

Popular conspiracy theories in Slovakia and the Czech Republic

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Abstract

The study presents popular conspiracy theories spread within the Czech and Slovak language milieu. Along with the growth in the number of internet portals disseminating this type of texts, their reflection in public opinion is also visible in the way almost every major foreign policy issue or domestic case is commented upon in public internet discussions. The authors seek to identify the narrative and rhetorical sources of conspiracism in these countries since the rise of modern nationalism in the 19th century, focusing on the events accompanying the creation of the common state of the Slovaks and Czechs, the period of the Second World War, the rule of the Communist regime, the events related to the fall of the Iron Curtain and the “Velvet Revolution” in 1989 up to the present. The paper focuses attention on group-shared images of the enemies and on mutual interactions between the interpretations of local events and global conspiracy theories, as well as updates or later reinterpretations of older conspiracy motifs.

Keywords

Conspiracy theories, rumours, propaganda, blood libel, anti-Semitism, Milan Rastislav Štefánik, potato beetle plague, Velvet Revolution, Slovakia, Czechia

Introduction

The conspiracy theory, as a genre, has enjoyed great popularity in both the Slovak and Czech cultures over the past decade. Conspiracy theories predominate mainly in different types of news disseminated through the Internet. Over the past 10 years, we have seen a large increase in the number

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of conspiracy websites, that is, websites presenting ‘alternative’ news based on a rejection of official news, which is supposedly manipulated by hidden forces; they have also been successful in electronic social networks. In 2013, influential ‘alternative’ print and broadcast media were established in Slovakia, offering a platform for conspiratorial versions of events.¹ In the Czech Republic, the popularity and a tacit legitimisation of conspiracy theories have been promoted beyond the Internet more or less during the same period via their highlighting by several important personalities of the Czech public life. The main role was played by two advisors to former President Václav Klaus (in office in 2003–2013): Petr Hájek, Head of the President’s Office, and Ladislav Jakl, the President’s Secretary, who repeatedly interpreted several events on the domestic and foreign political scene through a conspiracist perspective, both in the mass media and in their own books. Many global conspiracy theories centred on the theme that world politics is controlled by secret societies have long been supported by the most popular Czech pop singer Karel Gott, who has popularised them in a wide range of interviews.

Ten years ago, the term ‘conspiracy theories’ was relatively unknown to the Slovak and Czech public; yet it has swiftly become a common part of the public discourse in recent years. A substantial part of these rumours, basic narrative cycles, images of the enemy and argumentation strategies have been adopted from foreign sources. On the other hand, local events and attitudes are connected to more global schemes which highlight the abundant interpretive potential of these theories, mainly thanks to the Internet. The reflection of this phenomenon in the Slovak and Czech social sciences and humanities is still relatively uncommon, with the exception of a few pilot studies and public opinion polls on the causes and consequences of this phenomenon within this geographical region.²

Actually, a tradition of conspiracy theories existed in Central Europe long before the Internet era. This paper aims to highlight how the past meets present in this area, and to reveal some specific features of the conspiracist discourse on the basis of local history. We will focus on the period from the second half of the 19th century up to the present, in particular, on those popular conspiracy theories which represent important milestones in Czech and Slovak history and have been replicated in the present-day discourse. These include local variants of accusations of Jewish ritual murders, the suspicious deaths of prominent political personalities and the alleged ‘staging’ of the revolution in 1989. These topics can be considered a discursive interconnection of local historical events, not only with previous images of the enemy within, but also with global conspiracy theories developing the ‘classical’ motifs of secret societies.

Blood libel in the Czech lands and Hungary towards the end of the 19th century

It should be mentioned at the beginning that the Czech and Slovak societies have developed within slightly different historic contexts. In the 19th century, they were part of the Habsburg Empire. During that period, the Czech territory was a sovereign country with relatively developed industry and clearly demarcated borders within the Austrian part of the Habsburg Empire. National rivalry and occasional tensions (reflected mainly within the context of the Czech national movement, starting from the beginning of the 19th century) were manifested mainly with regard to rivalry between the Czech and the German-speaking populations. Besides the traditional ‘rivals’ of the Czech-speaking population – Czech Germans who made up almost one-third of the population of the Czech Kingdom – and the relatively numerous Jewish population who had been stigmatised for centuries, other groups also acquired the role of symbolic enemies within the folk tradition of the country. The cycles of legends and rumours about the activities of the Jesuits and agents of the

Catholic Church in general represent a peculiar vernacular reception of the Enlightenment rivalry between the state and the church during the rule of Emperor Joseph II (1765–1790). These cycles followed on from the anti-Catholic discourse of the Czech national movement and were handed down up until the mid-20th century (Janeček, 2009). These ‘proto-conspiracy theories’, recorded for the first time at the end of the 18th century, confirm Véronique Champion-Vincent’s hypothesis about the gradual shift of accusations of conspiracies from ‘bad others’ towards ‘bad elites’ (Champion-Vincent, 2005).

The territory of today’s Slovakia was situated within the multi-ethnic Hungary, which was more agrarian in comparison with the Austrian part of the empire, geographically overlapping with the territory of ‘Upper Hungary’, where the Slovak-speaking population was not officially granted a separate ethnic status within the country. In spite of the official declaration of the ethnic law (1868), the representatives of the Slovak national movement were unhappy about how the ethnic issue was addressed in Hungary (and, vice versa, the Hungarian politicians who supported Hungarian national unity suspected Slovak – and other Slavic – nationalists of participating in a ‘pan-Slavic conspiracy’ orchestrated by Russia).

The image of the political enemy in Slovak satirical press was not only marked by attributes of the image of the ‘Hungarian’ – the national oppressor, but also accompanied by hints about collaboration with Jewish forces, which were held responsible for attacks on traditional values.³ The notion of a Jewish conspiracy as part of the ethnic conflict in Hungary resonated with the rise of modern political anti-Semitism. The growing anti-Semitic mood in Hungary erupted in 1882, when the country was stunned by widespread rumours of a ritual murder of a young Christian girl, Eszter Solymosi, which was allegedly committed by Jews in the village of Tiszaeszlár. The agenda of modern political anti-Semitism managed to transform the traditional folk image of the demonic Jew and previous local rumours about ritual murders into a nationwide affair. For a part of the public, the fact that the accused Jews were released in the court proceedings due to lack of evidence confirmed that it was a conspiracy on the political level. This conviction forms a part of the anti-Semitic ultra-nationalist discourse in present-day Hungary – over 130 years later.⁴ This rumour was also very popular within the territory of today’s Slovakia, as proven by a series of similar accusations in the 1890s (Námestovo, 1899; Šalov, 1895; Senica, 1894; for further details, see Szabó, 2014).

A parallel affair took place in the Czech lands in 1899, when a young Jew, Leopold Hilsner, was accused of the ritual murder of a young seamstress. Just as the image of Jews in Slovakia was linked to Magyarisation,⁵ Czech nationalist anti-Semites accused Jews of complicity in Germanisation (in spite of the fact that as many as 54% of Jews in the Czech lands claimed Czech as their language of communication in 1900). This process occurred upon a background of an escalated ethnic and linguistic Czech–German conflict after Badeni’s government in Austria passed laws (1899) under which Czech became the official language within the Czech territory alongside German, which raised strong protests among Austrian Germans (Kovtun, 1999). Hilsner’s case also resulted in scandalous court proceedings, provoking public hysteria⁶ and a wave of anti-Semitic violence. TG Masaryk, the future first Czechoslovak president and professor of philosophy in Prague, was also involved in the case.⁷ By publicly claiming that the court ruling was illegal, based on indirect evidence and popular superstitions, he earned not only the indignation of the public and of some of his colleagues and students, but also the label of a Jewish conspirator and alleged freemason. A current variant of this opinion is presented, for example, in Bartoš (2014), which raises the question of whether Czech Israel-oriented domestic and foreign policies are shaped only by the authentic attitudes of the majority opinion of Czechs, or whether they are consequence of the legacy of the First Republic, where the most influential political positions were occupied by ‘our fellow citizens of Jewish origin’.⁸

An interesting example of the development of these notions is the rumours surrounding the tragic death of the Slovak general Milan Rastislav Štefánik.

The birth of post-war Czechoslovakia and the theories about the death of MR Štefánik

The peace negotiations in 1918 resulted in the breakup of the Austro-Hungarian Empire and the formation of new Central European states, including Czechoslovakia. The seemingly optimal solution of joining two small nations into one and the idea of creating a united Czechoslovak nation (its proponents were called ‘Czechoslovakists’ in the contemporary rhetoric), which was intended to outnumber the large German minority, turned to be a source of new national conflicts and local conspiracy theory topics. One of the opportunities for developing a conspiracy theory was a tragic event that took place in 1919, shortly after the birth of Czechoslovakia – the crash of the plane carrying a war hero, General Milan Rastislav Štefánik. The rumours that the plane was shot down by Czech soldiers who were ordered to do so by their superiors, or that Štefánik, still alive after the crash, was assassinated at the site of the plane crash and that it was planned by the ‘Freemason’ President Masaryk or by Minister Eduard Beneš, became increasingly popular. These rumours became a consistently revived element of the Slovak nationalist canon and culminated during the period of the wartime Slovak state⁹ as well as after the dissolution of Czechoslovakia in 1993.

The personality of MR Štefánik acquired attributes of a national hero (Macho 2001). His image represents a successful story of a poor Slovak boy who became an astronomer, designer, war hero (French brigade general and Knight of the Legion of Honour) and prominent diplomat, who made a large contribution, thanks to his contacts, to the creation of the Czechoslovak Republic. The alleged reasons for this murder were Masaryk and Beneš’s fears concerning the powerful influence of Štefánik as a supporter of an autonomous Slovak nation within international diplomacy.

The strong narrative and argumentation strategy in later reflections upon the background of this tragedy is based on the creation of analogies with similar heroes and contrasts with villains. Štefánik thus ended within the pantheon of other victims of anti-Slovak ‘Czechoslovakist’ conspirators. Such martyrs included, for example, Andrej Hlinka (an important figure of the autonomist Slovak movement during the first Czechoslovak Republic¹⁰), Jozef Tiso (President of the wartime Slovak state, executed after the war for his collaboration with Nazi Germany) and, from the ranks of later politicians also, Alexander Dubček (the Slovak protagonist of the Prague Spring of 1968, who died in a car accident in 1992).¹¹ The image of Eduard Beneš in the narrative schemes of these theories represents a clear counterpoint to Štefánik. He is depicted as a weak-willed string-puller behind the scenes, who built his political career exclusively thanks to Štefánik’s skills, or a salon gambler who wasted away the money of American Slovaks in foreign casinos. Besides his alleged negative personal attributes, his conspiratorial image presents him primarily as the executor of the will of a global enemy, as these theories consider the orders issued by Freemasons to be the main reason for the assassination of Štefánik, in which President Masaryk was also allegedly involved.¹²

Disputes about the mythified image of MR Štefánik arose shortly after his death during the first Czechoslovak Republic, when he was claimed by both rival ideological groups – the autonomists and the supporters of Czechoslovak national unity. Štefánik was unacceptable for communists as an exponent of bourgeois Czechoslovakia and an open enemy of bolshevism, and it was a social taboo to commemorate him. However, shortly after the revolution in 1989, the old anti-Czech and anti-Czechoslovak moods revived and culminated in the split of the common state at the turn of 1992 and 1993, bringing back to life the nationalist symbols and clichés, including new and old conspiracy theories. Contemporary satirical reflections of these theories also circulate on the Internet (Figure 1).



Figure 1. The celebration of the 95th anniversary of Štefánik's death in May 2014 not only caused a revival of conspiracy theories, but also brought a humorous adaptation of this topic. The impulse was the endeavour of one of the members of the nationalist Slovak National Party, R Rafaj, to be publicly identified with the figure of the popular general. Rafaj wore a uniform similar to Štefánik's during the memorial service at Štefánik's Memorial in Bradlo. In large parts of society, the act provoked an outrage; online social networks started to disseminate a satirical collage of a popular website called *Cynical monster*, whose targets were not only the relevant historical figures, but also conspiracy theories.

Dismay in the Czech Republic:

- Bloody hell, that's Štefánik! I thought we'd killed him...'

- Damn! Guess we've just badly mutilated him.

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Theories about Štefánik's death were and still are disseminated mainly in the form of personal experience narratives, referring (just as in the case of contemporary legends) to eyewitnesses of the event. This topic found fertile soil in the nationalist discourse to such an extent that it can also be used within the current ideological contexts (serving as an argument against real or artificially created enemies from among 'Czechoslovakists', Freemasons, communists, until the fall of the Iron Curtain, as well as – among some historians – populist politicians since the 1990s):

The general was still alive and was shot dead by a pistol!

I call on all the grandchildren and descendants of former Czechoslovak legionnaires from the Czech, Moravian and Slovak lands to join together spontaneously, contact each other and get organised in clubs to remember our grandparents, who were expelled through world-dominating manipulations and misused

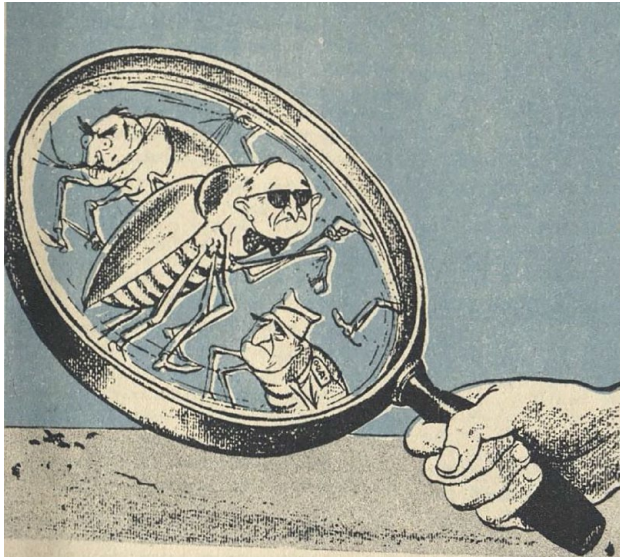


Figure 2. ‘Potato beetle under a magnifying glass’. Cartoon from the Slovak humorous magazine *Roháč* (1950).

in a disgusting way for different hidden objectives; they were forced to accept the demonocracy model which led them from the Christian empire into the serfdom of MNF republics; Christian sister nations had to kill each other twice for false “liberty”, “equality” and “fraternity”, without God, just as it works in the EU even today (dolezite.sk/old/forum.php?ip=217.31.32; cf. dolezite.sk/old/Nove_svedectva_o_vrazde_generala_M_R_Stefanika_84.html).¹³

Conspiracy motifs during the communist regime

The period of the communist regime in Czechoslovakia (1948–1989) brought a certain change in the attributes of the image of the enemy. It also changed the rhetoric: the image of the Jew, ‘Jew Bolshevik’, or Freemason faded into the background, giving way to images of the class enemy, either external (‘Western imperialists’) or internal (saboteurs, anti-state groups and many other categories, depending on the particular context). The images of ‘imperialist’ Western capitalists pretending humanism in order to hide their greed and attempts at world domination were also present in political criticism and satire during the first Czechoslovak Republic and in the war propaganda during the wartime Slovak state (1939–1945) (Panczová, 2015). These images were also instrumental to the regime’s propaganda. During this period, the image of the enemy was defined mainly by means of the ideological indoctrination provided by the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR). The state leadership devoted much attention to strict censorship, to ‘shaping’ public opinion ‘from above’, and to a search for ‘secure’ information ‘from below’.¹⁴ The feeling of threat was spread during the Cold War through the artificially induced fear of a war that was allegedly prepared by ‘Western imperialists’; yet, unexpected real conflicts (the revolution in Hungary in 1956, the Cuban crisis in 1962, the invasion of Czechoslovakia by Warsaw Pact troops in 1968, and so on) resulted in an uncontrolled spread of rumours among the public. Within the general atmosphere of people’s distrust of official news, rumours played a specific role. People even searched between the lines of the daily press for various ‘secret signs’ signalling the outbreak of the war (Zavacká, 2005: 102).

In the 1950s, mass media were constantly producing new evidence about the re-armament of Germany and Japan by the USA and about plans for a Third World War with the assistance of Hitler's former officers.¹⁵ The first half of the 1950s was characterised, under the influence of Soviet Stalinism, by a hysterical search for enemy infiltration into the country. The communist regime began to use a certain type of conspiracy theories as part of its political propaganda. From time to time, it produced highly farcical situations, such as accusing 'Western imperialists' of intentionally dropping 'American bugs' (potato beetles, causing a plague in Europe)¹⁶ onto the fields of East Germany, Czechoslovakia and Poland with the aim of paralysing socialist agriculture (Figure 2). On 28 June 1950, the Czechoslovak government published an official declaration entitled 'Government's call to fight against potato beetles'. Among other information, it contained the following text:

We have even found boxes and bottles filled with these beetles. All this is conclusive proof that the current potato beetle threat has not arisen in a natural and commonplace manner. This dangerous pest was artificially, intentionally, and massively imported by means of clouds and winds by Western imperialists and their subversive agents who were sent to our countries. This unprecedented attack on the existence of our farmers and of all our peaceful people is a shocking crime of imperialists, who threaten the world with nuclear bombs and use the same means and criminal weapons as those used by the Nazi aggressors in the war, such as toxic gases, or those used by Japanese fascists, such as epidemical bacteria.... ('Provolání vlády k boji proti mandelince bramborové', *Rudé právo*, 29 June 1950)

Sudden deaths of important personalities also became the subject of rumours and theorisation during (for further details, see also Formánková 2008.) the communist period. Such was the case of Klement Gottwald (1896–1953), the first communist president of Czechoslovakia, who died only 9 days after returning from Stalin's funeral. Rumours that he was poisoned were supported by previous events – his private doctor was arrested in 1952 – but more popular was the version according to which he was poisoned by the Soviet intelligence service during Stalin's funeral in Moscow. This version is also mentioned in a popular anecdote:

Jozef Tiso,¹⁷ Jan Masaryk¹⁸ and Klement Gottwald meet in the afterlife.

Masaryk and Gottwald ask Tiso:

- How did you get here?
 - On a rope.
 - And you? – The other two ask Masaryk.
 - Me, through the window.
 - And you? – They finally turn to Gottwald.
 - I'm here on a medical prescription from Moscow...
- (Dašková et al., 1991: 157)

Naturally, similar speculations about political murders in communist Czechoslovakia were not allowed to be spread in public. On the other hand, the Czechoslovak press sought to use conspiracy theories concerning JF Kennedy's death in 1963 for its propaganda purposes. In its reaction to this event, the press jointly emphasised the 'unhealthy violent atmosphere of the American society' with its deep-rooted 'self-conceit and superiority'¹⁹ and hinted at the actual offenders from among ultra-right wing organisations and other political opponents of Kennedy's policy, stressing the role of the police and the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) in concealing evidence.²⁰

The stereotypical images of the USA and the 'West' as societies full of violence, corruption, scandals, deep social inequalities and sexual decadence, supported by the communist propaganda

during the Cold War period, even today represent an ethical argument in the rhetoric of some conspiracy theories, according to which the USA and the ‘West’ act in the role of enemies of the nation.

The ‘Velvet Revolution’ in 1989

The relatively smooth and bloodless manner of overthrowing the 40-year totalitarian communist regime in Czechoslovakia resulted not only in the attribute ‘Velvet’ Revolution, but also in several conspiracy theories. These saw in its background hidden actions by secret services from the ‘West’, Czechoslovakia or the USSR, or their sophisticated cooperation. The most frequent presumed motive behind these conspiracies was the liquidation of the relatively developed Czechoslovak industry by means of its privatisation, in order to prevent it from becoming an unwanted competitor to suddenly open Western global markets. Besides the brutal police intervention against the student demonstration in Prague on 17 November 1989, which sparked the Velvet Revolution, a rumour concerned the alleged death of Martin Šmíd, a fictional student of Charles University. This rumour, spread by world news agencies on the basis of unverified information and later presented by Czechoslovak state television, became the main emotional trigger for the massive social support of the Velvet Revolution. The insufficient explanation of this revolution for a part of the Czech and the Slovak society gave rise to many conspiracy theories, which interpreted this event as an intervention by the Czechoslovak (or also Soviet) secret services, with the goal of inciting the relatively passive citizens to overthrow a political regime which was no longer functional.²¹ The latent popularity of these conspiracy theories on the Internet has recently increased through its penetration into off-line discourse, mainly thanks to their highlighting by the above-mentioned public personalities in the media, representing the basic communication space for the dissemination of such ideas (Keeley, 1999: 122).

A unique artistic rendering of a part of the Czechoslovak conspiracist discourse, which interprets all important events of the Czechoslovak history from the Munich Agreement of 1938 through the Prague Spring in 1968 up until the Velvet Revolution in 1989 as a coherent global manipulation by the Soviet (later Russian) and American secret services, can be found in the extensive novel *Větr, tma, přítomnost* (Wind, Darkness, Present Time) by Kahuda (2014), one of the most original contemporary Czech writers. In this pessimistic and paranoid fiction, the inhabitants of the Czech Republic and Slovakia have for decades been a mere passive puppet in a huge intelligence game, condemned to live forever within the Russian sphere of influence with the active consent and collaboration of the West.

Conspiracist interpretations of present-day events

The popularity of the *X-Files* series and of the *Wag the Dog* movie in the 1990s enhanced the dissemination of conspiracy motifs in various popular genres. Conspiracy theories have become smoothly established in every type of cultural phenomena, including science and lifestyle, philosophy or medicine. They have found their ‘counterparts’ in different branches of ‘sceptics’, who fight against rumours by promoting critical consideration of information sources and a rational type of argumentation (we can mention *Sisyfos*, a branch of the international movement of sceptics, which has been active in the Czech Republic since 1995; in Slovakia, similar initiatives came into existence during the past 10 years²²).

As for Slovakia, several European Union policies have recently become the subject of heated debates. Religious discourse is a sensitive domain of dispute. An example is the ‘conspiracy-soaked’ campaign preceding the Slovak referendum ‘for the protection of (traditional) family’, held on 7 February 2015.²³ The calling of this referendum was initiated as a reaction to the European

Union policy advocating gender equality, including the possibility for homosexual couples to contract marriages and adopt children. Heated discussions with a confessional and political flavour divided the society. They were nurtured by all leading representatives of political and religious life. The storm which swept Slovakia was also hiding a message of revolt against the European Union, attracting supporters of different ideas with a common anti-European ground. Electronic social networks made a large contribution to the discussion. Friends shared ‘testimonies’ with each other about the kidnapping and sexual exploitation of children by homosexuals, or unverified cases of perverted violence against children, which had a function similar to the motifs of Jewish ritual murders at the end of the 19th century.

Within the Czech environment, the conspiracist discourse partly follows the social line of the *café/pub split*²⁴ of the Czech society, which has eliminated for good the nationwide pro-European and pro-Western consensus that prevailed in the Czech society after the fall of the communist regime. Since the first years of the new millennium, the Czech society has been increasingly divided between the liberal, pro-Western and pro-European urban citizens, and the conservative, leftist, nationalist and anti-European inhabitants of the rural areas. This split can be observed, politically and socially, in all major public debates since 2006 (on the instalment of a US military radar in the Czech Republic in 2006, on the form of the new Czech National Library in 2007 and, in particular, during the election of the Czech President in 2013 and the subsequent Ukrainian crisis).

The most fervent issue in recent times that has turned the social debate in Slovakia and Czech Republic towards a conspiracist discourse has been the issue of refugees seeking to get to Germany through the Balkans and Central Europe. ‘Alternative’ news sources suggested that the migrant influx was not caused by the war events in the Middle East, but that it was the effect of targeted efforts deployed by conspirators controlling global policy (i.e. the USA) to Islamise Europe, undermine its traditional values and cultures and bring about ethnic and economic destruction. Refugees have been depicted in numerous hoaxes as a threat which brings, in addition to thousands of culturally incompatible, socially dependent, uneducated and naturally violent people, dangerous exotic diseases also (one of the Internet hoaxes was about an outbreak of the West Nile fever epidemic in Vienna, illustrated by photos of a boy with bleeding eyes, intentionally transferred from articles about dengue fever, which is a completely different type of disease²⁵). The fact that the German Chancellor Angela Merkel demonstrated her willingness to admit refugees triggered a strong response among conspiracy theorists for whom this represented a clear proof that Merkel was in the pay of conspirators who are preparing, together with Brussels, the end of the European civilisation.²⁶

Conclusion

In the history of conspiracism in Slovakia and the Czech Republic, we can observe – just as elsewhere in Europe – expressions following the lines of accusations against marginalised minorities (mainly Jews) through modern fears of conspiracies by secret societies gathered within the newborn liberal intellectual elites (mainly Freemasons and the Illuminati) and the current form of what Peter Knight calls ‘conspiracy culture’,²⁷ which permeates, in addition to explicit political or religious propaganda, the different layers of public debate. The current nationalist conspiracist discourse is gradually abandoning the issues of Czecho–Slovak relations: the main role of the enemy has been taken over by the European Union and the USA. This, however, does not only concern political issues. In connection with the defence of ‘traditional values’, political ambitions are intertwined with religious stances, a phenomenon clearly visible in the Slovak environment. Returns to the anti-liberal, conservative or archaic utopian discourse marked by nationalism are also frequent, depicting the present as a phase of decline, guided by enemies towards an apocalyptic

future. The proponents of these ideas base their convictions on a nostalgia for diverse, idealised forms of a Golden Age – ranging from the era preceding the rise of liberalism, in the 19th century, to the period before the rise of capitalism, in the first half of the 20th century, to the mythified wartime Slovak state after the Second World War and, after 1989, even to the period of the communist dictatorship (not only in left-wing ideologies, but also in some dissident circles now targeting the ‘West’). This social debate has sharpened the contours of the new ‘anti-Western’ conspiracist discursive system. If the latter is knowing a successful dissemination, it is also because it creates its historic analogies and follows up on well-known images, motives and strategies in line with the theories of the dissemination of social representations.

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Notes

1. In particular, the magazine *Zem a vek* (Earth and Age) and *Rádio Slobodný vysielač* (Radio Free Transmitter), broadcasting since January 2013.
2. Besides pilot studies in the field of Slovak ethnology and folklore studies (Galiová-Panczová, 2006; Panczová, 2011), sociological researches have also been published in recent years, for example, as a part of the study, ‘The conspiratorial mindset in the age of transition’ (Gyárfášová et al., 2013). This study is based on a poll conducted among the inhabitants of France, Hungary and Slovakia. One of the interesting results was the proportion of people identifying themselves with the statement: ‘It is not in fact the government that runs the country: we don’t know who pulls the strings’ – 42% of Hungarians, 50% of French and as many as 63% of Slovaks. The authors of this research commented upon these results with a warning that even though the opinion poll does not directly reflect a belief in conspiracy theories, it seeks to ‘reveal the nature and fertility of the terrain for conspiracy theories about the role of government’ (Gyárfášová et al., 2013: 9). From the perspective of experimental psychology, conspiracy theories were studied, for example, as a type of irrational thinking within the framework of the study conducted by Čavojská et al. (2015). In 2015, an issue (3/2015) of the journal of the Institute of Ethnology, Slovak Academy of Sciences, *Slovenský národopis/Slovak Ethnology*, was dedicated to conspiracy theories.
3. The image of Hungarians and Jews in humorous and satirical press in Slovakia was discussed in the paper by Krekovičová and Panczová (2013).
4. This scandal arose in the Hungarian society with statements by a member of the Jobbik party in Parliament who, on the 130th anniversary of the death of Eszter Solymosi, compared her death to the death of a teacher killed by a Hungarian Roma in 2007. He considered the involvement of ‘Jewry and its then leaders’ in the murder in Tiszaeszlár to be demonstrated and the withdrawal of the accusations a milestone in a process when the country fell under the control of ‘external forces’ (see Hodgson, 2012).
5. The term is derived from the word ‘Magyar’ (Hungarian) used in the ethnic and linguistic sense; ‘Hungarian’ in that period indicated political nationality and incorporated all citizens of the Kingdom of Hungary (including the Magyars, Slovaks, Serbs, etc.). The term ‘Magyarisation’ indicated the official preference for ‘Magyar’ language in Hungary during that period.
6. The ‘Hilsneriad’ motifs are also present in Czech and Moravian folklore (see Thořová, 2000). The fact that these motifs are still preserved in people’s memories is documented by sporadic mentions in Internet discussions; for example, on 26 December 2013, the following tune appeared in connection with a comment on an article on fraudulent Christmas discounts, which has existed in different variants since 1908: *Nekupujte od Židů / cukr, kávu, mouku, / oni nám zabili / modrookou holku. / Anežka Hružová / byla zavražděná, / od Poldy Hilsnera / byla podřezaná. Zeptejte se Sálusa, / když ji táhli do lesa. / Sálus u ní vartu stál, / když ji Hilsner podřezal.* (‘Don’t buy from the Jews / sugar, coffee, flour / they killed / our blue-eyed girl. / Anežka Hružová / was murdered / slaughtered / by Polda Hilsner. Ask Sálus / when they

- dragged her into the forest. / Sálus stood on guard / while Hilsner slaughtered her', www.diskusforum.sk/tema/zlavy-zlavy-zlavy).
7. Tomáš Garrigue Masaryk (1850–1937), Professor of Sociology and Deputy of the Austrian Reichstag in Vienna, became President of the Republic, thanks to his diplomatic accomplishments in relation to the birth of inter-war Czechoslovakia.
 8. On 31 March 2015, the author of this book and other representatives of the nationalist political party National Democracy placed a commemorative plaque with an anti-Semitic text at the scene of the murder of Anežka Hružová.
 9. Basic information about the global conspiracy of the Freemasons is provided in the article by Ľudovít Hargaš 'Tajná židovská svetovláda' ('Secret Jewish World Domination'), *Gardista*, 22 April 1939: 8–9, describing the activities, financial background and details of the membership of the respective central Jewish organisations established in the USA. The Freemasons are held responsible not only for the creation of Czechoslovakia (which represented the period of Czech domination according to the rhetoric of Slovak nationalists), but also, together with the Jews, for starting the Second World War.
 10. Andrej Hlinka (1864–1938) was a Slovak priest and Chairman of the conservative Slovak Popular Party. He gained his reputation not only as a martyr during the fight against Magyarisation, but also after being held in the Czech lands in 1919 for his efforts to influence the peace negotiations in Paris in favour of Slovak autonomy. He was later conditionally sentenced for offending President Masaryk as a protector of Jews (when he defended himself, he mentioned his disapproval of Masaryk's attitudes in supporting 'the murderer Hilsner', see Szabó, 2014: 15).
 11. The interpretations of Dubček's death came in several versions, and the range of persons who allegedly ordered his assassination was much wider – from the Czechoslovak President Václav Havel, via the later Slovakian Prime Minister Vladimír Mečiar, up to the Soviet Committee for State Security (KGB).
 12. A Polish parallel to these conspiracy theories is represented by the narrative cycles about plane crashes which caused the death of Władysław Sikorski, Chief of the Polish General Staff, in Gibraltar in 1943, and of the Polish President Lech Kaczyński and other prominent Polish politicians, officers and church representatives in Smolensk, Russia, in 2010 (Czubala, 2014).
 13. The authenticity of the conspiracy versions was also spread and confirmed by academics and politicians with substantial influence (including former Slovakian Prime Minister V Mečiar and nationalist historian MS Ďurica). They referred to the alleged testimonies of eyewitnesses. Their statements, however, are discarded by mainstream interpretations by most Slovak historians.
 14. For more details on the official foreign policy propaganda in Slovakia, see Zavacká (2005).
 15. For example, the weekly *Týždeň*, which used to present overviews of political and economic events in the world, published an article on 8 September 1951 entitled 'Biela kniha o obrodení nemeckého imperializmu. Proti americkej vojne v Európe' ('White Book on the Revival of German Imperialism. Against American War in Europe'), which was a translation of the document issued by the National Council of the National Front of the German Democratic Republic.
 16. Accusations of offensive use of Colorado potato beetles have an interesting historical background. The presence of natural invasion of these beetles from the USA to Europe was reported in 1876 in the port of Bremen, then in Rotterdam and Liverpool (1877); a big incursion occurred in 1914 in Germany (Massard, 2000; Salaman, 1985: 185). During the Second World War, Nazi Germany authorities suspected the existence of an Allied scheme to use potato beetles as biological weapons. This led to the establishment of a 'Potato Beetle Defence Service', a 'Potato Beetle Research Institute' in Kruft in 1942 and several field trials. However, accusations made by socialist countries in Central and Eastern Europe against the USA, in 1950 and 1951, have never been proven (Garrett, 1996).
 17. Jozef Tiso (1887–1947) was President of the Slovak Republic in 1939–1945. After the war, he was executed by hanging for his collaboration with Nazi Germany.
 18. Jan Masaryk (1886–1948) was the son of the first Czechoslovak President TG Masaryk and he acted as the Czechoslovak Foreign Minister in 1940–1948. After the communist coup in February 1948, he refused to resign. In March of the same year, he was found dead beneath the windows of his flat. The investigation of his death, restored in 2004, led to the conclusion that he was assassinated.
 19. 'Atentát v ovzduší teroru a násilí', *Rudé právo*, 5 December 1963.

20. 'Otazník nad Dallasem', *Lidová demokracie*, 2 November 1963; 'O realismu v mezinárodní politice', *Mladá fronta*, 3 December 1963.
21. For a historical analysis of the sources of the untrue information concerning the death of Martin Šmíd, see the study by the Czech historian Pavel Žáček (2010).
22. One of several similar initiatives is the Slovak Sceptics community, <http://skeptici.pouzimerozum.sk>.
23. The following questions were asked in the referendum: 1. Do you agree that only a bond between one man and one woman can be called marriage? 2. Do you agree that same-sex couples or groups should not be allowed to adopt and raise children? 3. Do you agree that schools cannot force children to participate in education pertaining to sexual behaviour or euthanasia if the children or their parents do not agree?
24. See the conclusions of the conference *Beyond the Café/Pub Split: Interlocking Urbanity and Rurality in the Popular Culture of East Central European Societies* held on 30–31 October 2015 in the National Museum in Prague: <http://en.cspk.eu/conference-2015>.
25. See *Denník politika*, 22 October 2015, <http://dennikpolitika.sk/vo-viedni-sa-siri-zapadonilska-horucka>.
26. A similar spirit can be observed in the article by a Russian reporter, Darya Aslamova, in *Komsomolskaya Pravda*, 25 August 2015, the translation of which was shared by dozens of 'alternative' websites in the Czech Republic and in Slovakia.
27. According to Knight, 'conspiracy culture is thus no longer a symptom of a naïve and fervent demonology, but a very knowing acceptance of suspicion as a default mode – including even a cynical and self-reflexive scepticism about that suspicion itself' (2000: 55).

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