Democratic Slovakia.

The 'Soros myth' or 'Soros card' appeared gradually in Slovak politics after the migration crisis erupted in 2015/2016. **Plenta's** paper scrutinising the use of **Soros** conspiracy solely focused on the short span between 2017-2019, and only on Smer-SD and **Fico's** utilisation of **Soros** conspiracy compared to **Orbán's** populist rhetoric on **Soros** in Hungary (Plenta 2020). This paper offers an analysis focused on the last decade and explains that Smer-SD is not the only political party using Soros conspiracy. The narrative painting **Soros** as a primary organiser of anti-government protests across Slovakia, after Kuciak and Kušnírová's murder, is only one of many within Slovak political discourse. This paper also addresses how other political parties or movements - especially far-right political forces such as K-ĽSNS and populist and nationalistic parties such as SNS or Sme Rodina - spread several important conspiracy theories and used them as an effective tool for political propaganda.

This study is structured as follows: A brief introduction to the current state of conspiracy research will be offered to conceptualise a key phenomenon. Subsequently, current research on conspiracy of both Western and Slovak scientific discourse will be emphasised. Following that, the methodological background of the paper will be presented, alongside the introduction of the main research questions, and data gathering and coding processes. Finally, this study will not only answer the postulated research questions, but the author also argues that conspiracy rhetoric became an inherent part of the broader context of the value struggle known as "cultural wars" additionally, it represents an extremely malign phenomenon for further Slovak democratic development.

## **1. Conspiracy theory: conceptualisation, the current stage, and the Slovak contributions**

As mentioned, conspiracies are a historical phenomenon. However, scientific contributions to conspiracy are the product of the modern-day, which has developed into a multidimensional approach including fields of study such as philosophy, sociology, political science, international relations, ethnology, anthropology, and cultural studies. Since the first conceptualisation of conspiracy phenomena - which **Hofstadter** outlined in the 1960s and defined as having a "paranoid style" (Hofstadter, 1965) - several famous names across social science disciplines, e.g., **Karl Popper**, **Theodore Adorno**, or **Harold Lasswell** were addressed for their research on conspiracies within recent decades (Butter-Knight, 2019), with the core of conspiracy research focusing on theoretical

debates in an effort to clarify the term conspiracy theory. As such, many studies focused on testing and explaining the various sociological, psychological, or political precursors that define what we call conspiracy beliefs. Regarding the first group of studies on how CT is defined (see Table 1 below), e.g., **Cassam** (2019) in his seminal book, established commonalities for what he calls "Conspiracy Theories"<sup>5</sup>; characterised by (1) speculative (2) amateurish (3) self-sealing (4) pre-modern (5) contrarian features.

**Table 1:** Conspiracy theories and their characteristics.

<b>(Cassam 2019)</b>	<b>(Barkun 2013)</b>	<b>(van Prooijen-van Vught 2018)</b>
speculative	nothing happens by accident	pattern
amateurish	nothing is as it seems	agency
self-sealing	everything is connected	threat
pre-modern		secrecy
contrarian		

Source: authors, based on the existing literature.

Meanwhile, in order to fight against misinformation and the spreading of CTs during the COVID-19 pandemic, the European Commission and UNESCO defined a six-point CT scale based upon every CT featuring the following common traits: (1) an alleged secret plot, (2) a group of conspirators, (3) 'evidence' that seems to support the conspiracy theory, (4) suggests that nothing happens by accident and that there are no coincidences/everything is connected, (5) the dividing of the world into good or bad, (6) scapegoat people and groups. Taking into account the relatively cohesive debate on the conceptualisation of CTs where the many definitions more or less share the same characteristics, this paper adopts **Farinellis's** definition of conspiracy theories, also used by the European Commission, which defines conspiracy theories as "*primarily stories and morality tales that can be completely fictional or based on a mix of facts and fiction that produce vicious circles of internally consistent explanations and analogies*" (Farinelli 2021, p. 5).

Regarding the second group of current, state of the art conspiracy research, multiple studies focused on predictors such as critical and analytical thinking (Swami et al., 2014; Gjoneska, 2021; Lantian (eds.) 2021) and education (van

<sup>5</sup>Cassam uses this term for conspiracies and the term "conspiracy theories" for real historical occasions that have been planned as a plot.

Prooijen, 2017) as linked to an increased ability to resist conspiracy theories. Additionally, a higher level of sociological predictors such as narcissism, self-esteem, attraction to Manichean narratives, or so-called national narcissism indicated a higher level of conspiracy belief (see, e.g., Sternisko (eds.) 2021; Cichocka-Marchlewska-de Zavala, 2016; de Zavala-Cichocka-Eidelson-Jayawickreme, 2009; Oliver-Wood, 2014; de Zavala-Cichocka, 2012). Regarding political preferences and CTs, the recent study has shown that: (1) supporters of political parties that are judged as extreme on either end of the political spectrum in general terms have increased conspiracy mentality; (2) there is a positive linear relation with pronouncedly greater conspiracy mentality for supporters and voters of parties coded as traditional, authoritarian, and nationalistic as opposed to the green, alternative, and liberal (Imhoff (eds.), 2022).

Compared to the West, Slovakia lacks the long and systematic research tradition on conspiracy observed in the Anglophonic world. However, the Institute of Experimental Psychology, Slovak Academy of Sciences, has contributed several crucial political psychology papers which were dedicated to CTs within the Slovak context. Nevertheless, in 2018, Mikušková, in her study, showed that future Slovak teachers had mid-point agreements with conspiracy theories and that students reading and watching legitimate media believed significantly more in conspiracy theories than those reading and watching tabloids. (Mikušková, 2018). Then, Šrol-Čavojová-Mikušková also provided several studies during the COVID-19 pandemic. From one of the recent studies, they approved the "higher perception of risk of COVID-19 and lower trust in institutions' response to the pandemic were related to feelings of anxiety and lack of control", or that "feeling the lack of control, but not anxiety, independently predicted COVID-19 conspiracy theory endorsement." (Šrol-Mikušková-Čavojová, 2021). In another study, they examined the associations between China-specific and generic COVID-19 conspiracy beliefs and negative feelings, social distance, and refusal of help to Chinese, Italian, and Roma people, and also found that lowered trust in government regulations and increased hostility associated with the COVID-19 and generic conspiracy beliefs correlated with the justification of and willingness to engage in non-compliance with regulations, violent attacks on 5G masts, and anti-government protests (Šrol-Čavojová-Mikušková 2022). Finally, Mikušková showed that „conspiracy beliefs correlated negatively with cognitive reflection, denominator neglect and motivation for rational integration and positively with conspiracy mentality and preference for experiential thinking, only conspiracy mentality, cognitive reflection and motivation for rational integration were

significant predictors of conspiracy beliefs” (Mikušková 2021).

Except for the works mentioned above, the character of the very first contributions on CTs oriented more toward anthropological, sociological, or cultural aspects than the political. Within a special issue of the journal *Slovak Ethnology*, several papers have introduced problematic CTs to Slovak discourse and have focused on cognitive aspects, and cognitive biases of CTs (Bahna 2015; Ruisel 2015); psychological characteristics of conspiracy believers (Jurkovič, 2015); or have analysed current rumours with a xenophobic potential as opposed to conspiracies (Rabatinová, 2015). The most systematic approach to studying CTs is visible through the works of Slovak ethnologist and anthropologist **Zuzana Panczová**. Not only had she applied a historical-anthropological analysis to political propaganda in USA and Czechoslovakia during the 1950s (Panczová, 2021), she also scrutinised the negative image of the West in Slovakia from a historical point of view, with her analysis touching half of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century (Panczová, 2017a). **Panczová** also brought the valuable comparative analysis of the most popular Czech-Slovak CTs (Panczová-Janeček, 2015), as well as the first comprehensive analysis of the so-called anti-system web pages in Slovakia that stand massively behind the spreading of conspiracies (Panczová, 2017).

Several important research papers that stress very up-to-date relations between CTs and Slovak politics or conspiracy beliefs in Slovak society have been recently published. Political scientists **Cíbik** and **Hardoš** addressed a critical question touching the relevant public response to CTs regarding the right to free speech. The authors denied the current epistemic approaches to conspiracy theorising and distinguished two conditions necessary for any state policy and its justification to diminish CTs: (1) clearly identify the problematic class of CTs, (2) clarify the grounds on which the state is justified in acting against them (Cíbik-Hardoš, 2020). Additionally, **Ižák's** (2020) and **Plenta's** (2020) papers addressed valuable case studies and empirical evidence on current CT in Slovak discourse. **Ižák**, in his paper, analysed CTs as a tool of political propaganda and has focused on pro-Kremlin discourse, which stated that the EU organises migration and Islamizes Europe. Their findings approved a successful binary division of the Slovak society into “we” and “they”. They also found that conspiracy theory is a useful tool for pro-Kremlin political propaganda to create a narrative on the “evil” West (Ižák 2020, 93). Meanwhile, **Plenta** (2020) in his analysis compared a recent politically turbulent period in Slovakia between 2017-2019, with the murder of a Slovak journalist and his fiancé and the following reconstruction of **Fico's** third government, with **Orbán's** Hungary after the 2015



migration crisis, which both could be characterised as using **Soros** conspiracy.

## 2. Research Questions, Methodology, and Data

### 2.1 Research questions

With regards to the previous chapter where the current state of research on conspiracy and politics was outlined, this paper postulates the following research questions:

- 1) Which political parties adopted and used **anti-Soros** rhetoric and *de facto* contributed to legitimising and spreading CT about **Soros** and vice versa?
- 2) Which narratives about **George Soros** we can detect and which are prevailing?

### 2.2 Methodology

From a methodological point of view, this contribution falls into the category of qualitative research. From the offered methods of qualitative methodology, this contribution focuses on content analysis. Although the research went beyond the text and analysed the substantive using the language rather than only counting words. This study uses content analysis more concretely than a qualitative content analysis (QCA) (see Kracauer, 1953; Schreier, 2019; Prior, 2014; Mayring, 2004, 2014), which is widely used in political science within discourse and speech act-oriented research (Nefes, 2019; Janičatová-Mlejnková, 2021; Meislová-Buckledee, 2021; Naxera, 2021; Ižák, 2021). Despite the fact that this paper analyses the quantitative aspects of speeches held within Slovak parliamentary discourse, the main intention of this study is to go beyond the quantitative aspects of speech acts to analyse the central and prevailing narratives<sup>6</sup> around **George Soros** in Slovak politics.

For the purpose of this study, a unique dataset was created, consisting of speeches and commentary held through NRSR<sup>7</sup> plenary sessions from the fifth to the eighth electoral terms. **Table 2** below summarises which political parties

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<sup>6</sup> Narratives are conceptualised as a "rich source of information about how people make sense of their lives, about how they construct disparate facts and weave them together cognitively to make sense of reality." (Patterson-Monroe, 1998).

<sup>7</sup> An acronym derived from the official name of Slovak Parliament, *Národná Rada Slovenskej Republiky*; known in English as the National Council of the Slovak Republic.

were seated in each term in Slovak Parliament.<sup>8</sup> The analysis counts only MPs' speeches and plenary comments and does not include other actors who have a right (or should have a right) to give a speech at NRSR plenary sessions.<sup>9</sup>

**Table 2:** List of electoral terms and all relevant political actors that qualify an analysis.

Electoral term	Election held	Parties sitting in the National Council <sup>10</sup>	
		Government	Opposition
5th	2010	SDKÚ-DS, SaS, KDH, Most-Híd	Smer-SD, SNS
6th	2012	Smer-SD	SDKÚ-DS, SaS, KDH, OĽANO, Most-Híd
7th	2016	Smer-SD, SNS, Most-Híd, Sieť	SaS, OĽANO, K-ĽSNS, Sme Rodina
8th	2020	SaS, OĽANO, Za ľudí, Sme Rodina	Smer-SD, K-ĽSNS

Sources: author, based on data from Slovak statistical office.

The main source used for finding documents was an official NRSR web page<sup>11</sup> where the transcripts of plenary sessions were available in an "in-text" or "in-video" format. This analysis uses the former: the transcripts of speeches. The search was conducted with the keyword "**Soros**"; thus, the chosen keyword could also detect various possible adjectives related to **Soros** in the Slovak language such as *sorošovo*, *sorošove*, and *sorošovský*. The first time the keyword was mentioned was dated at the plenary session held on the 10<sup>th</sup> of October 2010; the last mentioned was at a plenary session dated the 3<sup>rd</sup> of November 2021.

The founded data was then manually transferred from the official NRSR website to MAXQDA 2020 software for further analysis.<sup>12</sup> It is vital to bear in mind that "CAQDAS query tools can even provide frequency counts, but the query tools

<sup>8</sup>All political parties had passed the 5% threshold mandatory for entering into a solely unicameral legislative body.

<sup>9</sup>More often, the President of the Slovak Republic, Members of the European Parliament, the Ombudsman, or other relevant political stakeholders like General Prosecutors.

<sup>10</sup>A list of political parties with their full name is included in Appendix A at the end of this paper.

<sup>11</sup>NRSR official page: [www.nrsr.sk](http://www.nrsr.sk).

<sup>12</sup>For more detailed information about the MAXQDA programme see, e.g. (Kuckartz – Rädiker, 2019; Franzosi – Doyle – McClelland, 2013).

are designed to highlight thematic and conceptual patterns across a number of different documents" (Franzosi - Doyle – McClelland, 2013, p. 3228). Computer-Assisted Qualitative Data Analysis<sup>13</sup> has been provided through a third-level coding process. From various offered coding types, this study uses an inductive coding approach which is "one of the most common procedures of QCA" (Mayring, 2014, p. 52). This approach implies that the author did not follow theoretical expectations or pre-defined categories from existing academic literature and instead created these categories during the text analysis process. As a coding unit, the author chose *theme*, which is the symptomatic code unit connected with propaganda, and value-oriented political research (Holsti, 1969; Vaismoradi-Snelgrove, 2019). The *theme* is focused on identifying a coherent idea regardless of whether the statement is contained in one sentence or paragraph or within many sentences or paragraphs. In the first step of quantifying the obtained data, every item was tagged with codes regarding (1) MPs name, (2) political party affiliation, (3) type of speech act.<sup>14</sup> In the second step, the author began the coding process and identified the leading narratives that oscillated around **Soros**. After finalising the stages of the coding process where the main categories were detected, an independent coder - not involved in the previous process but well-known and informed with processes of inductive coding and qualitative methodology - was invited to review all methodological steps described above to maximise the trustworthiness, and reliability of this study (Elo (eds.), 2014). As a result of this critical consideration, the narratives and themes categorised as "not clear"<sup>15</sup> during the previous steps were not included in the final corpus.

### 3. Findings

The analysis begins with a brief introduction to the quantitative aspects of the final corpus. The final corpus consists of N=84 analysed speeches and comments that amount to 67,438 words. Firstly, **Graph 1** illustrates the frequency in which the keyword appears within the searched period and the division of the speech acts. As mentioned, **Soros** theories were discussed in Slovak political discourse many years ago during the **Mečiar's** era. The graph shows that an **anti-Soros** agenda was marginal due to **Radičová's** or **Fico's** second cabinet. Meanwhile,

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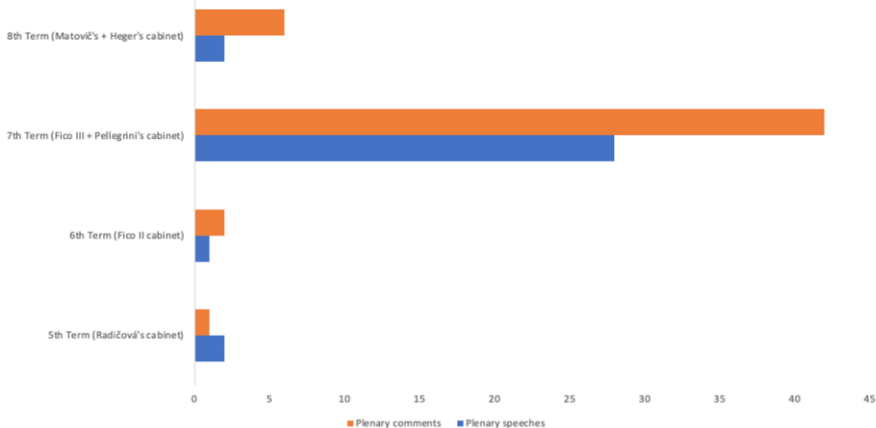
<sup>13</sup>Acronym CAQDAS.

<sup>14</sup>The analysis includes only plenary speeches or commentaries.

<sup>15</sup>Overall, three speeches/commentaries were excluded from the final corpus.

select narratives used by nationalistic politicians who incorporated **Mečiar's** rhetoric were also detected. The use of anti-**Soros** agenda in Slovak political discourse skyrocketed significantly after 2016 when the Eurozone crisis substituted the migration crisis of 2015-2016; this ontological insecurity brought far-right and populist parties such as K-ĽSNS and Sme Rodina to enter into Slovak parliament (Rybář-Spáč, 2017; Zvada, 2018).

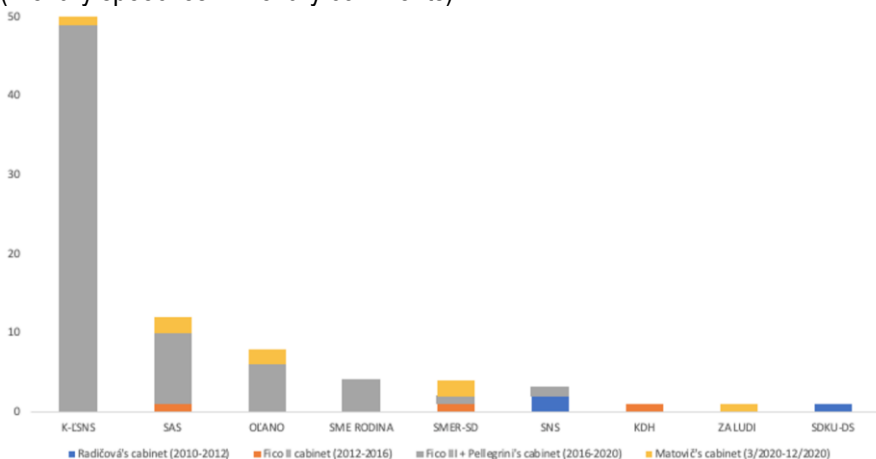
**Graph 1:** The occurrences of searching keyword "Soros" through the researched period 2010-2020.



Source: author, based on own analysis.

To quantify the obtained data, and as demonstrated in Graph 2 below, the core use of **Soros** in discourse is structured predominantly by the Slovak far-right and populist groups. Out of the eleven political parties that held seats in NRSR within the researched period - excluding the short-lived political project #Siet', and Slovak-Hungarian party Most-Híd - all have used the searched term '**Soros**' at least once. These data also show a significant gap favouring the far-right K-ĽSNS movement in both nominal and absolute numbers, too. Whilst fourteen K-ĽSNS deputies made 49 speeches and comments regarding **Soros** - an instance when the number of times **Soros** was mentioned oscillated from one to 71 - the SAS deputies responded with nine speeches and comments during 2016-2020. In other words, while every far-right MP spoke about **Soros** 3-5 times and used **Soros'** name on average 35 times per speech, liberal deputies spoke about **Soros** 2-3 times and made only one mention per speech.

**Graph 2:** Distribution of keyword "Soros" through the research period 2010-2020 (Plenary speeches + Plenary comments).



Source: author, based on own analysis.

From this quantitative point of view, in regards to **Plenta's** previous analysis on utilising anti-Soros rhetoric during 2017-2019, **Fico's** party, Smer-SD, played an unimportant role in the parliamentary debates (overall, four speeches contain mention on **Soros**) instead, opting for alternative forms of communication such as press conferences and social media communication.

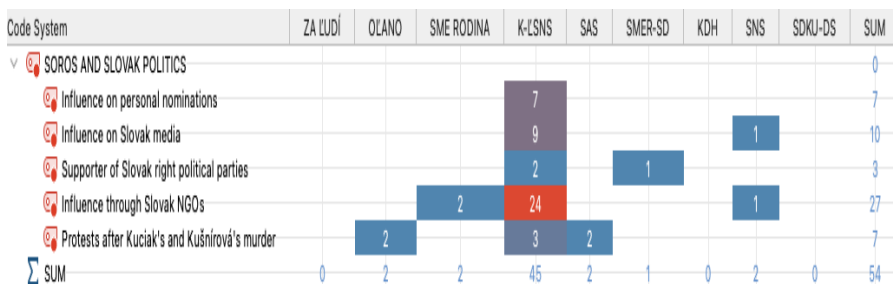
A qualitative approach to the analysed corpus found five specific narratives in Slovak parliamentary discourse addressing **Soros**. Three of which combined traditional conspiracy arguments and dominated the discourse, with one utilised to delegitimise political opponents; the last acted as a counterweight from the centre-right political parties by trying to condemn using this rhetoric. It is worth mentioning that of the 84 speeches and comments from which these narratives were recruited, only a quarter of them had tried to deny anti-**Soros** rhetoric. These narratives, their proponents, and the evidence of their argument will be introduced in the following section. In order to visualise the frequency of the main narratives, heatmaps have been chosen with values displayed in coded segments, a standard visualisation tool offered by the MAXQDA. The evidence cited will illustrate the argument's logic; it was derived from the final corpus and will not be included in the list of references.

## NARRATIVE NO. 1 - SOROS' INFLUENCE ON SLOVAK POLITICS

### MAIN PROPONENTS: K-LSNS, Sme Rodina, SNS

The idea that a small group of people, often Jewish, stand behind the scenes and rule the world whilst pursuing their own interests by using the governments or other state institution puppets is one of the most symptomatic of right-wing conspiracy narratives (Farinelli 2021, 12-13). This narrative was also detected in Slovak parliamentary discourse and was the most evident. Far-right Kotlebists, populists Sme Rodina, and Slovak nationalists from SNS were the leading proponents of spreading this narrative. These parties perpetuated a theory that connected **Soros'** influence to the shaping of Slovak politics through several factors, although primarily via **Soros'** impact on the Slovak NGOs, media, and centre-right political parties.

**Graph 3:** Found narrative and sub-narratives of Soros and Slovak politics.



Source: author, based on own analysis.

In 2011, the Slovak nationalist leader, **Ján Slota**, connected the novelisation of Language Law in favour of minor Hungarian language with the influence of NGOs acting against Slovakia when he stated, "(...) Slovakia is exceptional, it has an exceptional government, good collaborators who record traitors from various Soros foundations, such as Prime Minister **Iveta Radičová**, to Prime Minister **Orbán**, in their interests" (Ján Slota, 2011). Two years later, under the ruling of **Fico's** majority cabinet, his party colleague **Martvoň** accused the centre-right political party of "following the manual they have from Mr Soros from the 1990s" (Martvoň, 2013).

SNS and extremists K-LSNS dominated typical conspirative conjecture by blaming Soros' NGOs. They marked NGOs under **Soros'** umbrella organisation, Open Society Foundations, as "foreign agents" or "kind of sects" (Mazurek,

2016). According to them, "George Soros does not only promote his own personal, power and financial interests and the interests of its peers and associates and thus the interests of its foreign agents here in Slovakia and around the world, but also promotes the interests of foreign state power". They clearly defined the goal of this organisation as threatening Slovakia's "open society" (Schlosár, 2018; 2016). Proponents of this narrative argued that "these NGOs and these foreign agents are gradually pushing for the disintegration of traditional values, the disintegration of Europe, the disintegration of Christianity, our faith, all that our ancestors fought for millennia, and hundreds of thousands and millions of them fell at the gates of Europe against the invasions of African and Asian immigrants" because "soulless and shapeless peoples are always the easiest to fulfil what the powers of this world demand of them" (Ibid.).

Moreover, this Soros theory organised through Slovak NGOs goes hand in hand with his influence on Slovak media, consisting not only of traditional newspapers like Denník N, or Sme but also the Slovak national broadcast. **Anton Hrnko**, an SNS politician, stated, "(...) if television wants to be able to operate at least independently (...) it must also have independent resources. (...) if we want, then we will have it. However, the state television with everything that belongs to it, not only will the state pay for it, but **Soros** will dictate what will be broadcast" (Hrnko, 2016). Proponents of this narrative see **Soros'** influence also behind the 2015 presidential election when the independent civic candidate, **Andrej Kiska**, was elected, arguing that **Kiska** "deceived the whole nation with the help of the media, especially the **Soros** ones, then he became President" (Mizík, 2018e). Finally, this **Soros** conspiracy also played an inherent part in the anti-government protest following **Kuciak's** and **Kušnírová's** murder, whilst the key point of the argument as follows: "(...) people around the daily SME who obtained a loan to build their own publishing house from the American investment fund established and financed by **George Soros**; that means that these people organised this protest" (Mazurek 2018a).

## **NARRATIVE NO. 2 - SOROS AS A TOOL OF DELEGITIMIZATION**

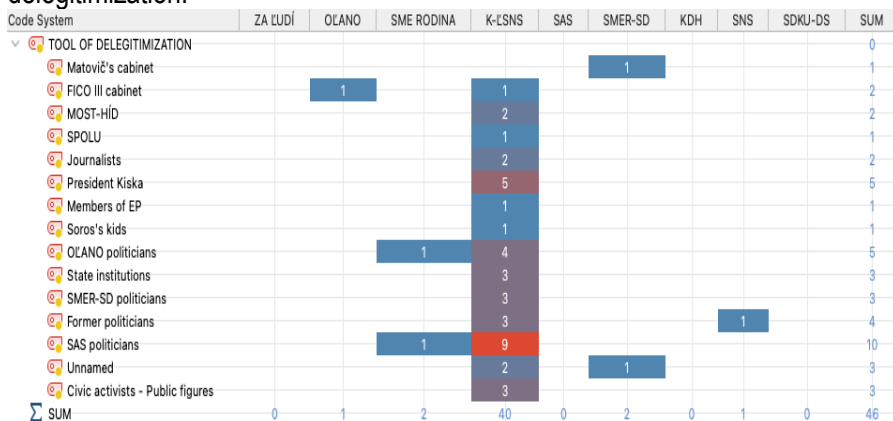
**MAIN PROPONENTS:** K-LSNS, Sme Rodina, Smer-SD, OLANO, SNS

The second most frequent narrative relates to using **George Soros'** name for delegitimization and abusing political opponents. During the coding process, moving this narrative as a sub-narrative to the previous one was considered. However, while the first narrative is going to be more "procedural" or "structural", this one is oriented very personally. Moreover, *the sub-categorization of this*

narrative could reduce real significance (if we also consider its nominal robustness) or the diversity of objects falling into this group.

This narrative was predominantly used by the extremist K-ĽSNS in regards to the entire political spectrum and broader public discourse when pointing fingers at former politicians such as **Ivan Mikloš** or **Iveta Radičová**, public figures and journalists from Denník N, Sme, marking them as "trained by **Soros** and docile to **Soros**" (2018d). Specifically, far-right Kotlebists often attacked liberal politicians from SAS, or OĽANO labelling them as "**Soros' straw men**" (Mizík, 2018b) or "**Soros' foreign agents seated in Slovak parliament**" (Grausová, 2017).

**Graph 4:** Found narrative and sub-narratives using Soros as tool of delegitimization.



Source: author, based on own analysis.

This narrative was not used only in Parliament but was also frequently used for the delegitimization of President **Kiska** as an essential tool within the domestic political contest. Kiska's main opponent, the Smer-SD, is not detected at plenary speeches as a proponent of this narrative. Though **Fico's** party harshly criticised **Kiska's** presidency, they did not do so via parliamentary debate. On the other hand, Slovak extremists from K-ĽSNS constituted their argument as follows: "I agree, yes, that Mr **Kiska** is a neoliberal, neo-Marxist fanatic, an anti-Slovak **Soros** puppet, who is directly advised by another man connected to **Soros**, **Martin Bútora**, whom we know writes all the speeches for him because Mr **Kiska** does not speak up without a paper for even two sentences" (Mazurek, 2018i).

Sme Rodina deputies also used **Soros** rhetoric to delegitimise their



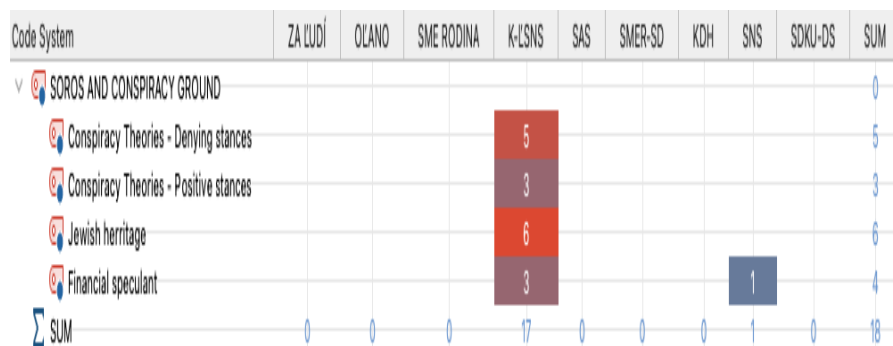
opponents. Sme Rodina made a speech during the negotiation of the Marrakesh resolution, with **Peter Marček** connecting "*freemason Soros*" to "*his influence on Slovak Foreign ministry, Miroslav Lajčák*", and then connected Soros' NGOs with **Ján Budaj's** OĽANO member initiative, which acted in Slovak NGOs favour (Marček, 2018; 2018a).

### NARRATIVE NO. 3 - SOROS AND ANTISEMITIC CONSPIRACY GROUND

#### MAIN PROPONENTS: K-L'SNS, SNS

After using **Soros** to delegitimise political opponents, the third most common narrative was detected, where anti-**Soros** speeches were used and operationalised as **Soros** and other conspiracy theories. As documented in the graph below, this narrative is used exclusively by far-right K-L'SNS. The analysed documents categorised in this narrative combined antisemitic and conspiracy rhetoric based on strong historical prejudices typical for the far-right (Wodak, 2018; OSCE 2019); for Slovakia, it means a resuscitation of the resentment connected to the Slovak puppet state 1939-1945 led by **Jozef Tiso**.

**Graph 5:** Found narrative and sub-narratives of Soros and antisemitic ground.



Source: author, based on own analysis.

Of the detected narratives, marking **Soros** as a financial speculate can be seen as less problematic because, in essence, financial speculation is a relevant strategy used in stocks; however, in this context, it was only used by SNS. More problematic is that these kinds of statements, when used by far-right politicians - who adored fascist and Nazi ideology - stressed Jewish heritage, as in the case of K-L'SNS. K-L'SNS constantly used and repeated phrases connecting finance

and **Soros'** Jewish heritage, such as: *"American billionaire and speculator of Jewish origin"* (Schlosár, 2018) or *"(...) the Open Society Foundation was not established by anyone other than a well-known Jewish financier and speculator **George Soros**"* (Schlosár, 2016). The connection between finance and money with Jewish people is one of the most common anti-Semitic stereotypes, dating back to the New Testament (OSCE, p. 4).

Perhaps the most interesting is the fact that two opposing uses of this narrative can be detected here. The first use is constructed around denying the rhetoric which reduced **Soros** to conspiracy; the logic of this argument is based on the fact that this person actually exists and is very wealthy, therefore it is very naive to think that he could not rule the world and that media are censoring reality, e.g. *"I just wanted to talk about the subject of billionaire **George Soros** to make it clear that this person really exists, really affects many things, really funds a lot of organisations, and pushing this topic into conspiracy theories is not only cowardly and naive, but it is also a dirty political game of certain media trying to cover up reality"* (Mazurek, 2018a). Another rhetoric act unveils their argument more precisely *"let us pour clean wine on this subject, because it is important, we cannot pretend that some of this gentleman's money does not interfere in anything and that it is just a conspiracy theory. That would simply be stupid"* (Ibidem).

The second use of the narrative is based on a speech by K-L'SNS proposing the classic elements of worldwide conspiracy where small group media owners, billionaires and wealthy people rule the world. In this case, K-L'SNS argued *"(...) it would be foolish to somehow think that rich, extremely rich people with certain political ambitions will not use their huge financial resources to manipulate governments, to use the media for their own benefit, to shape the public opinion so that they achieve their political ambitions. It would be naive to expect that these extremely rich people will not do this."* (Mazurek, 2018a). Another statement explicitly exclaimed: *"(...) and when we start to gradually go through the individual activities of Mr **George Soros** and his Open Society Foundation, we come to shocking conclusions, because we realise how huge, monstrous conspiracy is taking place against the background of the world and how this monstrous conspiracy directly affects the Slovak Republic"* (Mazurek, 2018g).

In this case, Slovak extremists' rebirth traditional anti-Semitic rhetoric used by the Slovak Catholic church from the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century (Szabó 2020). K-L'SNS used Slovak catholic priest **Andrej Hlinka's** opinion on Jews, an argumentation best expressed in the statement: *"I really admit that **George***

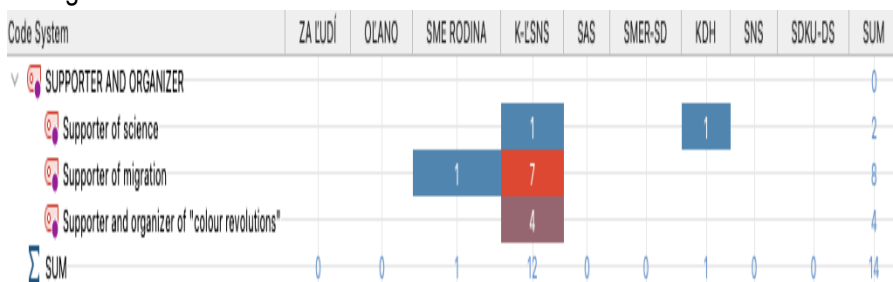
**Soros** is just such a puppet in the hands of those in the background what **Andrej Hlinka** has already mentioned, that is, the **Rothschild** family. You can find it in old articles, when they already knew in 1900 what a huge threat this world is to this family and what they do. And imagine what wealth they were able to earn in the century that has passed in the meantime. This is simply unimaginable, and the impact is simply unquestionable. The fact that Soros is just their puppet is simply a fact" (Mazurek 2018h).

#### NARRATIVE NO. 4 – SOROS AS A SUPPORTER AND ORGANISER

**PROPOSERS:** K-LSNS, Sme Rodina, KDH

The fourth detected narrative painted **Soros** as the supporter and organiser. This narrative was detected fourteen times during the parliamentary debates and in comments made by the K-LSNS supremacy beforehand. The narrative refers to three different theories: support of science and the support and organising of the so-called 'colour revolutions'.

**Graph 6:** Found narrative and sub-narratives framing Soros as a supporter and an organizer.



Source: author, based on own analysis.

Christian-democratic politician **Jozef Mikloško** questioned **Soros'** intention to support young students from Russia during the 1990s in the argument: "I don't think **Soros** did it as a good deed" (Mikloško, 2013). Thus, the far-right **Mizik** criticised and blamed the people "who studied for **Soros'** money", and nowadays "are riddled with government, even the security forces" (Mizik, 2018). Further stressed was the theory that connected **Soros** with the so-called colour revolutions, when K-LSNS politicians claimed that "billionaire's money has contributed to many coups in many countries around the world" (Milan Mazurek,

2018a); e.g. Ukraine's orange revolution was connected with **Soros** as is follows: "(...) Because some fellow citizens and especially their politicians have believed the sweet talk of a more beautiful future promised by people like **Soros** and similar foreign agents" (Schlosár, 2016).

Finally, within the eight speeches and comments, a connection was made theorising migration was financed and supported by **Soros**. The member of populist Sme Rodina saw **Soros'** support of migration as a "conservative-liberal dispute over how states should function (...) and protect a border" (Krajniak, 2016). Meanwhile, extremist K-LSNS, like **Orbán** in Hungary, connected the migration crisis with **Soros** when they argued: "In 2015 alone, the **Soros** Foundation of an Open Society in Slovakia gave more than 380,000 euros to various non-governmental organisations for projects such as Helping Refugees, Legal Aid to Refugees or Providing Aid to Refugees on the Way Through Europe. In other words, **Soros'** foreign agent in Slovakia finances immigrants who are flooding Europe and who are a huge threat to our Christian civilisation" (Schlosár, 2016).

## (COUNTER)-NARRATIVE NO. 5 - CONDEMNATION OF USING SOROS CONSPIRACY

### MAIN PROPONENTS: SAS, OĽANO

The last narrative can be interpreted only as a deflective one, and it is only counter-narrative. The main proponents were recruited from the liberal SAS and OĽANO political parties and therefore from the parties which served in Slovak Parliament as the main target of opponents who used **anti-Soros** rhetoric as a delegitimization tool as described in Narrative No. 2.

**Graph 7:** Found narrative condemning use of the Soros conspiracy rhetoric.

Code System	ZAĽUDÍ	OĽANO	SME RODINA	K-LSNS	SAS	SMEĽ-SD	KDH	SNS	SDKU-DS
CONDEMNATION OF USING SOROS CONSPIRACY	1	7			10	1			1

Source: author, based on own analysis.

In 2010, **Miroslav Beblavý**, an SDKU-DS MP, spoke of his demonised influence as "(...) I heard that I control the European Commission, I have now learned that I control the OECD (...) it's getting closer to your legend, **George Soros** (...) I can't comment on things that are beyond human rationality either" (Beblavý, 2010). The use of **Soros** in discourse was frequently used by its

proponents to mislead and substitute problems, masking the proponents' inability to discuss and solve issues constructively. The critique is echoed in examples such as this: "I would react, but there is not much to do, so there is only one thing, what would you do if you didn't have **Soros**, non-governmental people, homosexuals, Roma (...)" (Drdul, 2020). The denying of irrationality, speculative character, manipulation, and contrarian essence by the conspirators were often countered, such as in **Peter Osuský's** case: "(...) I am not a friend of conspiracy theories. I've been rejecting them my whole life. When I literally found myself on National Avenue on November 17, '89, I was not a victim of a Masonic lodge manipulation, nor was I later taken by **Soros**, Bilderberg, or even the CIA and Mossad" (Osuský, 2013).

The core argument for the condemnation of **Soros** conspiracy was used after **Kuciak's** and **Kušnírová's** murder and was echoed loudly by SAS and OĽANO politicians; it stressed the connection of using conspiracy narratives and its impact on the international reputation of the Slovak Republic, and is best illustrated in the proceeding excerpt: "(...) The image of Slovakia among our allies has suffered enough and I would say that it was largely destroyed, for example, by the statements of the Prime Minister of the Slovak Republic, now fortunate our colleague, **Robert Fico**, that a decent protest in the streets is an expression of the state coup organised by **George Soros**." (Klus, 2018a).

## Conclusion

Few studies focus on conspiracy theory and politics in CEE, specifically when it comes to the **Soros** phenomenon. Billionaire **Soros** is frequently the main subject of international attacks. With his reputation remaining divisive, discourse on **Soros** is often driven by domestic political needs and local political context (McLaughlin-Trilupaityte, 2012). The analysis provided in this study extends from previously published papers that focus on the role of **George Soros** in Lithuania (Ibid.), Hungary (Kalmar, 2020), or in comparative perspective in Hungary and Slovakia (Plenta, 2020).

Using a method of qualitative content analysis, N=84 parliamentary speeches and comments containing the keyword **Soros** from 2010-2020 were analysed. As a result of this analysis, five narratives were found. The first narrative pattern where **Soros** discourse was identified related to his influence on Slovak political issues. This narrative stressed many theories, including **Soros'** influence through the financing NGOs and Slovak media and his direct impact on personal

nominees in Slovak politics. The second narrative reveals a pattern of anti-**Soros** rhetoric used to personally abuse and delegitimise a wide range of the political opponents, journalists, public figures and activists or other former political elite by marking them in general as **Soros'** puppets. The third narrative identified stressed conspiracy of Jewish influence in finance and their efforts to rule the world through their power in media with a puppet government serving in their favour, and labelled **Soros** as an inherent and undivided part of this theory. The first and third narrative supports a common worldwide anti-Semitic conspiracy. A fourth narrative, which connects other common CTs, conspired that **Soros** organised and supported the migration crisis and the so-called colour revolution. The final narrative stood in direct opposition and involved speeches and comments that condemned the use of anti-**Soros** conspiracy rhetoric. This narrative pattern also criticised opponents' manipulative, irrelevant, and irrational arguments in a limited way. The first four narratives and their themes are common for nationalistic, populist, and far-right political parties such as SNS, Sme Rodina, and in this case, the hegemonic K-ĽSNS. However, the narrative condemning this kind of political propaganda was utilised by three of the four current governmental parties, with the dominant position of SAS followed by OĽANO.

It is suggested that these findings are necessary to see a broader picture of the evolution of Slovak politics within the last couple of years. The grouping of political parties into two opposite standings is not only observed in the field of conspiracy but also in other political themes in Slovakia, especially if these themes involve more or less the same parties. The first group of political parties with strong conservative and paternalistic political orientation emphasises the anti-government or anti-system rhetoric, and in this paper, are the leading proponents of anti-**Soros** conspiracy rhetoric and are also the main actors in anti-Muslim and anti-Semitic rhetoric (Zvada, 2018; Zvada 2021; Grančayová-Kazharski, 2020), anti-gender rhetoric (Ďurinová-Malová, 2017; Očenášová, 2021), and Eurosceptic rhetoric (Meislová-Buckledee, 2021). In other words, the result of this analysis indicates that the group of political parties mentioned above added the use and spread of **Soros** conspiracy to their political rhetoric toolboxes in the same manner as previously mentioned rhetoric for explaining the ontological insecurity. As documented in **Soros' case**, using conspiracy narratives and legitimising them could strengthen other conspiracy beliefs. Slovakia has dealt with this during the COVID-19 pandemic, where a higher level of conspiracy belief negatively affected people's willingness to get vaccinated, for example (Slovak Spectator, 2021). The use of conspiracy narratives could also

contribute to further polarisation regarding culture-oriented political issues, foreign policy issues or issues related to a narration of Slovak national history which all of these are objects of so-called 'cultural wars'.

Finally, the popularity of conspiracy theories must lead social scientists to (re)think even more about the mainstream discourses that conspiracy narratives naturally oppose and which were created within the last three decades. It should lead to examining the actors who set the principles and boundaries of mainstream discourses as well as the narratives that are undermined and attacked by populist and far-right politicians per se. In post-truth era, the resilience of the critical thinking and well-educated civil society that will stand against the possible negative implications produced by the CTs is more demanding than ever before.

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## **APPENDIX A**

- KDH – Kresťansko-demokratické hnutie (Christian-Democratic Movement)
- K-ĽSNS – Kotlebovci – Ľudová strana naše Slovensko (Kotlebists – People's Party Our Slovakia)
- OL'ANO – Obyčajní ľudia a nezávislé osobnosti (Ordinary People and Independent Personalities)
- SaS – Sloboda a solidarita (Freedom and Solidarity)
- Sme rodina – (We Are Family)
- Smer-SD – Smer-sociálna demokracia (Direction-Social Democracy)

SNS – Slovenská národná strana (Slovak National Party)

SDKÚ – Slovenská demokratická a kresťanská únia (Slovak Democratic and Christian Union)

Za ľudí – (For the People)

#Sieť – (#Network)

Most-Híd (Bridge)