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The path from distrusting Western actors to conspiracy beliefs and noncompliance with public health guidance during the COVID-19 crisis

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ABSTRACT


Global crises provide a fertile environment for the proliferation of disinformation and conspiracy narratives that feed on the people's distrust of institutions. We investigate perceptions and beliefs related to COVID-19 in Romania during the lockdown and the state of alert (April and July 2020) using survey data. Building on measures tested in previous research, we identify the public's vulnerability to conspiracy narratives and its willingness to comply with public health guidance. We test whether individuals exhibiting pro-Russian or anti-Western attitudes believe more strongly in COVID-19 conspiracy narratives compared to the rest of the population. Then, we check if those believing conspiracy narratives are less susceptible to comply with public health recommendations. We find an indirect relationship between distrusting Western actors and noncompliance with COVID-19 guidelines. Thus, pro-Russian and anti-EU, U.S. and NATO attitudes are linked to stronger conspiracy beliefs, which relate to lower levels of concern and knowledge regarding the virus, which in turn are associated with reduced compliance with official guidelines. This suggests that openness to anti-Western narratives may have behavioral consequences. The findings highlight potential sources of unsafe behaviors during the pandemic, especially in the young democracies of Eastern Europe.

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Introduction

As the COVID-19 pandemic progresses, the public support of official measures to contain the virus remains essential to the management of this significant public health crisis, and special attention must be given to the factors that decrease this support. In the last years, growing emphasis has been placed on the issue of conspiracy theories gaining adherents during significant crises or after traumatizing events (Sunstein and Vermeule 2009;

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Swami and Coles 2010), such as public health crises (Lyons, Merola, and Reifler 2018).

Conspiracy beliefs are broadly defined as a set of alternative explanations, bearing little relation to actual historical facts or scientific explanations, but centered on alleged actions by powerful elites acting in the shadow and manipulating major events for self-serving purposes (see for example Flynn, Nyhan, and Reifler 2017; Goertzel 1994; Imhoff and Bruder 2014; Sutton and Douglas 2020).

An increasing body of literature has emerged, focusing mainly on the psychological mechanisms of endorsing conspiracy narratives. Previous research results show that people tend to turn to conspiracy beliefs in times of great societal pressure to satisfy epistemic, existential, or social needs (Douglas, Sutton, and Cichocka 2017). These alternative stories fulfill needs for knowledge, control or having positive self-image, that official explanations, often complex, abstract or incomplete, cannot satisfy: “a conspiracy theory gives believers someone tangible to blame for their perceived predicament, instead of blaming it on impersonal or abstract social forces” (Goertzel 2010, 493). In some cases, either the difficulty to distinguish official explanations from other sources of information, the scarcity of sources of information (Sunstein and Vermeule 2009), or the predisposition to reject information from experts (Uscinski et al. 2020) can create the premises for accepting conspiracy narratives. A solid finding is the fact that belief in one conspiracy narrative is consistent with belief in others (Goertzel 1994; Swami et al. 2011; Miller 2020), even when they contain contradictory elements (Freeman et al. 2020).

Conspiracy beliefs can have behavioral implications. On the individual level, a series of studies show a strong link between belief in conspiracy narratives and non-compliance with official health recommendations during the COVID-19 pandemic (Freeman et al. 2020; Allington and Dhavan 2020; Allington et al. 2020; Imhoff and Lamberty 2020). However, the processes linking conspiracy beliefs to non-compliance are not clearly understood, and we propose two possible mediating factors: decreased knowledge about how the virus spreads and concern about the effects of COVID-19. Decreased knowledge because conspiracy beliefs have been linked to rejecting scientific explanations for natural phenomena (Lewandowsky, Gignac, and Oberauer 2013), and decreased concern due to the feeling that the threat of the virus is being exaggerated by ill-intentioned elites.

On the social level, conspiracy beliefs can be “drivers of societal corrosion” (Freeman et al. 2020, 12). They are connected with negative attitudes towards authority (Swami et al. 2011) and ideological polarization (Sutton and Douglas 2020), feelings of political powerlessness, decreased intention of political engagement (Jolley and Douglas 2014; Imhoff, Dieterle, and Lamberty

2021) and lower levels of institutional trust (Kramer 1999; Freeman et al. 2020; Sutton and Douglas 2020).

More attention has been paid to trust in national actors, but it is likely that trust in international actors can also shape people's beliefs around COVID-19, given that this is a global crisis. One study showed a negative relationship between foreign policy views favoring an alignment to the West and conspiracy beliefs (Onderco and Stoeckel 2020).

The spread of conspiracy beliefs is not always based on a natural contagion process. The COVID-19 pandemic has brought forth two conditions that favor their dissemination: social media usage (Allington et al. 2020), and intentional spread (Bentzen 2020; EEAS 2020) by interested parties acting as "*conspiracy entrepreneurs* who profit directly or indirectly from propagating" these ideas (Sunstein and Vermeule 2009, 212). In recent years, Russia has been described to project and carry out "active measures" designed to destabilize societies (Galeotti 2017), to undermine the European Union or NATO (Sherr 2013; Lucas and Pomerantsev 2016), in efforts that include cyber operations carried out on social media (Prier 2017). Ever since the pandemic started, Russian attempts to induce distrust in European or national authorities' (Bentzen 2020), and promote disinformation have been suggested by several reports (US Department of State/GEC 2020; EEAS 2020).

Like other young democracies in the region, Romania sits between the Eastern and Western spheres of influence, making it an interesting case study. Romania's institutional allegiance to the Western model is firm, and surveys show strong support for the EU and NATO in the population (European Commission 2018). Nevertheless, there is a minority critical of Western influence, and they are the primary target for the conspiracy narratives currently in circulation. Some believe that Russia can offer an alternative, given its adversity toward the West, and the shared Orthodox religion. We thus distinguish two different types of international trust patterns: toward the West (mainly the USA, the European Union and NATO) and toward Russia.

In this paper, we investigate how trust in international actors is directly related to COVID-19 conspiracy beliefs and indirectly related to compliance with official guidelines, through both cognitive (knowledge about the virus) and affective (concern about the seriousness of the effects of the pandemic) channels, using Structural Equation Modeling on data collected from surveys of the Romanian population.

Hypotheses

Our main research question is whether there is an indirect relationship between distrust in Western actors and noncompliance with COVID-19 regulations, with conspiracy beliefs, knowledge, and concern about the virus

acting as mediators. We expect that those who trust Russia are more likely to believe conspiracy narratives (H1a) and those who trust the West are less likely to believe conspiracy narratives (H1b). Believing conspiracy narratives makes people less likely to be correctly informed about the transmission of the virus (H2) or concerned about the seriousness of the COVID-19 crisis (H3). Being misinformed and, respectively, unconcerned will translate into a lower compliance with COVID-19 regulations (H4 and H5). We expect that the effect of trust in Russia and/or the West on compliance is indirect (through the paths H1->H2->H4 and H1->H3->H5). We represent the model graphically in Figure 1. An alternative configuration (where knowledge influences conspiracy beliefs) is tested in Appendix 5. A simplified model applied on a different sample from a telephone survey is tested in Appendix 2.

Data and methods

The data come from a web survey was of 914 Romanian adults, fielded in July 2020, after the end of the emergency state in Romania. The non-probability sample was provided by an opt-in online panel. Quotas for age, gender and region were employed. We retained 582 respondents with high quality and complete responses.¹

All the key concepts that we refer to in this paper are translated to latent variables (represented with ellipses in Figure 1). They are measured through multiple indicators, to increase construct validity and reduce measurement error. In the first step Confirmatory Factor Analyses for each of our six latent variables assesses the quality of our measurement models.

In the second step, we test our hypotheses using path analysis. Hypotheses H1-H5 can be represented as a path model, where direct and indirect

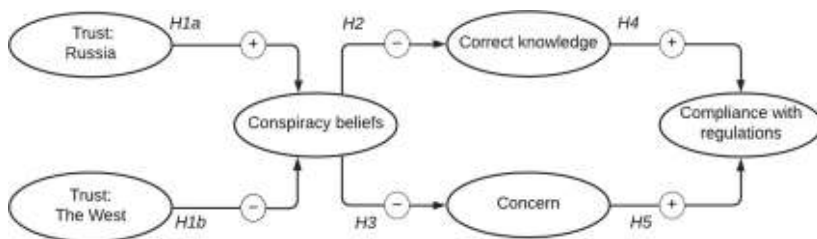


Figure 1. The theoretical model showing an indirect effect of trust in international entities on compliance with regulations around COVID-19.

¹We also check the robustness of our results on data from an earlier telephone survey, fielded in April 2020 on a probability sample (see Appendix 2).

effects can be calculated. A path model is a series of regressions, where a variable can be dependent in one regression, and independent in the next.

Confirmatory factor analysis and path analysis can be modeled together under the framework of Structural Equation Modeling (SEM), widely used in social sciences to construct latent variables and to test hypotheses about relationships between them (Hoyle 1995). They are suited for mediation analysis (Gunzler et al. 2013). We want to test whether conspiracy beliefs and COVID-19 knowledge and concern can act as a mediator between trust in international entities and compliance with national COVID-19 regulations.

For data processing and analysis, we used R, version 3.6.1 with the package *lavaan* (Rosseel 2012), version 0.6.6 for the SEM.

Conspiracy beliefs about COVID-19 are measured using 14 indicators. Compliance to COVID-19 guidelines is measured using 6 indicators. Indicators are similar to those found in Allington and Dhavan (2020). Knowledge about COVID-19 is measured using six true/false statements regarding how the virus spreads and known treatments, based on information from the World Health Organization website (<https://www.who.int/emergencies/diseases/novel-coronavirus-2019/advice-for-public/myth-busters>). Concern about COVID-19 is measured with six indicators. Trust in international actors was measured using two latent variables: trust in Russia – 8 indicators, and trust in the West (EU, USA and NATO) – 7 indicators.

The indicators (except for knowledge) are measured on five and four-point fully labeled Likert scales. The statements are phrased both in support and in opposition to each attitude reflected by the constructs, to reduce the effects of acquiescence bias on measurement (Krosnick 1999).

As control variables in the SEM model we used several variables associated with increased conspiracy beliefs in previous research: populist attitudes (Castanho Silva, Vegetti, and Littvay 2017), mistrust in institutions (Freeman et al. 2020), media consumption (Mitchell et al. 2020), low education (Douglas et al. 2016; Freeman and Bentall 2017; Van Prooijen 2017), low income (Freeman and Bentall 2017), and male gender (Cassese, Farhart, and Miller 2020). We also controlled for town size and age, and for trust in social media (Facebook), since it is the source of many conspiracy narratives. For descriptive statistics for all variables, see Appendix 1.

Results

In July 2020, 54% of respondents agreed with at least one of the eight conspiracy statements, particularly that COVID-19 was created in a laboratory (47%), while 45% agreed that there is no conspiracy around COVID-19. Most respondents self-reported washing their hands frequently (95%), keeping distance from other people (92%) and wearing a mask (98%),

although 23% reported no change in their usual behavior. Trust in international actors was high for NATO (57%) and the EU (62%), and lower for Russia (17%).²

Measurement models (CFA)

The *conspiracy beliefs* latent variable contains the largest number of items, and they load on the factor with the expected sign: the pro-conspiracy statements with positive signs, and the anti-conspiracy statements with negative signs. The highest loading is the “virus created by powerful people” item (0.84).

The *Trust in Russia* factor separates from the *Trust in the West* factor, and they are negatively correlated ($r=-0.19$, $p<0.001$). The strongest standardized loading (-0.72) from the *Trust in Russia* factor is for “Russia is trying to promote corruption in the region”. The strongest loading for the *Trust in the West* factor is the statement that “The EU is beneficial to Romania” (0.75). The *Compliance* factor has the strongest loadings for “no change in behavior” (-0.63). For the *Concern* factor, worrying about the situation in the country has the highest loading (0.74), while for the *Knowledge* factor the strongest item is “transmission by touch” (0.42).

The fit of the measurement model is adequate (CI for RMSEA between 0.050 and 0.055, CFI=0.87). Detailed results are presented in Figure 2 and Appendix 2.

Structural model (SEM)

The structural model examines linear relationships between the latent variables, to test our hypotheses. Standardized regression coefficients are described below (and shown in Figure 3 and Appendix 4).

Conspiracy beliefs increase in strength if trust in Russia increases ($\beta=0.163$, $p=0.001$), all other predictors held constant, confirming H1a. At the same time, conspiracy beliefs strongly decrease in strength when trust in the West increases ($\beta=-0.564$, $p<0.001$). Conspiracy beliefs also tend to increase with populist beliefs and trust in Facebook, and to decrease with higher education, and men have stronger conspiracy beliefs compared to women.

Knowledge about Coronavirus decreases when conspiracy beliefs increase ($\beta=-0.266$, $p=0.017$), thus confirming hypothesis H2. Knowledge increases with increased overall media consumption ($\beta=0.201$, $p=0.004$), and is not influenced by trust in international actors when controlling for conspiracy beliefs.

²Values are similar to the ones obtained from an earlier, probability based survey (see Appendix 2).



Figure 2. Measurement model for Conspiracy beliefs (CFA). Standardized factor loadings on the arrows. Fit indices (for all latent variables): CFI = 0.871; RMSEA = 0.052, p (RMSEA<0.05) = 0.067; SRMR = 0.064; N = 582.

Concern about the spread and seriousness of the COVID-19 pandemic decreases with increased level of conspiracy beliefs ($\beta=-0.498, p<0.001$), confirming H3. At the same time, concern increases with knowledge about the pandemic ($\beta=0.426, p<0.001$), and with trust in national institutions, which have been sending messages of caution since the pandemic began. Concern also increases with age ($\beta=0.112, p=0.008$), which can be explained by higher vulnerability in case of infection. Concern is not influenced by trust in international actors when controlling for conspiracy beliefs.

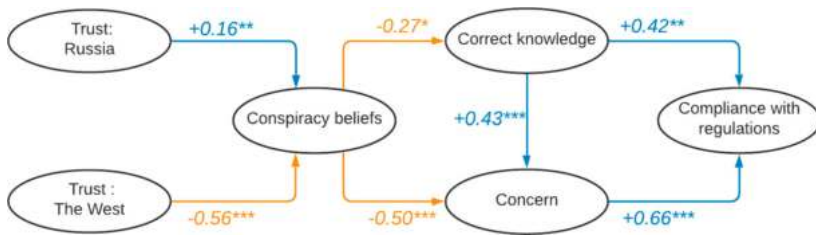


Figure 3. Empirical path model (results of SEM analysis). Standardized coefficients shown. Fit indices: CFI = 0.93; RMSEA = 0.04, p (RMSEA<0.05) = 0.947; SRMR = 0.03; N = 582.

Finally, *compliance* with official COVID-19 guidelines is positively influenced by knowledge ($\beta=0.417$, $p=0.002$), confirming H4, and by concern ($\beta=0.663$, $p<0.001$), confirming H5. These two variables explain a large part of the variation in compliance. Compliance is not influenced by trust in international actors when controlling for conspiracy beliefs, concern, and knowledge.

In our SEM model, the predictors explain a large part of the variation of the dependent variables. The highest explained variance is for noncompliance ($R^2=0.864$), followed by concern about COVID-19 ($R^2=0.763$), conspiracy beliefs ($R^2=0.616$) and knowledge ($R^2=0.366$).

There are several paths from trust to compliance. The direct path shows a weak effect that is not statistically significant ($b=0.016$, $se = 0.055$ for trust in Russia, and $b=-0.047$, $se = 0.041$ for trust in the West). The indirect path from trust to conspiracy beliefs to concern and finally to compliance shows a stronger effect, especially in the case of trust in the West ($b=0.106$, $se=0.028$). The alternative path through knowledge also shows a positive effect for trust in the West ($b=0.038$, $se=0.019$). Direct and indirect effects are calculated in Appendix 4.

In summary, we find support for all our hypotheses. Support is stronger for H1b than H1a. In other words, not trusting Western actors shows a stronger direct link to conspiracy belief and indirect link to noncompliance compared to trusting Russia.

Discussion

We confirm the connection between conspiracy beliefs and lack of compliance with public health recommendations found in previous studies, and furthermore build a new, more nuanced model, that shows strong links between our latent constructs during the COVID-19 crisis in Romania. Our model shows not only the direct relationship between conspiracy beliefs and conformity to rules, but also some indirect relationships, which can offer some insight for the future.

The indirect connections are related to the level of actual knowledge and concern regarding COVID-19. This implies that stronger and better-tailored communication efforts might increase people's levels of understanding of the new threat, as well as their predisposition to comply to the safety recommendations. However, the usual paths of institutional communication used by the authorities could be insufficient to reach a public that is more attracted to alternative explanations.

Finally, the model shows indirect links between trust in international actors and compliance to regulations. Not trusting that Romania's international allies are strong, stable, and well intentioned is linked to a higher propensity to believe in conspiracy narratives, independent of trust in national leaders

and institutions. Especially vulnerable to foreign influence efforts are those who don't necessarily trust Russia but mistrust the West and more easily accept alternative explanations related to the coronavirus crisis that downplay its gravity. While we cannot attribute these beliefs directly to foreign influence efforts, we do show that there are clear vulnerabilities in groups that feel that the West is failing Romania, that EU integration was not successful, and that NATO does not offer the country protection. Reversely, trust in Western institutions can act as a safeguard against conspiracy beliefs and their effects on public health.

We believe that the conclusions can be relevant not only for Romania, but also for countries from the Eastern border of the EU or NATO, such as Poland. This region is a geopolitical battleground where anti-Western propaganda efforts are increasingly sophisticated (Galeotti 2017; Bentzen 2020). These countries also share similar media use patterns (Kemp 2021), levels of participation, trust, tolerance or other characteristics of political culture (Haerpfer et al. 2020). Romania and Poland are among the most pro-Western countries in Eastern Europe (Populus 2020), and this status is now under threat.

This study offers a snapshot, but perceptions and attitudes around COVID-19 are fluid: bound to change with new information, cross borders and influence each other. Constant monitoring of trust, conspiracy beliefs, and compliance across the European Union is necessary to capture the cross-continental exposure to false information about the virus. Our cross-sectional analysis leaves the possibility open for alternative causal paths. Future research should include instrumental variables or use panel data to help clarify the causal relationship between conspiracy beliefs, knowledge, and concern.

This is an unprecedented crisis and it calls for unprecedented efforts to contain the danger, as in this case misinformation can be fatal. Our research points out grave vulnerabilities, which can be exploited by malign actors, generate public health risks, and even endanger the stability of democratic values.

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Data availability statement

The data has been uploaded to the public data repository. The datasets and the R syntaxes used for analysis are available on Figshare at: <https://doi.org/10.6084/m9.figshare.12974909>.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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