

The Suspicious Virus: Conspiracies and COVID19 in the Balkans

As elsewhere, the Western Balkans have been affected by conspiracy theories, with doubts about government policies and trust in institutions emerging in light of the pandemic. The scale and implications of these theories are particularly strong. While in most of Europe COVID conspiracies are supported by a quarter to a third of the population, more than 75% of WB citizens surveyed believe in one or several of six COVID theories. Education, age and gender do not significantly impact these numbers. Instead, there is a geopolitical pattern, where support for conspiracies often aligns with larger feelings about the USA and China. Minorities, more vulnerable and often less trusting in the state, might be more susceptible to conspiracies.

There is a direct link between support for conspiracy theories and scepticism towards vaccination. A majority across the region does not plan to take the vaccine, a ratio considerably lower than elsewhere in Europe, where a majority favours taking the vaccine. Conspiracy theories constitute a risk for public health in the Western Balkans and weaken trust in institutions and states, promoting a populist worldview that undermines democratic development.

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Conspiracy theories, big and small, seem to have grown in strength globally in 2020. From Qanon, originating in the US, to *querdenker* in Germany, who deny the pandemic and compare the government restrictions to Nazi Germany, outlandish claims seem to galvanize social media and thousands who take to the streets across the world. Conspiracy theories are not new, but the high visibility of such theories and the willingness of thousands to take to the street is novel and has given them greater attention.

In general, conspiracies feed radical and anti-democratic policies. They also give rise to individuals rejecting science, such as vaccines and other conventional medicine and advice. They thrive in an environment shaped by hard to explain phenomena, uncertainty and low trust in society and institutions. While rationally we can imagine a virus, it is invisible and threatens us suddenly in our normal environment, making it hard to make sense of shifting from normal routines to lockdowns and social distancing. If this challenge coincides with a general sense of uncertainty, be it in terms of jobs, social position and other support networks, conspiracies can flourish. Finally, if this is part of a low-trust environment, where government advice and explanations by scholars are distrusted, these theories thrive.

In the Western Balkans, conspiracy theories fall on fertile ground. Institutions are weak and often distrusted and there is a pre-history of conspiracy theories that flourished in particular during the 1990s. While Covid19 conspiracies chime with global trends, they are stronger in the Western Balkans, as the BIEPAG/IPSOS survey of the Western Balkans suggests, and potentially more destructive.

Background

Conspiracy theories that emerged in the Balkans, just as in other parts of the world, are related to the concept of the Enemy, the Other who incessantly works against Us, with the ultimate objective of destroying our nation and its identity. In doing this, the Enemy is accused of working together with “domestic traitors”.

The domination of Others over Us would be impossible without a powerful foreign sponsor, who joins forces with “domestic collaborators”. The famous example is the so-called “Vatican-Comintern” conspiracy explanation of the Yugoslav Communist Party’s “plot” against Serbs and Serbia. On the other side, the conspiracy about omnipotent Serbs who subjugated Croats via their full control of the state

apparatus was equally “convincing”. But both of them were widely shared by various segments of the population. For example, in 2011, 93 percent of Croatian citizens believed in at least one conspiracy theory, whereas on average they believed in five.²

With the breaking up of Yugoslavia and the war that followed, conspiracy explanations received a new dimension. Everyone blamed others for what happened to them, and they all found some external force supportive of their enemies. The list of the ‘internal enemies’ of the new post-Yugoslav states involved ethnic minorities, liberal and anti-war forces, who purportedly conspired with Soros (Open Society), with the forces of globalization and the Hague Tribunal. A complex past and present, difficult to digest, thus becomes easier to interpret and accept for many.

Conspiracy theories continue to be spread widely by media and leading politicians in the Western Balkans. The Serbian tabloids *Informer* and *Srpski Telegraf* mentioned the threat of war and armed conflict no less than 265 times during a one-year period in 2016-7. Leading politicians from the government and opposition in Serbia, Montenegro and elsewhere frequently evoke the threat of a “globalist” elite and George Soros is a regular *bête noire*. With the onset of the pandemic, conspiracy theories, as well as the promise that the population would be protected by their genes, hormones, ozone or just plain rakija—fruit brandy—have been given attention in tabloids, TV and public figures. So have such claims and conspiracies borne fruit?³

How Conspiracy theories stand in the Balkans?

In a world full of doubters about the deadliness of the coronavirus and its origin, the spread of conspiracy theories has been given unprecedented attention. Numerous conspiracy theories emerged with the spread of Covid19 and spread as globally as the virus itself. Not all conspiracy theories are equal. Some contain elements of truth or could be true but remain, till present day, unproven. Thus, belief in them displays a lower level in conspiratorial thinking than the more outlandish ones. Among the conspiracy theories explored in the regional survey, the least implausible is the theory that the virus escaped a lab in Wuhan, i.e. that it had existed for longer than publicly known and its origins had been obscured by China.

Already less plausible is the theory that claims the Chinese government engineered the coronavirus in a lab. Thus, the virus is not of natural origin, but design. There is no evidence for this claim and plenty

1 We thank other members of the BiEPAG for their comments. We would like to thank Fynn-Morten Heckert for his research assistance.

2 Nebojša Blanuša: *Teorije zavjera i hrvatska politička zbilja 1980. – 2007*. Plejada, Zagreb, 2011, p. 316.

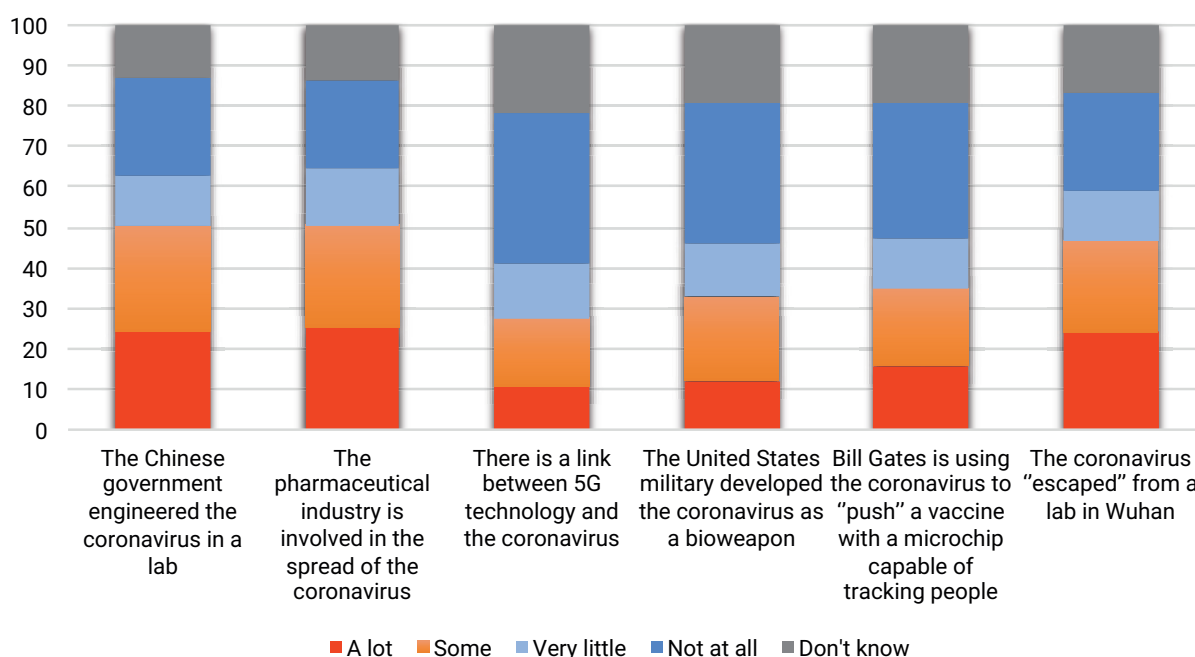
3 Florian Bieber, “Conspiratorial Corona: Hoaxes and Conspiracy Theories in the Balkans,” *Balkan Insight*, 7.7.2020, <https://balkaninsight.com/2020/07/07/conspiratorial-corona-hoaxes-and-conspiracy-theories-in-the-balkans/>



to suggest how it evolved naturally. The other four common conspiracy theories are already considerably more outlandish, including the claims that it is spread by the pharmaceutical industry; the US government engineered the virus as a bioweapon; that it is linked to 5G technology and, probably most improbable, that it spread to allow Bill Gates to chip the population through a vaccine. While most theories—except the first two—are mutually exclusive, the belief in them is not.

In Europe and the United States, surveys conducted between the beginning of the pandemic and November 2020 suggest that conspiracy theories are popular and widespread. However, their reach is limited to a clear minority. As a general pattern, around a quarter of the population appear to support conspiracy theories, with a range between those theories that are less intense, such as the presupposition that the virus was created in a lab, and more extreme conspiracies such as the link to 5G networks. For example, in Italy, hard hit by the pandemic in the first wave, the share of those believing in varying conspiracy theories is cumulative at a quarter in November 2020.⁴ Data for Poland reveals similar numbers with 23% believing that the virus is spread deliberately and 23.5% considering the virus part of an international plot. The belief that the virus originated in a lab is believed by 44.8% and only 5.6% believe that 5G is linked to COVID's spread.⁵

Germany has similar rates that have been stable since May 2020, with 16 to 19 % believing that COVID19 is a hoax and 14 to 18% believing that it is man-made. Due to an overlap of 8.5% (in November 2020), the rate of those who believe both stands at 22.5%. Another German survey from March 2020 suggests similar shares of the population endorsing conspiracy theories: 8% believed that there are secret organizations influencing decisions regarding the pandemic and 24% believe that media and politics are deliberately hiding information regarding the pandemic.⁶ Even the US, which has seen a very public dissemination of conspiracy theories, not least by President Trump, has a similar rate. A quarter believe in a July 2020 survey that the pandemic is planned by "powerful people."⁷ Similar to the other indicator on support for conspiracies, 22% of Americans believe that COVID19 is a Chinese biological weapon, while 49% reject this outright. Most visible has been the part of the public that rejects masks and other restrictions and does not consider the virus more dangerous than the flu. While there is strong partisan polarization on the issue, contributing to its visibility, the share of support for this downplaying of the pandemic stands at a third of the population.⁸ The visibility of conspiracy theories is high globally, however, numbers are strikingly high in the Western Balkans. Of the six most common conspiracy



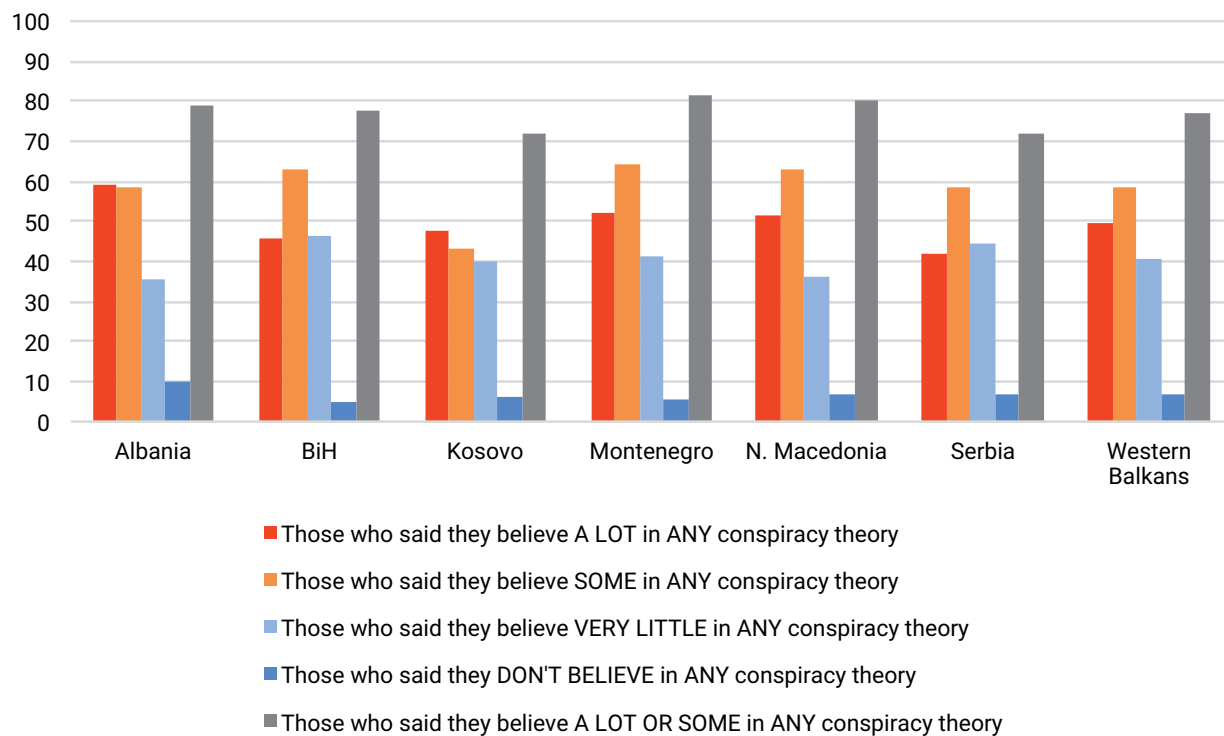
Graph 1: Support for COVID19 Conspiracy Theories in the Western Balkans (by 6 key Conspiracy Theories)

- 4 Rising from 19% in September <https://www.swg.it/observatory>
- 5 Biostat, *Mity o koronawirusie. Polacy o skuteczności ochrony przed SARS-CoV-2*, 23.9.2020, https://www.biostat.com.pl/news/mity_o_koronawirusie_polacy_o_skutecnosci_ochrony_przed_sars_cov_2.php
- 6 Institut für interdisziplinäre Konflikt- und Gewaltforschung (IKG), Erste Ergebnisse einer Online-Umfrage zur gesellschaftlichen Wahrnehmung des Umgangs mit der Corona-Pandemie in Deutschland, April 2020.
- 7 Katherine Schaeffer, "A look at the Americans who believe there is some truth to the conspiracy theory that COVID-19 was planned," Pew Research Center, 24.7.2020, <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2020/07/24/a-look-at-the-americans-who-believe-there-is-some-truth-to-the-conspiracy-theory-that-covid-19-was-planned/>
- 8 Overall, 19% believe (mostly or completely) that Hydroxychloroquine is a safe treatment. Daniel A. Cox, John Halpin, "Conspiracy theories, misinformation, COVID-19, and the 2020 election, Findings from the September 2020 American Perspectives Survey," Survey Centre on American Life, 13.10.2020, <https://www.americansurveycenter.org/research/conspiracy-theories-misinformation-covid-19-and-the-2020-election/>

theories detected on a global scale, three have more believers than non-believers, namely that the Chinese government engineered the virus in a lab, that the pharmaceutical industry is involved in its spread and that the virus escaped a lab in Wuhan (see graph 1). The three more outlandish theories, namely the link to 5G technology, the involvement of the US military in developing the virus as a bioweapon and the spread of COVID19 by Bill Gates to chip the world population have more non-believers than believers, but still across the region, between 27.7 and 34.9% of the population claim that these theories contain some, or a lot of truth. This means that between a quarter and half of the population subscribe to at least one conspiracy theory.

to any one of the theories varies between 41.5% in Serbia and 59.4% in Albania, the total number of those give some and a lot of credibility one or several theories is steady throughout the region.

Conspiracy theories are not going to die out or be resolved through more knowledge. Neither education nor youth are clear protections from the belief in conspiracies. Whereas studies of conspiracy theories generally suggest a strong link to lower levels of education⁹, there is no such pattern in the Western Balkans. Some conspiracies fare better among the young and well educated, others among the middle aged and decently educated, and others among the old and less educated. Neither does gender nor rural versus urban population explain the variation. For example, in Kosovo, 47% of the population with



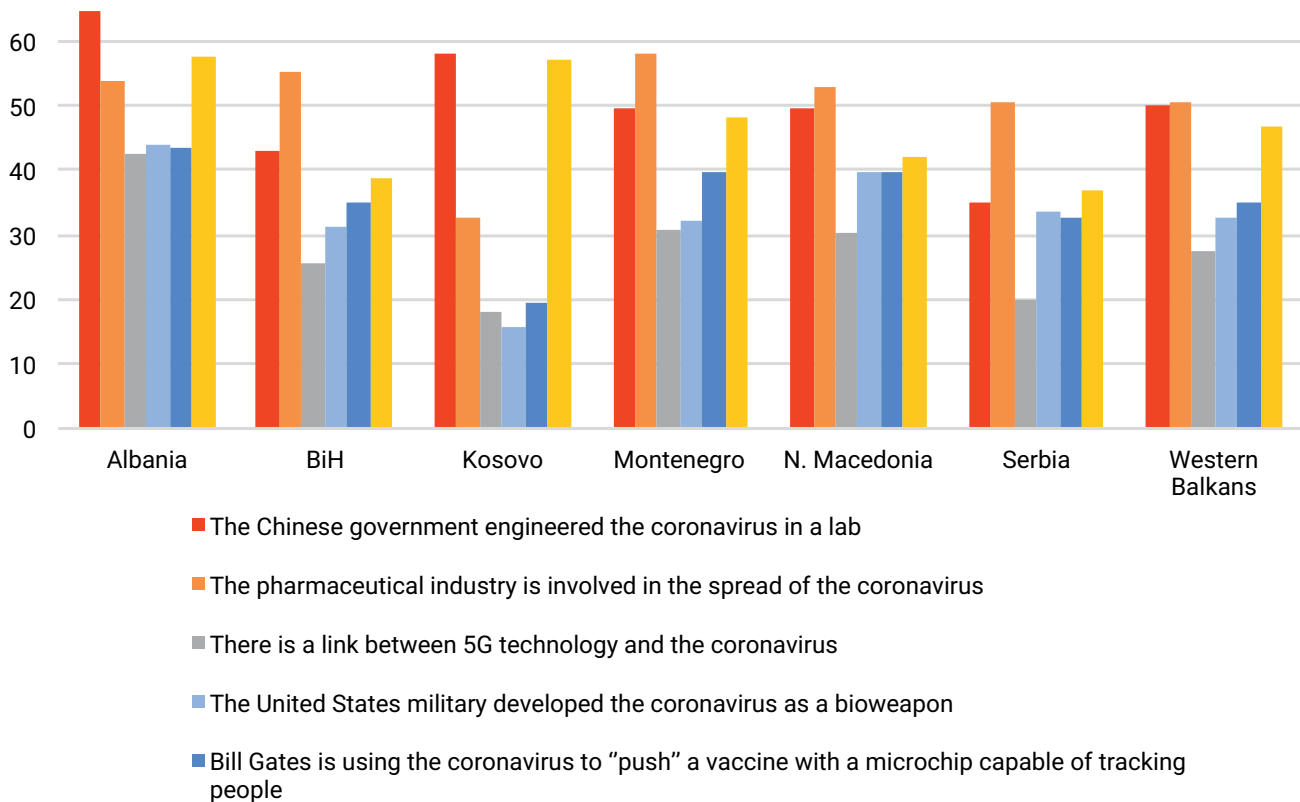
Graph 2: Cumulative Support for COVID19 Conspiracy Theories in the Western Balkans

The country with the highest number of supporters of conspiracy theories in the Western Balkans is Albania. Here, all theories, no matter how contradictory they are, have more believers than not. Most popular are the theories that attribute responsibility to China, but even the link to Bill Gates is considered to have a lot or some truth to it by more than 43% of the population. Overall, in the region nearly 80% believe a lot, or to some degree, any of the COVID19 conspiracies. While the number of those that give a lot of credence

a college degree believe that the pharma industry is spreading the disease, compared to just 22.2% with primary education. This suggests that conspiracy theories are deeply embedded in all layers of society. Different groups have their favourite conspiracy theory, but on average, there is little variation. Strikingly, those who subscribe to conspiracy theories more also claim to encounter fake news more regularly, although there is no particular pattern of media consumption among those who subscribe to conspiracy theories.

⁹ In the US, the biggest predictor for the belief in conspiracies is education. The less educated, the higher the share of believes in conspiracies, where as the best educated have very low levels of belief in CT and high levels of rejection (78% vs. 15%, i.e. few "sitting on the fence"). Katherine Schaeffer, "A look at the Americans who believe there is some truth to the conspiracy theory that COVID-19 was planned," Pew Research Center, 24.7.2020, <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2020/07/24/a-look-at-the-americans-who-believe-there-is-some-truth-to-the-conspiracy-theory-that-covid-19-was-planned/>





Graph 3: Support for Conspiracy Theories by Country

Geopolitics and Conspiracy Theories

If education, age and gender are not good predictors of belief in conspiracy theories in the Western Balkans, and neither is the urban-rural divide, can an answer be found in geopolitics? After all, the main Covid19-related conspiracy theories tested in our survey have a distinct geopolitical component. On the one hand there are, inevitably, issues that relate to China. On the other, there are conjectures about the involvement of the US or of US-linked actors: the US military bioweapon theory and the 'Bill Gates' theory. While the latter group of beliefs is somewhat less widespread (and unsurprisingly so, given that the virus's Chinese origin is widely uncontroversial), it is still present.

The survey reveals a geopolitical divide of sorts, as Serbs appear to have a more favourable view of China than citizens of other nationalities. Respondents from Serbia were those with the lowest recorded belief in China's explicit 'design' (35%) as well as in the Wuhan lab escape theory (39%). These figures are higher in all other countries, and especially in Albania, where they stand at 65% and 58%, respectively. While in Serbia the figures are relatively low across the board, it is still relevant to remark that the gap between the belief in

US- and China-related theories is extremely thin, whereas in all other countries this gap is much wider, with the US-related theories having much less traction.

It is further interesting that Serb ethnic citizens in Montenegro and in Kosovo express a lower belief in China-related conspiracy theories than other ethnic groups. Given Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić's very public show of gratitude towards China during the coronavirus crisis, addressing the Chinese repeatedly as Serbia's 'brothers' and 'saviours', it is no surprise that Serbian respondents would feel more inclined to hold a friendly image of China than other groups. In an inverse case, ethnic Croats in Bosnia and Herzegovina appear to be distinctly more inclined towards the US than towards China – perhaps as a long tail of their reaction to US interventionism in the war. A caveat, here, is in order, as the number of the IPSOS/BiEPAG survey's observations for individuals belonging to minority ethnic groups in each country is relatively small. Therefore, the inferences are not as statistically strong as those referring to the respondents of a country as a whole. Nevertheless, this data can be treated as indicative and offering food for thought and an avenue for further examination.

These preliminary findings also indicate a difference between the beliefs held by the majority and minority ethnic groups in several countries. The above-mentioned case of Kosovo Serbs holding more favourable views than their Albanian compatriots about the China-related theories is especially stunning when it is compared with their belief in the other conspiracy theories, which is astonishingly high. As many as 86.1% of Kosovo Serbs surveyed believe in the Bill Gates conspiracy theory, and a staggering 93.7% of people surveyed in this group think that the pharmaceutical industry has played an active role in the creation and propagation of the coronavirus. Similarly, non-majority ethnic groups in Montenegro (Serbs, Albanians and Muslims/Bosniaks) and in North Macedonia (Albanians) are distinctly more likely to believe in conspiracy theories than the majority ethnic groups in these countries. These results seem to suggest that some minority groups, who might feel disenfranchised by their government, are more distrustful of authority, and therefore more drawn towards seeking plots perpetrated against them. Therefore, while geopolitics may play a role, internal dynamics of trust-building between authorities and citizens may be a better prism to explain the attitudes of social and ethnic groups towards conspiracy theories in the region.

Finally, the belief in conspiracy theories is distinctly more present among Eurosceptics than among those who favour EU integration: 60.6% of opponents of EU membership have strong views in favour of any one conspiracy theory, as opposed to 48.9% of Europhiles – a difference of almost 12%.

The Impact of Conspiracy Theories

Belief in conspiracy theories is not a quirky conviction of a few outsiders: in the context of the Covid19 pandemic, public health consequences loom large. Multiple studies show that believers in conspiracy theories are also less likely to vaccinate themselves, once a vaccine is available.¹⁰ As vaccinations are becoming available, it is clear that besides the distribution of the vaccine, the willingness of citizens to vaccinate is crucial for overcoming the pandemic. Not just to protect more vulnerable citizens, but also to enable a full return to normal social and economic

life, requires the widespread vaccination of the population. However, European citizens are weary, despite being eager to return to 'normal'. The most serious concern of many citizens not willing to take the vaccine are safety concerns due to the rapidity of the development of the vaccine. Overall, the ratio in most countries in Europe indicate a slight majority for taking a vaccine.

The willingness of citizens in the Western Balkans, when this survey was conducted (October 2020), to take the vaccine is lower than in other European countries. Across the region, 53.4% would not take a vaccine (certainly not or probably not), while only 39.2% will probably or certainly take a vaccine. Comparable data from the same period reveal that the willingness in Germany is at 53%¹¹, in Austria 45%,¹² and in France 54%.¹³ Divided by country, in the Western Balkans, the highest numbers are in Montenegro, where still only 44.8% would certainly or probably take the vaccine. In all other countries, a majority rejects vaccination, with more than one third being in the 'firm' camp. As elsewhere, there is strong correlation between the belief in conspiracy theories and the rejection of a vaccine.

Across the region, the biggest predictors are generally age (the older and thus more worried you are about getting seriously ill, the more likely you are to seek vaccination); education and gender, with women considerably more reserved about a vaccine than men. However, ethnicity also matters. In particular among Kosovo Serbs, the community most prone to conspiracy theories, also displays the greatest resistance to vaccination: 89.6% of Serbs from Kosovo surveyed reject vaccines.

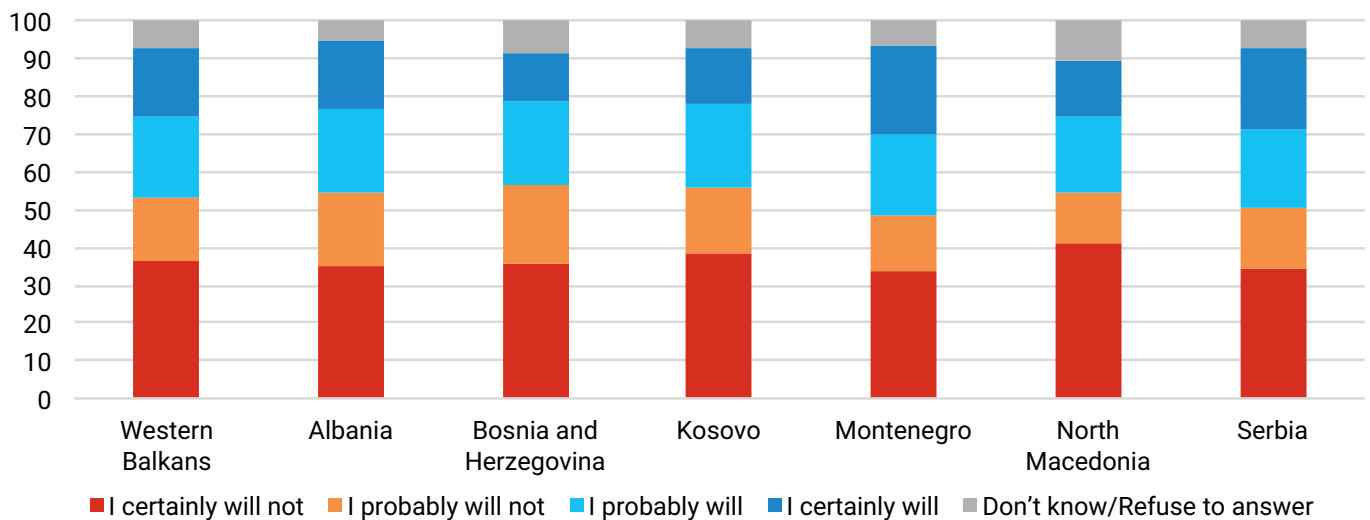
10 Studies in France show a high correlation between belief in conspiracy theories and rejection of vaccination. Paul Bertin, Kenzo Nera, Sylvain Delouvée, "Conspiracy Beliefs, Rejection of Vaccination, and Support for hydroxychloroquine: A Conceptual Replication-Extension in the COVID-19 Pandemic Context," *Frontiers in Psychology*, doi: 10.3389/fpsyg.2020.565128, similarly in Germany Cornelia Betsch, "Ergebnisse aus dem COVID-19 Snapshot Monitoring COSMO: Die psychologische Lage," Universität Erfurt, 20.11.2020.

11 Betsch, Ergebnisse aus dem COVID-19 Snapshot Monitoring.

12 Gallup Stimmungsbarometer Corona, 10.11.2020, <https://www.gallup.at/de/unternehmen/studien/gallup-stimmungsbarometer-home-office/>

13 IPSOS, "Global Attitudes on a COVID-19 Vaccine, Ipsos survey for The World Economic Forum, Conducted October 8-13, 2020," <https://www.ipsos.com/en/global-attitudes-covid-19-vaccine-october-2020>





Graph 4: Support for COVID19 Vaccines

Conclusion

Beyond public health, conspiracy theories undermine trust in the state and rational and science-based policy making. The implications are clear beyond the pandemic. First, the strength of conspiracies in the Western Balkans, considerably more prevalent in wide segments of society than elsewhere in Europe, underlines and reinforces the lack of trust in society and institutions. Furthermore, conspiracies play into the strong narratives that blame neighbouring nations or great powers for a range of ills, and often taint critics and opposition politicians and activists (or governments) as part of sinister global plots.

These conspiracies do not just risk to derail an effective fight against the pandemic; they also point to a threat to democracy in the region. High levels

of belief in conspiracy theories coincides with increasing demand for tight-fisted leadership and a decline of democracy, providing a fertile ground for further democratic decline and antagonism.

It is not easy to confront this volatile mix. As the survey highlights, education itself does not end the spread of conspiracies, nor does age or hope in the younger generation. As the high proclivity towards conspiracy theories among some minorities highlights, it is the sense of vulnerability and low trust in the state that fuels conspiracy theories. Similarly, the competing geopolitical alignments in the region shape conspiracy theories, highlighting that tackling conspiracy theories and their risks requires more than just debunking the theories themselves or fighting fake news.

Methodology

The primary data used in this BiEPAG policy analysis come from a public opinion poll conducted in the six Western Balkan countries in October 2020. Survey was conducted on a nationally representative sample consisted of minimum 1000 respondents aged 18+, through telephone and online interviews, by the following ratio: Albania (phone + online, 90:10), Bosnia and Herzegovina (phone + online, 80:20), Kosovo (phone, 100), Montenegro (phone + online, 90:10), North Macedonia (phone + online, 90:10) and Serbia (phone + online, 80:20). Results are presented in percentage and are subject to following statistical errors: Albania $\pm 3.39\%$, Bosnia and Herzegovina $\pm 3.39\%$, Kosovo $\pm 3.32\%$, Montenegro $\pm 3.36\%$, North Macedonia $\pm 3.34\%$ and Serbia $\pm 3.38\%$. Data collection was implemented by Ipsos Strategic Marketing.

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