

The 2020 Belarusian presidential election and conspiracy theories in the Russo-Ukrainian conflict

MICHAEL GENTILE AND MARTIN KRAGH*

Throughout history, conspiracy theories have been linked to the prevalence of prejudice, terrorism and various forms of conflict, and their instrumentalization is a common approach taken by non-democratic state actors aiming to achieve political and strategic goals. Conspiracy beliefs have impacts on democracy, societal cohesion and information boundaries, fostering a ‘post-truth politics’.¹ For example, in the Middle East, acceptance of conspiracy theories has been found to correlate positively with religious fundamentalism, anti-Semitism and anti-western beliefs.² In Europe, rising Islamophobia is linked to beliefs in secret ‘Muslim’ plots to overtake the continent.³ Similarly, Boban Petrović and colleagues have found that a ‘conspiracy mentality’ has influenced the propensity for reconciliation in former Yugoslavia.⁴ Finally, following the US presidential election in 2016, and findings that the Kremlin deploys conspiracy theories as a ‘public diplomacy tool’,⁵ a debate intensified in western societies about the exploitation of domestic cleavages by actors from outside.⁶

In Ukraine, supporters of the pro-western Euromaidan movement were likely to adhere to conspiracy beliefs regarding actions and motivations ascribed to

* We thank the anonymous reviewers and the editor for their helpful comments on earlier drafts of this article. Michael Gentile acknowledges funding from the Research Council of Norway (Norges Forskningsråd), NORRUSS project 287267 (‘Ukrainian geopolitical fault-line cities: urban identities, geopolitics, and urban policy’).

¹ Bethany Albertson and Kimberly Guiler, ‘Conspiracy theories, election rigging, and support for democratic norms’, *Research and Politics* 7: 3, 2020, pp. 1–9; Matthew Atkinson, Darin DeWitt and Joseph E. Uscinski, ‘Conspiracy theories in the 2016 election’, in J. Lucas, C. Galdieri and T. Sisco, eds, *Conventional wisdom, parties, and broken barriers in the 2016 election* (Lanham, MD: Lexington, 2017), pp. 163–80.

² Johannes Beller, ‘Religion and militarism: the effects of religiosity, religious fundamentalism, religious conspiracy belief, and demographics on support for military action’, *Peace and Conflict: Journal of Peace Psychology* 23: 2, 2017, pp. 179–82; Brendan Nyhan and Thomas Zeitzoff, ‘Conspiracy and misperception belief in the Middle East and North Africa’, *Journal of Politics* 80: 4, 2018, pp. 1400–404.

³ Faith Uenal, ‘The secret Islamization of Europe exploring the integrated threat theory: predicting Islamophobic conspiracy stereotypes’, *International Journal of Conflict and Violence* 9: 1, 2016, pp. 93–108.

⁴ Boban Petrović, Janko Mededović, Olivera Radović and Sanja Lovrić, ‘Conspiracy mentality in post-conflict societies: relations with the ethos of conflict and readiness for reconciliation’, *Europe’s Journal of Psychology* 15: 1, 2019, pp. 59–81.

⁵ Ilya Yablokov, ‘Conspiracy theories as a Russian public diplomacy tool: the case of Russia Today (RT)’, *Politics* 35: 3–4, 2015, pp. 301–15; Ilya Yablokov, *Fortress Russia: conspiracy theories in post-Soviet Russia* (Cambridge: Polity, 2018).

⁶ Elsa Hedling, ‘Transforming practices of diplomacy: the European External Action Service and digital disinformation’, *International Affairs* 97: 3, 2021, pp. 841–59; Nina Jankowicz, *How to lose the information war* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2020). See also Robert Mueller, *Report on the investigation into Russian interference in the 2016 presidential election* (Washington DC: US Department of Justice, 2019).

their opponents in the Ukrainian government.⁷ Other studies have documented how Russian influence operations systematically target both the Russian and the Ukrainian publics with disinformation and conspiracy theories, with the intention of shaping both countries' opinion climate and political orientation.⁸ As Golovchenko and colleagues have noted, not only states but also individual social media users can be involved in the diffusion of online disinformation.⁹ Conspiracy theories, in other words, can polarize a population on both sides of a political conflict, as in the diverse but also similar cases of Venezuela and Kyrgyzstan.¹⁰

The academic literature typically defines conspiracy theories as attempts to explain causes of significant social and political events with reference to secret plots by powerful actors or groups. While true conspiracies do occur, a conspiracy theory refers to an allegation of conspiracy that remains unproven or that has been proved false—that is, claims based on faulty information, or 'crippled epistemologies'.¹¹ A distinction is also typically made between conspiracy theories and conspiracy beliefs, the latter referring to a belief in a specific conspiracy theory.¹²

Most previous research in this area has focused on the United States, the EU and the Middle East. As regards the former Soviet Union (FSU), research on conspiracy beliefs is still developing, being represented in fields such as literature and history,¹³ media and public debate,¹⁴ and the spread of anti-Semitism.¹⁵ However, few studies bring the field of conspiracy theories into an analysis of security policy, and those that do typically approach the topic from a state or elite-centred perspective.¹⁶ With some notable exceptions,¹⁷ research has suffered

⁷ Maria Chayinska and Anca Minescu, "They've conspired against us": understanding the role of social identification and conspiracy beliefs in justification of ingroup collective behavior', *European Journal of Social Psychology* 48: 7, 2018, pp. 990–98.

⁸ Kiril Avramov, 'By another way of deception: the use of conspiracy theories as a foreign policy tool in the arsenal of the hybrid warfare', *Information and Security* 39: 1, 2018, pp. 151–61; Taras Kuzio, 'Old wine in a new bottle: Russia's modernization of traditional Soviet information warfare and active policies against Ukraine and Ukrainians', *Journal of Slavic Military Studies* 32: 4, 2019, pp. 485–506; Joanna Szostek, 'Nothing is true? The credibility of news and conflicting narratives during "information war" in Ukraine', *International Journal of Press/Politics* 23: 1, 2017, pp. 116–35; Yablokov, *Fortress Russia*.

⁹ Yevgeniy Golovchenko, Mareike Hartmann and Rebecca Adler-Nissen, 'State, media and civil society in the information warfare over Ukraine: citizen curators of digital disinformation', *International Affairs* 94: 5, 2018, pp. 975–94.

¹⁰ John Michael Carey, 'Who believes in conspiracy theories in Venezuela?', *Latin American Research Review* 54: 2, 2019, pp. 444–57; Scott Radnitz, 'Paranoia with a purpose: conspiracy theory and political coalitions in Kyrgyzstan', *Post-Soviet Affairs* 32: 5, 2016, pp. 474–89.

¹¹ Jovan Byford, *Conspiracy theories: a critical introduction* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011); Brian Keeley, 'Of conspiracy theories', *Journal of Philosophy* 96: 3, 1999, pp. 109–26.

¹² Atkinson et al., 'Conspiracy theories in the 2016 election'.

¹³ Marlène Laruelle, 'Conspiracy and alternate history in Russia: a nationalist equation for success?', *Russian Review* 71: 4, 2012, pp. 565–80.

¹⁴ Yablokov, *Fortress Russia*; Eliot Borenstein, *Plots against Russia: conspiracy and fantasy after socialism* (Ithaca, NY, and London: Cornell University Press, 2020).

¹⁵ Ilya Yablokov, 'Anti-Jewish conspiracy theories in Putin's Russia', *Antisemitism Studies* 3: 2, 2019, pp. 291–316; Peter Plenta, 'Conspiracy theories as a political instrument: utilization of anti-Soros narratives in central Europe', *Contemporary Politics* 26: 5, 2017, pp. 512–30.

¹⁶ Richard Sakwa, 'Conspiracy narratives as a mode of engagement in international politics: the case of the 2008 Russo-Georgian war', *Russian Review* 71: 4, 2012, pp. 581–609; Martin Kragh, Erik Andermo and Liliia Makashova, 'Conspiracy theories in Russian security thinking', *Journal of Strategic Studies*, doi: 10.1080/01402390.2020.1717954.

¹⁷ Chayinska and Minescu, "They've conspired against us"; Arena, *Why conspiratorial propaganda works and what we can do about it—audience vulnerability and resistance to anti-Western, pro-Kremlin disinformation in Ukraine*, 2021,

from a dearth of survey data measuring attitudes towards conspiracy theories among ordinary citizens. Only a couple of studies have been conducted in or near conflict areas in the FSU, where the salience of factors such as group identity and belonging to specific national, political and/or religious groups is heightened.¹⁸ These factors are known determinants of people's adherence to conspiracy theories.¹⁹ A similar impact on adherence to conspiracy theories may be exercised by a group's negative experiences, such as discrimination, harassment or unfair treatment. Historical context may thus explain why certain conspiracy theories seem plausible, especially for members of groups that have been victims of maltreatment in the past.²⁰

This article places the topic of conspiracy theories in the field of international relations, approaching it from a security perspective. A growing academic literature on authoritarian diffusion and so-called 'black knight' regimes—state actors that reinforce and help to sustain non-democratic regimes abroad—has emphasized how the state-sponsored spread of disinformation can undermine and hinder both democratization and security.²¹ Conversely, civil society and civil engagement have been said to be fundamental to the creation of societal resilience to the political, economic and—potentially—military damage caused by disinformation.²² Conspiracy theories, by virtue of their Manichaean and polarizing internal logic, can be regarded as antithetical to the establishment of the societal cohesion necessary for peaceful resolution of conflict, thus contributing to its prolongation.

We address gaps in previous research on conspiracy theories through an analysis of their relation to critical juncture events (defined below), adding to the existing literature in three ways: first, by placing the study of conspiracy theories in the field of international relations when their relevance is heightened by conflict, specifically as a potential source of political mobilization in the protracted conflict between Russia and Ukraine; second, by broadening the geographical scope of

available online at <https://arenaresearch.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/Conspiratorial-propaganda-anti-West-narratives-Ukraine-report-light.pdf> (unless otherwise noted at point of citation, all URLs cited in this article were accessible on 12 Feb. 2022); Galyna Petrenko, Otar Dovzhenko, Oksana Iliuk and Petro Burkovsky, *On the other side of the screen: an analysis of media consumption and disinformation in the Ukrainian information environment* (Detector Media, 2021), [https://detector.media/doc/images/news/archive/2021/188115/Fin_On_the_other_side_DM_final_ENG_WEB%20\(2\).pdf](https://detector.media/doc/images/news/archive/2021/188115/Fin_On_the_other_side_DM_final_ENG_WEB%20(2).pdf).

¹⁸ Notably, Arena, *Why conspiratorial propaganda works*; Petrenko et al., *On the other side of the screen*; Dmitri Teperik, Grigori Senkiv, Dmytro Dubov, Illia Miroshkin, Oleh Pokalchuk, Oksana Iliuk, Anastasiia Apetyk and Larysa Snihur, *Resilient Ukraine—a delicate mosaic? Society, media, security and future prospects* (Tallinn: International Centre for Defence and Security, 2021).

¹⁹ Joseph Uscinski and Joseph Parent, *American conspiracy theories* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014); Moreno Mancosu, Salvatore Vassallo and Cristiano Vezzoni, 'Believing in conspiracy theories: evidence from an exploratory analysis of Italian survey data', *South European Society and Politics* 22: 3, 2017, pp. 327–44.

²⁰ Charles Briggs, 'Theorizing modernity conspiratorially: science, scale, and the political economy of public discourse in explanations of a cholera epidemic', *American Ethnologist* 31: 2, 2004, pp. 164–87; Nicoli Nattrass, 'Understanding the origins and prevalence of AIDS conspiracy beliefs in the United States and South Africa', *Sociology of Health and Illness* 35: 1, 2012, pp. 113–29.

²¹ Thomas Ambrosio, *Authoritarian backlash: Russian resistance to democratization in the former Soviet Union* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2009); Jakob Tolstrup, 'Black knights and elections in authoritarian regimes: why and how Russia supports authoritarian incumbents in post-Soviet states', *European Journal of Political Research* 54: 4, 2015, pp. 673–90.

²² Petr Kopecký and Cas Mudde, 'Rethinking civil society', *Democratization* 10: 3, 2010, pp. 1–14.

conspiracy theory research with empirical evidence from Mariupol, a key front-line city in eastern Ukraine;²³ and third, through the analysis of how an important critical juncture event—namely, the presidential elections in Belarus of 9 August 2020 and the subsequent protest movement against the incumbent president, Alexander Lukashenko—affected people's propensity to believe in conspiracy theories.

The first part of the article describes the political upheaval of 2020 in Belarus, and how this event was narrated by pro-Kremlin media as a framework for understanding the conflict between Russia and Ukraine. Next, we explain our research methodology and data; after that, we present and analyse our results. We conclude by discussing our main findings and their implications.

The Belarusian critical juncture

Following Collier and Collier, we define a critical juncture as a 'period of significant change ... which is hypothesized to produce distinct legacies'.²⁴ A necessary condition is that, given a particular historical circumstance, one self-reinforcing choice be made among multiple available options.²⁵ Arguably, the effect of critical junctures has been felt most strongly in areas that have experienced violent conflict, and heightened exposure to disinformation and conspiracy theories is a fundamental characteristic of conflict areas.²⁶ Previous research has identified the collapse of the communist bloc in 1989–91 and the 1999 apartment bombings in Russia as important critical juncture events explaining the diffusion of conspiracy theories in the FSU.²⁷ The spectre of the 'troubled 1990s' is regularly invoked in narratives aimed at demonizing the liberal opposition in Russia,²⁸ echoing research suggesting that belief in conspiracy theories is stronger under conditions of uncertainty and large-scale upheaval,²⁹ and that authoritarian leaders tend to respond to destabilizing events by invoking conspiracy explanations.³⁰ However, pinning down the transformative role of critical juncture effects on conspiracy beliefs is an empirically and methodologically daunting task, requiring access to comparable data collected immediately before and after critical juncture events.

²³ This article was written before the Russian Federation's ongoing large-scale invasion of Ukraine starting on 24 February 2022. As such, it describes the situation ante bellum.

²⁴ Ruth Collier and David Collier, *Shaping the political arena: critical junctures, the labor movement, and regime dynamics in Latin America* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991), p. 29.

²⁵ James Mahoney, 'Path dependence in historical sociology', *Theory and Society* 29: 4, 2000, pp. 507–48.

²⁶ Radnitz, 'Paranoia with a purpose'; Carey, 'Who believes in conspiracy theories in Venezuela?'

²⁷ Stefanie Ortmann and John Heathershaw, 'Conspiracy theories in the post-Soviet space', *Russian Review* 71: 4, 2012, pp. 551–64.

²⁸ Yablokov, *Fortress Russia*; Borenstein, *Plots against Russia*.

²⁹ Jan-Willem van Prooijen and Nils Jostmann, 'Belief in conspiracy theories: the influence of uncertainty and perceived morality', *European Journal of Social Psychology* 43: 1, 2012, pp. 109–15; Patrick Leman and Marco Cinnirella, 'Beliefs in conspiracy theories and the need for cognitive closure', *Frontiers in Psychology* 4, art. 378, June 2013, DOI: 10.3389/fpsyg.2013.00378.

³⁰ Scott Radnitz, *Revealing schemes: the politics of conspiracy in Russia and the post-Soviet region* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021).

Even though the characteristics that permit an event to be defined as a critical juncture are disputed,³¹ we, like Alla Leukavets,³² contend that the Belarusian presidential election and subsequent political crisis qualify, for two reasons: first, because they marked a major change in foreign policy orientation away from ‘multi-vector’ politics and towards rapidly intensifying integration within Russian (geo-)political space;³³ and second, because they were accompanied by a significant spike in regime brutality.³⁴

The election, which took place on 9 August 2020 and is widely regarded as fraudulent,³⁵ was followed by a long period of mass demonstrations. Lukashenko responded by cracking down on the protesters, and what had at the time seemed like a democratic breakthrough changed into what was described by Human Rights Watch as widespread state terror.³⁶

While the regime relied mainly on violence to secure its immediate survival, it subsequently made use of propaganda and conspiracy theories to delegitimize the opposition and its supporters. In a recent interview with the BBC, for example, Lukashenko accused the West of being the hidden hand behind all opposition to his rule.³⁷ The Belarusian regime received practical assistance from Russia, including the dispatch of Russian state-employed journalists to take over operations in Belarusian newsrooms.³⁸ Using Scott Radnitz’s terminology, for the regime this change meant a sudden shift from ‘sporadic’ to ‘sustained official conspiracism’.³⁹ Russian state media also supplied the master narrative that the protest movement was organized by agents of western countries as part of a ‘colour revolution’ scenario.⁴⁰ One of these alleged agents is the Hungarian-born US billionaire financier and philanthropist George Soros, who, the narrative goes, finances and instigates protests and colour revolutions wherever he sees the opportunity arise.⁴¹ Furthermore, Lukashenko added that NATO was preparing military provocations along the Polish and Lithuanian borders,⁴² a narrative which was reproduced in the Ukrainian

³¹ John Hogan, ‘The critical juncture concept’s evolving capacity to explain policy change’, *European Policy Analysis* 5: 2, 2019, pp. 170–89.

³² Alla Leukavets, ‘Russia’s game in Belarus: 2020 presidential elections as a checkmate for Lukashenko?’, *New Perspectives* 29: 1, 2021, pp. 90–101.

³³ Lukashenko expressed this position very clearly himself in a recent interview with Steve Rosenberg for the BBC, 23 Nov. 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZdxBOOnVgnY&t=0s>.

³⁴ Sofie Bedford, ‘The 2020 presidential election in Belarus: erosion of authoritarian stability and re-politicization of society’, *Nationalities Papers*, no. 49, 2021, pp. 808–19.

³⁵ Bedford, ‘The 2020 presidential election in Belarus’, p. 810.

³⁶ Human Rights Watch, ‘Belarus: unprecedented crackdown’, 13 Jan. 2021, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2021/01/13/belarus-unprecedented-crackdown>.

³⁷ See interview with Lukashenko, 23 Nov. 2021.

³⁸ Nick Holdsworth, ‘Kremlin propagandists from RT sent to fill Belarus airwaves’, *The Times*, 1 Sept. 2020.

³⁹ Radnitz, *Revealing schemes*, p. 26.

⁴⁰ EUvsDisinfo, *Colour revolutions everywhere: pro-Kremlin media covers popular protests*, 20 Aug. 2020, <https://euvsdisinfo.eu/colour-revolutions-everywhere-pro-kremlin-media-covers-popular-protests/>.

⁴¹ Igor Baldin, ‘Perepisannye uchebniki i oranzhevye revolyutsii: kak milliarder Soros desyatletyami vliyaet na dela gosudarstv’ [Rewritten textbooks and orange revolutions: how billionaire Soros influences the affairs of states], *TVzvezda.ru*, 16 Aug. 2020, <https://tvzvezda.ru/news/20208162244-qnl1hs.html>.

⁴² Belta, ‘“Vernut’ lyudyam spokoynyuyu stranu” — Lukashenko ozvuchil itogi zasedaniya Sovbeza’ [‘Give a peaceful country back to the people’ — Lukashenko reported the conclusions from the meeting of the Security Council], 19 Aug. 2020, <https://www.belta.by/president/view/vernut-lyudjam-spokojnyuyu-stranu-lukashenko-ozvuchil-itogi-zasedaniya-sovbeza-403372-2020/>.

pro-Kremlin media. Poland, according to one article promoting this narrative,⁴³ wants to 're-create the Rzeczpospolita by regaining control over Ukraine, Belarus and the Baltics'. Echoing the Kremlin's storyline that governments in central and eastern Europe are less than sovereign, it adds that this would take place 'under the control of globalists from the USA and Britain'. Far from being relegated to the margins, this narrative was recently promoted by no less a figure than former Russian president Dmitry Medvedev, now deputy chairman of the Russian Security Council, who claimed that '[Ukraine] is under direct foreign administration'.⁴⁴

The opposition-as-western-puppet narrative has been invoked by Russian state media to undermine political forces deemed undesirable across the post-Soviet space, most notably in Ukraine.⁴⁵ Russia's post-election influence campaigns in Belarus followed this narrative closely, creating the impression that a malignant West was trying to overthrow a 'legitimate' leader by orchestrating a revolution. The 'stability' of Lukashenko's regime, and the relatively high living standards it was able to sustain when compared to those in Ukraine, enabled the Belarusian dictatorship to present itself as an attractive model of government for many Ukrainians, and Lukashenko has consistently enjoyed significant approval among society at large,⁴⁶ although his unequivocal turn to Moscow during the past year has brought the level of his support down substantially.⁴⁷ Against this background, conspiracy theories aimed at Belarus could strengthen already existing conspiracy beliefs in Ukraine as well. The latter were cultivated through Russia's own efforts in Ukraine, with help from the domestic pro-Kremlin media.

At the national level, first among contemporary conspiracy beliefs is, arguably, the notion that George Soros controls the country.⁴⁸ An article in *Komsomolskaya Pravda*, for example, declares that 'in general, [Ukraine⁴⁹] may be called a Soros incubator, where "sorosiata" [literally, 'Soros piglets'] are raised—the "right kind" of young activists and politicians'.⁵⁰ An article in the Ukrainian version of *Komsomolskaya Pravda* concluded that the opposition leader Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya was in Soros's 'trail' on the basis of her meeting with French public intellectual Bernard-Henri Lévy, thus creating a direct link to the *sorosiata* conspiracy theory, which had by then become the master narrative projected by Ukraine's

⁴³ Aleksandr Skubchenko, 'Delo ne v Lukashenko, a v tom, chto Zapad podderzhivaet iskluchitel'no rusofobov' [The matter is not about Lukashenko, but about the fact that the West exclusively supports Russophobes], 12 Aug. 2020, <https://strana.today/opinions/283822-delo-ne-v-lukashenko-a-v-tom-chto-zapad-podderzhivaet-odnikh-rusofobov.html>.

⁴⁴ Dmitry Medvedev, 'Pochemu bessmyslenny kontakty s nyneshnym ukrainskim rukovodstvom' [Why contacts with the current Ukrainian administration are pointless], *Kommersant*, 11 Oct. 2021, <https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/5028300>.

⁴⁵ Yablokov, *Fortress Russia*.

⁴⁶ Rating, *Dinamika otnosheniya ukrainsev k mirovym lideram* [The dynamics of the Ukrainians' relation to global leaders], 11 Nov. 2019, https://ratinggroup.ua/ru/research/ukraine/dinamika_otnosheniya_ukraincev_k_mirovym_lideram.html.

⁴⁷ KIIS (Kyiv International Institute of Sociology), 'Level of trust in politicians, electoral rating and attitude to certain initiatives/events', 2 Feb. 2021, <https://www.kiis.com.ua/?lang=eng&cat=reports&id=1003&page=1>.

⁴⁸ Arena, *Why conspiratorial propaganda works and what we can do about it*.

⁴⁹ In the article, Ukraine is referred to as 'the independent' (*nezalezhnaya*), which is a sarcastic expression used to denigrate Ukraine's existence as an independent state.

⁵⁰ Maria Berk, 'Revolutsiyu v Belorussii pytalsya organizovat' Dzhorzh Soros' [George Soros tried to organize a revolution in Belarus], *Komsomolskaya Pravda*, 10 Sept. 2020, <https://www.kp.ru/daily/217180/4285160/>.

pro-Russian news media.⁵¹ Just about anything, or anyone, could be explained in relation to real or metaphorical links to Soros: his tentacles, we are told, stretch well into politics, the educational system and the boards of major enterprises.⁵²

That such conspiracy theories have achieved some impact is clear: according to a recent study by Petrenko and colleagues,⁵³ an absolute majority of the population in the Ukrainian-controlled part of Donetsk oblast believes that the protests were ‘an attempt by the West to overthrow the legitimately-elected President Lukashenko’. The narrative of a western agenda to undermine post-Soviet governments friendly towards Russia has been a consistent feature of Russian media campaigns for almost 20 years, beginning with the Orange (2004–2005) and Euromaidan (2013–14) revolutions, which had little support in the Donbas. Thus, for many people, a sense of *déjà vu* magnified the perceived relevance of the Belarus protests to the interpretation of past watershed events in Ukraine, as well as the ongoing conflict with Russia. The increasing supply of conspiracy theories provides easily accessible ‘evidence’, and confirmation bias strengthens belief by distorting the evaluation of evidence in support of and against conspiracy.⁵⁴

Research methodology

The Belarusian presidential election and the associated protests happened to take place in the course of a survey data collection effort in Mariupol by one of the authors. Because of the timing of the fieldwork, we can observe the results of what in the literature has typically been referred to as a ‘natural experiment’, enabling us to compare a substantial share of the responses (22.1 per cent, 276 responses) collected before the election with a majority (77.9 per cent, 975 responses) collected afterwards. Natural experiments refer to events that cannot be foreseen but are potentially useful for our understanding of dramatic political disruption, events that occur ‘as if by experimental intervention ... within an open environment’.⁵⁵ Furthermore, we can distinguish between responses collected before and after Minsk and Moscow initiated their own media campaigns (around 20 August). The Belarus protests were the single critical juncture event able to significantly influence opinions on conspiracy theories *relevant to the Russo-Ukrainian conflict*, and, by extension, to Ukraine’s national security. This is because the conspiracy theories surrounding the protests presume the existence of a common villain (the West) working with the same goals, actions and logics as it is alleged to have done during

⁵¹ Viktor Timofeev, ‘Sled Sorosa. Zachem Svetlana Tikhanovskaya vstretilas’ s Bernarom-Anri Levi’ [The Soros trail: why Svetlana Tikhanovskaya met with Bernard-Henri Lévy], *Komsomolskaya Pravda UA*, 20 Aug. 2020, <https://kp.ua/politics/674828-sled-sorosa-zachem-svetlana-tykhanovskaia-vstretylas-s-bernarom-anry-levy>.

⁵² Viktoriya Venk, ‘Ego zvali D’yord’ Shvarts. Chem izvesten I kak svyazan s Ukrainoy milliarder Soros, kotorymy segodnya 90 let’ [They used to call him George Schwartz. What is billionaire Soros, who is turning 90 today, known for and how is he connected to Ukraine?], 12 Aug. 2020, <https://strana.today/news/283830-sorosu-90-let-chem-izvesten-milliarder-iz-ssha-i-kak-on-svjazan-s-ukrainoj.html>.

⁵³ Petrenko et al., *On the other side of the screen*, p. 59.

⁵⁴ Quassim Cassam, *Extremism: a philosophical analysis* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2022), p. 109.

⁵⁵ Mary Morgan, ‘Nature’s experiments and natural experiments in the social sciences’, *Philosophy of the Social Sciences* 43: 3, 2013, p. 344.

past critical juncture events in Ukraine.⁵⁶ Only the coronavirus crisis can equal (indeed, probably surpass) the Belarusian events in terms of impact on conspiracy beliefs in Ukraine, but its significance for the conflict with Russia is tangential at best, and we did not find evidence of changes in, for example, vaccine-related conspiracy beliefs during the fieldwork.

Dataset

Our natural experiment took place within the single context of Mariupol, and our article is thus based on a single case-study. There are three very practical reasons for this: (1) the original purpose of the survey upon which we base our findings was, among other things, to study conspiracy belief *specifically* in three major cities of south-eastern Ukraine, because their heightened exposure to the Kremlin's strategic narratives is a major challenge to the country's overall information security;⁵⁷ (2) not all the conspiracy theories studied are relevant at other scales (e.g. those relating to the shelling of one of the city's neighbourhoods, see below); and (3) Mariupol is the only city where the timing of our fieldwork matched that of the Belarusian critical juncture event. A single case-study allows us to draw firm conclusions based on a representative sample at a single important site. This cannot be achieved using a nationwide sample, where the observations would be geographically dispersed and demographically more diverse.

The dataset used in our study reports the results from a questionnaire survey conducted in Mariupol between July and September 2020, with a sample of 1,251 adult persons (aged 18+), excluding people in active military service, in prison and in hospital. As a large (population around 450,000) and well-developed industrial and port city on the Azov Sea, about 10 kilometres from the pre-24 February 2022 military front line, Mariupol is of great strategic and symbolic importance.⁵⁸ The survey's overall goal was to learn more about geopolitical and foreign policy preferences in this city, and about how they relate to the national and supranational identifications of its population. Importantly, the survey contained a battery of questions allowing us to measure the prevalence of certain conspiracy beliefs.

The questionnaire was administered using personal interviews, strictly in compliance with the (mild) coronavirus restrictions and regulations in force at the time in Ukraine. The fieldwork was commissioned from the Center for Social Indicators (CSI), a non-profit branch of the Kyiv International Institute of Sociology.⁵⁹

Research variables

Our research variables comprise four conspiracy beliefs, chosen for their relevance to the country's ongoing conflict with Russia and to debates over Ukraine's broader

⁵⁶ Cf. Radnitz, *Revealing schemes*, pp. 52–7.

⁵⁷ Teperik et al., *Resilient Ukraine*.

⁵⁸ At the time of writing (24 March 2022), Mariupol is besieged by Russian troops, which have been shelling and bombing the city for weeks, causing widespread destruction and a humanitarian catastrophe.

⁵⁹ Compliance with applicable data protection legislation was confirmed by the Norwegian Centre for Research Data (decision 173602).

political orientation. Belief was measured using the respondents' assessment of the following statements (in translation from Russian): (1) Ukraine is in fact governed by external forces such as the organizations of George Soros and Bill Gates; (2) the shelling of the Vostochnyi microdistrict was perpetrated by the Ukrainian armed forces; (3) American laboratories on Ukrainian soil conduct medical experiments on the Ukrainian population; (4) the former acting minister of health care, Ulana Suprun, was in the government because the Americans wanted her there. The response options ranged from 'completely disagree' through 'rather disagree' and 'rather agree' to 'fully agree'. A neutral category was intentionally omitted in line with the 'forced choice' principle because middle-ground answers have ambiguous interpretations and often invite evasive responses,⁶⁰ while being virtually indistinguishable from the 'don't know' answers, for there is little difference between neither agreeing nor disagreeing with a conspiracy theory and not knowing whether it is true.

The first statement refers to a conspiracy theory popular not only in Ukraine, but in many countries across the world, especially among supporters of the far right.⁶¹ The belief that influential (and usually Jewish) businessmen or financiers secretly control global affairs goes back at least to the late nineteenth century, but its George Soros incarnation gained traction in Ukraine only around 2018, mainly because of its regular propagation through the television channels linked to Putin ally Viktor Medvedchuk,⁶² banned in early 2021. As the pro-Ukrainian Ukraine Crisis Media Center notes, however, the target of Soros conspiracy theories is not Soros himself, but civil society, 'which pro-Russian forces need to stigmatize and take out of the equation, employing the tactics imported from the north'.⁶³

The second question refers to an incident in January 2015, when forces stationed in the occupied areas of eastern Ukraine launched a rocket attack against the easternmost district of Mariupol, Vostochnyi. The OSCE Special Monitoring Mission to Ukraine confirmed that the attacks originated from the areas controlled by pro-Russian forces;⁶⁴ however, Russian and pro-Russian media have insisted that they were launched by the Ukrainian side, although the city was, and remained, under Ukrainian control.⁶⁵

⁶⁰ Seung Chyung, Katherine Roberts, Ieva Swanson and Andrea Hankinson, 'Evidence-based survey design: the use of a midpoint on the Likert scale', *Performance Improvement* 56: 10, 2017, pp. 15–23.

⁶¹ Corneliu Pintilescu and Attila Magyári, 'Soros conspiracy theories and the rise of populism in post-socialist Hungary and Romania', in A. Astapova, O. Colăcel, C. Pintilescu and T. Scheibner, eds, *Conspiracy theories in eastern Europe* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2020), pp. 207–31.

⁶² Ukraine Crisis Media Center (UCMC), *Who is behind the media campaign against George Soros? And who is the real target?*, 4 March 2020, <https://uacrisis.org/en/who-is-behind-the-media-campaign-against-george-soros-and-who-is-the-real-target>.

⁶³ UCMC, *Who is behind the media campaign against George Soros?*.

⁶⁴ Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), *Spot report by the OSCE Special Monitoring Mission to Ukraine (SMM), 24 January 2015: shelling incident on Olimpiiska Street in Mariupol* (Vienna, Jan. 2015).

⁶⁵ For examples, see 'Opolchenie DNR: Obstel Mariupolya—eto provokatsiya ukrainskikh silovikov' [DPR militia: the shelling of Mariupol is a provocation of the Ukrainian security forces], *Russia Today*, 24 Jan. 2015, <https://russian.rt.com/article/70447>; Aleksandr Boyko, 'Obstel Mariupolya velsya s pozitsii ukrainskikh voysk' [The shelling of Mariupol originated from the position of the Ukrainian armed forces], *Komsomolskaya Pravda*, 27 Jan. 2015, <https://www.kp.ru/daily/26333/3217124/>.

The third question, regarding secret western laboratories in Ukraine, refers to a conspiracy belief popular in the former Soviet Union, promoted by the Kremlin and by Russian officials.⁶⁶ In Ukraine, this belief has been projected onto the main character of our last conspiracy theory, Ulana Suprun, the former acting minister of health care. Suprun, who moved from the United States to Ukraine in 2013 and on whom Ukrainian citizenship was subsequently conferred by President Petro Poroshenko, allowing her to hold positions in government, is said to have been acting on behalf of the US government during her tenure from 2016 to 2019.⁶⁷ Suprun's critics—and Russian state media—have resorted to the false claim that she was (just) a nurse in her previous career in the United States or have characterized her, more bluntly, as 'Dr Death'.⁶⁸

Method

Our results are presented in two stages. First, we explore the descriptive statistics of the dependent variables—belief in four conspiracy theories—cross-tabulating them against our variable that measures exposure to the Belarusian presidential election critical juncture event, which is the date of the interview. In the second stage, we corroborate our descriptive findings by controlling for a range of variables that potentially influence belief in conspiracy theories. For this multivariate analysis we use binary logistic regression,⁶⁹ coding the two 'disagree' options ('completely' and 'rather') into a single disagree category (1), contrasting it to the rest, including 'don't know' ('hard to say') answers and refusals (0) (see table 1). The logic for lumping the 'don't know' answers with the rest is that they signal a lack of desire to distance oneself from the statement. In short, what we will be looking at are the predictors of *explicit disagreement* with a conspiratorial narrative.

⁶⁶ Kragh et al., 'Conspiracy theories in Russian security thinking'. See also e.g. 'Istochnik podtverdil sushchestvovanie amerikanskikh biolaboratorii na Ukraine' [Source confirmed the presence of American biolaboratories in Ukraine], *RIA Novosti*, 10 April 2021, <https://ria.ru/20210410/biolaboratorii-1727696354.html>.

⁶⁷ Michael Gentile and Yevgeniya Kuznetsova, 'Descent into the Mariupol disinformation maelstrom', *VoxUkraine*, 3 Dec. 2020, <https://voxukraine.org/en/descent-into-the-mariupol-disinformation-maelstrom/>.

⁶⁸ For examples, see Nora Berg, 'Amerikanskaya Doktor Smert' vzyalas' za ukrainsev vs'er'ez' [American Doctor Death is taking on the Ukrainians seriously], *RIA Novosti*, 1 March 2018, <https://ria.ru/20180301/1515446886.html>; Aleksandr Bolgov, 'Jod i zelenka—ostanki sovka: byvshaja rukovoditel' Minzdrava Ukrainy potrebovala "dekomunizirovat" domashnie aptechki' [Iodine and *zelenka*—leftovers of the Soviet times: the former leader of the Health Ministry of Ukraine demands the 'decommunization' of domestic medicine cabinets], *Komsomolskaya Pravda*, 19 Dec. 2020, <https://www.kp.ru/daily/1712102.5/4341066/>.

⁶⁹ Binary logistic regression is used to estimate the relationship between a binary categorical dependent variable (e.g. success vs failure) and a set of predictors. When interpreting the results, we are especially interested in the odds ratios (ORs)—the ratios between the probability that something will happen and the probability that it will not. For example, if the probability of catching a cold during any given winter is 40% and the probability of not doing so is 60%, the OR of catching a cold will be $0.40/0.60 = 0.67$. However, these odds change depending on many other factors (predictors), such as time spent indoors, amount of contact with potentially infected individuals, age and so forth. ORs thus describe the strength of the association between predictors and outcomes. An OR greater than 1 indicates a positive association, whereas an OR of less than 1 indicates the opposite. Statistically significant ORs, according to convention, are odds ratios whose probability of having occurred by chance is less than 5%.

Table 1: Belief in certain popular conspiracy theories (percentages)

Dependent variable code	Answer option	Gates/Soros conspiracy		Shelling of Vostochnyi		American medical experiments		Ulana Suprun	
		UW	W	UW	W	UW	W	UW	W
I	Completely disagree	7.0	8.1	5.1	6.1	8.2	9.6	1.4	1.7
I	Rather disagree	5.9	6.9	6.1	6.7	14.9	15.0	8.6	8.5
O	Rather agree	42.9	41.3	31.0	30.2	33.9	33.4	36.4	35.8
O	Completely agree	25.4	25.6	22.5	21.0	15.4	14.9	40.0	38.5
O	Hard to say	17.8	17.2	29.7	30.0	26.5	26.2	12.9	15.0
O	Refusal	0.9	0.9	5.7	6.0	1.0	0.8	0.6	0.5
<i>Dichotomized variable</i>									
I	Disagree (dich.)	12.9	15.0	11.2	12.8	23.1	24.6	10.0	10.2

Note: UW = unweighted dataset; W = weighted dataset.

Overall patterns of (dis)belief⁷⁰

Table 1 summarizes the descriptive results for the dependent variables in two versions, based on the unweighted and age/sex-weighted samples,⁷¹ respectively. Overall, our four conspiracy theories enjoy significant support, three of them being believed by an absolute majority (the fourth one—on the American medical experiments—is believed by about half, with an additional 26 per cent opting for ‘hard to say’). What is notable, however, is the very low share reporting *disagreement*, which hovers between 10 and 15 per cent for the Gates/Soros, shelling of Vostochnyi and Ulana Suprun conspiracy theories, rising to nearly one-quarter for the American medical experiments. Moreover, the shares of fully convinced

⁷⁰ Additional data and methodological information are provided in our online appendix on the website of the Swedish Institute for International Affairs, at <https://www.ui.se/projekt/conspiracy-theories/>.

⁷¹ Most public opinion surveys are based on samples that are skewed in some direction when compared to the target population’s known characteristics, because of the characteristics of the sampling frames available to the researcher and because of the propensity of certain groups to cooperate before others. Applying different weights to over- and underrepresented groups in the sample reduces the impact of this problem. This means that each observation is assigned an individual weighting factor that is determined by calibrating a base weight to the known age–sex statistics of the researched population (for details on how the weights are calculated, see appendix cited in n. 68 above). An unweighted sample is a sample that has not been subject to such modification. When the data and results for the weighted and unweighted samples differ, it is good to report both. Our weighted sample is adjusted to reflect the age and sex composition of Mariupol’s population as per official statistics.

believers vary between 15 and 40 per cent, whereas confident disagreement is rare, ranging from 9 per cent for the American medical experiments down to 1.5 per cent for the Ulana-Suprun-is-an-American-agent conspiracy. To rephrase: in Mariupol, as elsewhere in south-eastern Ukraine,⁷² conspiracy beliefs that are relevant in terms of the ongoing conflict with Russia are widespread and mainstream.

Belief in one conspiracy theory tends to correlate with belief in others because of the underlying psychology, thus giving structure to belief-systems.⁷³ However, recent research by Enders and colleagues found that belief-systems are multidimensional, with partisan or ideological dimensions being independent from dimensions associated with anti-social psychological traits such as Machiavellianism or narcissism.⁷⁴ While the range of conspiracy beliefs explored in our dataset is too limited to offer any further contribution to this debate, a simple correlation analysis of our dichotomized conspiracy theory disagreement variables suggests that Enders et al.'s interpretation is probably applicable to some extent in the case of Mariupol.⁷⁵ We find generally modest correlations, with the notable exception of the Gates/Soros and medical experiments pairing, suggesting an affinity between supranational and national-scale conspiracy theories. Supranational conspiracy theories gain purchase across multiple contexts by assimilating local contextual differences and sensitivities. Thus, if George Soros and his acolytes aspire to control the world by imposing their version of liberalism, they do so by conspiring to flood Hungary with migrants from Muslim countries, while instigating colour revolutions in the post-Soviet space. The Ulana Suprun conspiracy theory, on the other hand, is an essentially national affair (although it has not stopped her from being declared Soros's minion-in-chief⁷⁶) and is fairly widespread across the country, while the conspiracy theories surrounding the shelling of Vostochnyi are locally anchored.

The Belarusian factor

As mentioned above, the survey fieldwork was conducted at a time of great political turbulence in neighbouring Belarus. This section explores the effect of this critical juncture event on the popularity of our conspiracy theories.

The first point to be made is that we found no substantial effect on three of them. However, the effect on the fourth conspiracy theory—that 'Ukraine is governed by external forces such as the organizations of Bill Gates and George Soros'—is

⁷² Petrenko et al., *On the other side of the screen*; Teperik et al., *Resilient Ukraine*.

⁷³ Ted Goertzel, 'Belief in conspiracy theories', *Political Psychology* 15: 4, 1994, pp. 731–42; Jan-Willem van Prooijen and Karen Douglas, 'Belief in conspiracy theories: basic principles of an emerging research domain', *European Journal of Social Psychology* 48: 7, 2018, pp. 897–908.

⁷⁴ Adam Enders, Joseph Uscinski, Casey Klofstad, Michelle Seelig, Stefan Wuchty, Manohar Murthi, Kamal Premaratne and John Funchion, 'Do conspiracy beliefs form a belief system? Examining the structure and organization of conspiracy beliefs', *Journal of Social and Political Psychology* 9: 1, 2021, pp. 255–71.

⁷⁵ For details, see the online appendix cited in n. 68 above.

⁷⁶ See ZIK (Zakhidna Informatsiyna Korporatsiya), 'Koalitsiya protiv Zelenskogo: "Sorosityata" vo glave s Suprun vstrechalis' v restorane pod Kievom' [The coalition against Zelensky: "Sorosityata" headed by Suprun met in a restaurant near Kyiv], 13 May 2020, https://zikua.news/ru/news/ludyna/koalitsiya_protiv_zelenskogo_sorosityata_vo_glave_s_suprun_vstrechalis_v_restorane_pod_kievom_968336.

noteworthy, indicating that critical juncture events in third countries may influence belief in *relevant* conspiracy theories (table 2). Relevance, in this sense, stems from the extent to which the conspiracy theory has been circulated and has thus become recognizable in both countries, in this case Russia and Ukraine, echoing a central trope in Russian media outlets, which were quick to place the blame for the protests on the West, with Soros predictably becoming one of the protest movement’s main alleged puppeteers.⁷⁷ Recall that at that point Soros (and, to some extent, Gates) conspiracy theories had already been heavily promoted by the country’s pro-Kremlin media as well as by some of its politicians.⁷⁸ However, to gain broader currency, the Soros theory would have required more ‘evidence’. Enter Belarus.

Table 2: Belief in Soros/Gates shadow government conspiracy theory, before and after the Belarusian presidential election (percentages)

‘Ukraine is ruled by external forces such as the organizations of Bill Gates and George Soros’

	Date of interview	Sample size	Original variable					Dichotomized variable		
			Com-pletely disagree	Rather disagree	Rather agree	Com-pletely agree	Hard to say	Refusal to answer	Disagree	Other
W (%)	Up to 9 Aug.	276	20.3	10.1	21.4	21.7	24.3	2.2	30.4	69.6
	From 10 Aug.	975	4.6	6.1	46.9	26.7	15.2	0.5	10.7	89.3
	Total	1,251	8.1	7.0	41.3	25.6	17.2	0.9	15.0	85.0
UW (%)	Up to 9 Aug.	276	18.6	9.5	22.1	22.1	25.5	2.3	28.1	71.9
	From 10 Aug.	975	3.9	5.0	48.5	26.3	15.8	0.5	8.9	91.1
	Total	1,251	7.0	5.9	42.9	25.4	17.8	0.9	12.9	87.1

Note: UW = unweighted dataset; W = weighted dataset.

The difference between the pre-election and post-election levels of belief is striking. Whereas up to 9 August 2020 about 40–45 per cent agreed to some extent with the Soros/Gates conspiracy theory, after 10 August this share rose to almost three-quarters. Explicit disagreement, meanwhile, dropped from approximately 30 per cent to about 10 per cent, with uncertainty decreasing from roughly a quarter to about 15 per cent. This would suggest that the Belarusian protests influenced not only those who were in doubt, but also some of those who previously rejected the theory. Moreover, among those who still rejected the conspiracy theory, the share doing so confidently decreased by a factor of nearly five, meaning that the 10 per cent who did not believe in the Soros/Gates

⁷⁷ Borenstein, *Plots against Russia*.

⁷⁸ Arena, *Why conspiratorial propaganda works and what we can do about it*.

conspiracy theory after the election in Belarus were, as a group, less confident in their opinions than were the pre-election 30 per cent.

However, the 9 August cut-off point is not necessarily ideal, because the election was being discussed in the media well before it took place, with increasing attention as the date approached. Likewise, it was not until about one week after the election that the Russian and Belarusian state media had settled on a clear narrative. Table 3 revisits the results presented using two different cut-off points: 30 July and 20 August. These dates represent, respectively, the time when the election appeared on the agenda of the news media and the time by which the Russian narrative had taken shape.

Table 3: Belief in Soros/Gates shadow government conspiracy theory, before and after the Belarusian presidential election (percentages)

Date of interview	Sample size	W		UW	
		Disagree	Other	Disagree	Other
Up to 30 July	200	33.3	66.7	30.0	70.0
31 July to 19 Aug.	267	21.6	78.4	21.0	79.0
20 Aug. to 27 Sept.	784	7.6	92.4	5.9	94.1
Total	1,251	15.0	85.0	12.9	87.1

Note: UW = unweighted dataset; W = weighted dataset.

While the emerging picture confirms the findings presented above, table 3 demonstrates that the real jump occurred after 20 August. This raises the possibility that the media campaign aimed at discrediting the Belarusian opposition influenced many Mariupol residents in line with the best of Moscow’s and Minsk’s expectations. However, to certify that the Belarus effect is indeed a Belarus effect and not something else we need to take two additional steps. First, to prepare the ground, we must establish whether the 9 August election and the subsequent Russo-Belarusian media campaign in support of the regime has altered support for Lukashenko’s model of government, and whether support for the latter correlates with support for the Soros/Gates conspiracy theory. Second, we need to expose our findings to multivariate scrutiny to control for other plausibly intervening factors. Fortunately, our dataset allows us to do both things.

Regarding the first step, support for the ‘Belarusian model of government’, which since 1994 has been associated with Lukashenko’s strongman rule, rose substantially after the election and particularly around 20 August.⁷⁹ Thus, despite the violence and repression of the post-election weeks, the popularity of Lukashenko’s regime increased in Mariupol, contrary to the national-level trend.⁸⁰

⁷⁹ Data in online appendix: see n. 68 above.

⁸⁰ Petrenko et al., *On the other side of the screen*.

Moreover, there is a strong association between support for Lukashenko's regime and belief in the Soros/Gates conspiracy theory. This association remained in place throughout the period studied, meaning that an increase in support for Lukashenko's regime paralleled an increase in belief in the Soros/Gates conspiracy.⁸¹ This leads us on to the second step.

Is there really an independent Belarusian effect?

To validate the results, we tested them in a multivariate setting where the periodization of interview dates used in table 3 functions as our main explanatory variable. Our controls include a range of demographic, socio-economic, identity-related and attitudinal/trust variables informed by findings from the literature on the determinants of conspiracy belief and on geopolitical and foreign policy attitudes in Ukraine. Reliance on the latter stems from the known associations between political ideology and conspiracy beliefs,⁸² adjusted to the reality of Ukraine's local political divisions which surround the issue of the country's geopolitical orientation (albeit to a lesser extent than in the past),⁸³ in addition to various populist discourses, for example on corruption or land reform.⁸⁴

Our demographic controls are age (in six categories) and sex. Increasing age often correlates with authoritarian conservative values,⁸⁵ and in most of the FSU, Ukraine included, these values are frequently associated with a broader identification with, or nostalgia for, the Soviet period,⁸⁶ as well as with geopolitical preferences orientated towards the north-east,⁸⁷ even though not all studies support this finding.⁸⁸ Moreover, as Petrenko and colleagues report, younger cohorts in Ukraine's south-eastern oblasts are far less likely to believe that the West is the hidden hand behind the protests in Belarus, and far more likely to perceive those protests as an uprising against Lukashenko's electoral fraud.⁸⁹

Completed formal education (primary, secondary or tertiary) and a dichotomous good self-rated household economy variable (where scores of 4 or 5 on a five-point Likert scale are coded as '1') are our two socio-economic dimensions. Education typically reduces belief in conspiracy theories.⁹⁰ Belief in such theories also tends to be lower among the economic winners of society, and higher among

⁸¹ Data in online appendix: see n. 68 above.

⁸² Mancosu et al., 'Believing in conspiracy theories'.

⁸³ Grigore Pop-Eleches and Graeme Robertson, 'Identity and political preferences in Ukraine: before and after the Euromaidan', *Post-Soviet Affairs* 34: 2–3, 2017, pp. 107–18.

⁸⁴ Taras Kuzio, 'Theoretical and comparative perspectives on populism in Ukraine and Europe', *European Politics and Society* 20: 4, 2019, pp. 486–501.

⁸⁵ Pippa Norris and Ronald Inglehart, *Cultural backlash: Trump, Brexit and authoritarian populism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019).

⁸⁶ Ian McAllister and Stephen White, 'Nostalgia for the demise of the USSR in Belarus, Russia and Ukraine', *Russian Politics* 1: 2, 2016, pp. 113–30.

⁸⁷ Michael Gentile, 'West oriented in the East-oriented Donbas: a political stratigraphy of geopolitical identity in Luhansk, Ukraine', *Post-Soviet Affairs* 31: 3, 2015, pp. 201–23.

⁸⁸ Elise Giuliano, 'Who supported separatism in Donbas? Ethnicity and popular opinion at the start of the Ukraine crisis', *Post-Soviet Affairs* 34: 2–3, 2018, pp. 158–78.

⁸⁹ Petrenko et al., *On the other side of the screen*, p. 62.

⁹⁰ Jan-Willem van Prooijen, 'Why education predicts decreased belief in conspiracy theories', *Applied Cognitive Psychology* 31: 1, 2016, pp. 50–58; Mancosu et al., 'Believing in conspiracy theories'.

its losers, for whom conspiracy theories may be a source of belonging based on a shared (alternative) reality.⁹¹

The identity-related and attitudinal variables include non-exclusive self-identification at the (ethno-)national (feels Ukrainian, Russian) and supranational (feels Soviet, European) scales. The lingering presence of Soviet identification in Ukraine—a relic of the Soviet regime's attempts to craft an internationalist *homo sovieticus* out of the mosaic of ethnic groups present in the vast country—is well established in the literature.⁹² In addition to the straightforward 'feels Ukrainian/Russian/Soviet/European' variables, we include the respondents' trust in the Orthodox Church of Ukraine (OCU) and in the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate (UOC/MP), and agreement with the statements 'Sexual minorities should have equal rights' and 'Russians and Ukrainians are one people'.⁹³ All these variables explore aspects of the main fault-line cutting across the Ukrainian body politic—at least before Russia's 24 February 2022 invasion—namely the country's relations with Russia and with the West. While it is often assumed that national identities mirror this division (a notion that is increasingly questioned),⁹⁴ recent findings point to the greater salience of supranational identities in determining (mis)trust towards Russian official narratives.⁹⁵ Moreover, as the UOC/MP is frequently accused of promoting Moscow's agenda in Ukraine,⁹⁶ we may expect that the church's position of moral authority will lend these narratives additional credence. The 'sexual minorities should have equal rights' variable is a proxy indicator measuring support for traditional (family) values as they are defined in the Kremlin's post-2012 ideological edifice.⁹⁷ 'Russians and Ukrainians are one people' is Putin's position in respect of Ukrainian nationhood,⁹⁸ albeit often contradicted by the massive othering of (allegedly fascist) Ukraine and Ukrainians in the Russian media.⁹⁹ In short, adherence to this statement signals acceptance of Moscow's master narrative of the Ukrainian nation—that it is a less than fully sovereign state in need of Moscow's guardianship.

⁹¹ Uscinski and Parent, *American conspiracy theories*; Karen Douglas, Robbie Sutton and Aleksandra Cichocka, 'The psychology of conspiracy theories', *Current Directions in Psychological Science* 26: 6, 2017, pp. 538–42.

⁹² See e.g. Paul Pirie, 'National identity and politics in southern and eastern Ukraine', *Europe–Asia Studies* 48: 7, 1996, pp. 1079–104; Yaroslav Hrytsak, 'National identities in post-Soviet Ukraine: the case of Lviv and Donetsk', *Harvard Ukrainian Studies*, vol. 22, 1998, pp. 263–81; Andrew Wilson, 'Elements of a theory of Ukrainian ethno-national identities', *Nations and Nationalism* 8: 1, 2003, pp. 31–54.

⁹³ The self-identification and the two attitudinal variables were dichotomized using their natural cut-off points, e.g. feeling Ukrainian vs other, with the hard-to-say answers included in the other. The trust in the OCU and OUC/MP variables were originally measured on a five-point Likert scale; in our analysis, the 4s and 5s are coded as 1, and the rest as 0.

⁹⁴ Gwendolyn Sasse and Alice Lackner, 'War and identity: the case of the Donbas in Ukraine', *Post-Soviet Affairs* 34: 2–3, March 2018, pp. 139–57.

⁹⁵ Michael Gentile, 'Diabological suggestions: disinformation and the curious scale of nationalism in Ukrainian geopolitical fault-line cities', *Geopolitics*, publ. online Nov. 2020, doi: 10.1080/14650045.2020.1830766.

⁹⁶ Denys Shestopalets, 'The Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate, the state and the Russian–Ukrainian crisis, 2014–2018', *Politics, Religion and Ideology* 20: 1, 2018, pp. 42–63.

⁹⁷ Gulnaz Sharafutdinova, 'The Pussy Riot affair and Putin's démarche from sovereign democracy to sovereign morality', *Nationalities Papers* 42: 4, 2014, pp. 615–21; Borenstein, *Plots against Russia*.

⁹⁸ Vladimir Putin, 'On the historical unity of Russians and Ukrainians', 12 July 2021, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/66181>.

⁹⁹ Yuri Teper, 'Official Russian identity discourse in light of the annexation of Crimea: national or imperial?', *Post-Soviet Affairs* 32: 4, 2015, pp. 378–96.

Figure 1 (see page 992) plots the odds ratios for each variable included in our logistic regression exercise, which comprises identically specified models for our four conspiracy theories.¹⁰⁰ Recall that we are measuring disagreement, meaning that odds ratios greater than one should be interpreted as predictors of non-belief, whereas the opposite is true for odds ratios of between zero and one. In other words, the higher the odds ratio, the ‘better’ from the perspective of Ukraine’s informational security, and vice versa.

The multivariate analysis yields six findings. First, at a general level, there are different predictors for different conspiracy beliefs, even though all four would superficially seem to relate to the cluster of Russian-inspired disinformation. Notably, the Belarusian factor influences only the Soros–Gates conspiracy belief, but it does so very strongly, even after controlling for a comprehensive range of relevant predictors. The study by Petrenko and colleagues on the impact of disinformation on south-east Ukrainian audiences, which is based on data collected in November 2020, suggests widespread belief that an external government controls Ukraine, particularly within Donetsk oblast where Mariupol is located.¹⁰¹ Our results suggest that the Belarusian critical juncture event contributed to this outcome in a major way, most likely as a direct result of the Russian and Belarusian information campaign effort surrounding it.

Second, and in contrast with much extant research,¹⁰² formal education has no measurable impact on conspiracy belief (there is only a moderate effect on the Suprun conspiracy belief). Also, once the attitudinal and socio-economic controls are added, the effects of age and sex vanish. Material standard of living, on the other hand, does have an effect, at least for those conspiracy theories that somehow put this standard of living at risk or call it into question. For example, a member of the relatively affluent but small middle class has less interest in believing that the Ukrainian armed forces shelled Vostochnyi, as this theory advances the Russian cause and, by extension, the risk of a Russian or ‘Donetsk People’s Republic’ invasion.

Third, national self-identification as Ukrainian or Russian has relatively little effect on conspiracy beliefs. Feeling Russian is moderately associated with belief in the medical experiments theory, but otherwise there are no national self-identifications that yield significant results. It is instead the supranational level that carries greater weight: those who identify as Soviet tend to support the Soros/Gates and medical experiments theories, whereas those who identify as European are more likely to dismiss the medical experiments and Suprun theories.

Fourth, agreement with the statement that Russians and Ukrainians are one people is associated with belief (non-disbelief) in all four conspiracy theories, particularly strongly in respect of the Soros/Gates and Vostochnyi shelling conspiracy beliefs. On these grounds, the variable would seem like a good proxy for general pro-Russian inclination, but it is not quite that simple: it is perfectly possible to

¹⁰⁰ The full models are reported in the online appendix: see n. 68 above.

¹⁰¹ Petrenko et al., *On the other side of the screen*. See also Teperik et al., *Resilient Ukraine*.

¹⁰² Van Prooijen, ‘Why education predicts decreased belief in conspiracy theories’.

hold this opinion while having an anti-Kremlin stance, and considering that an overwhelming majority adhere to it, what this means is that it is the minority of ‘different peopleists’ that stands out. By way of illustration, only 49.3 per cent of those who disagree with the statement that Russians and Ukrainians are one people also disagree with the Vostochnyi theory (as opposed to as few as 5.7 per cent among those who view Russians and Ukrainians as one people).¹⁰³ On the other hand, the variable measuring the impact of traditional values—the opinion on equal rights for sexual minorities—has an impact only on the Soros/Gates and medical experiments conspiracy beliefs, the effect on the former being particularly strong.

Fifth, the effect of trust in the OCU and in the UOC/MP is somewhat ambiguous, but it appears that the variables might be measuring not only trust in these institutions *per se*, but also religiosity in general. If this is the case, it would explain the lack of effect on the Soros/Gates belief, which is most likely explained by the equal rights for sexual minorities variable, based as it is on a statement that would raise suspicion among followers of both churches. Otherwise, trust in both churches predicts greater scepticism towards the conspiracy theories, especially among those who trust the OCU. There is, however, one major exception, relating to the shelling of Vostochnyi. What is at stake here is, put simply, which side one thinks is responsible for the attack. For those who trust the Moscow Patriarchate, it simply cannot be Moscow: only 3.7 per cent disagree with the theory,¹⁰⁴ of whom a mere 0.7 per cent ‘completely’ disagree, as against 57.2 per cent who agree (64.2 per cent including refused answers). For those who trust the OCU, it probably isn’t either (17.8 per cent disagreement vs 47.3 per cent agreement).

Finally, the Ulana Suprun model is weak, probably because conspiracy theories surrounding the former acting minister of health care are so ubiquitous that they behave like established facts. Our research tested whether people believe that she was put in place by the Americans. Perhaps testing a conspiracy belief surrounding the intentions of her alleged puppeteer would have yielded clearer results: what did the Americans *really* seek to achieve? Did they place her in Kyiv with the intention of promoting a much-needed health care reform, or was their plan based on a more sinister plot?

Concluding discussion

Our findings add to the growing literature on how authoritarian regimes deploy disinformation and conspiracy theories to achieve foreign policy goals. While the effectiveness of these measures has been hard to pin down empirically, we contend that our study, which is based on a rarely occurring natural experiment, does just that. By documenting geopolitically relevant popular opinions in the key front-line city of Mariupol, we were able to analyse the prevalence of conspiracy beliefs, emphasizing that widespread exposure to (dis)information about the 9 August 2020 Belarusian presidential election and its immediate aftermath influenced these

¹⁰³ Weighted data. See n. 69 above.

¹⁰⁴ Weighted data. See n. 69 above.

opinions in a way that is detrimental to Ukraine's security interests, particularly considering the city's vital symbolic and strategic importance.

Two main findings of our study need to be highlighted. First, the propensity to believe in conspiracy theories is strong. Having controlled for basic demographic and socio-economic factors, we found that geopolitical and 'civilizational' loyalties (e.g. identifying as Soviet or believing that Russians and Ukrainians are 'one people'), issues forming a central dimension of political partisanship in Ukraine, are the strongest factors driving belief in specific conspiracy theories. This confirms previous research suggesting that people support conspiracies that vilify political adversaries, thus reinforcing the underlying sources of conflict and hindering its resolution.

In this light, the diffusion of conspiracy theories regarding events in the post-Soviet space by pro-Kremlin media makes sense, as it enables Russian political leaders to deepen existing societal fissures while creating new ones in the process. In the short run at least, distrust in the motives and behaviour of political opponents can translate into real behavioural engagement or disengagement favouring the actors fomenting these emotions. Considering that the Kremlin has not shelved its plans for maintaining a foothold inside Ukraine, as evidenced in 2021–2 by the military buildup along the Russian–Ukrainian border and by the subsequent large-scale invasion along multiple fronts, preparing the informational terrain in this way can thus be seen as an element of Russia's 'hybrid warfare' capabilities.¹⁰⁵

Our second main finding is that critical juncture events can influence belief in *relevant* conspiracy theories in a way that aligns with the strategic narratives projected by authoritarian governments. While we are not in a position to predict beliefs in the long term, the short-term effects are clearly discernible. The presidential election in Belarus, and the following unprecedented uprising of civil society, created an opportunity for the Russian/Belarusian state media to shape new narratives. By describing the protests as part and parcel of a sly western stratagem, these media mobilized the demonstrations as evidence for conspiracy theories that were already circulating. In Ukraine, the perceived relevance of these conspiracy theories was augmented by the pro-Russian media's regular comparison of the Belarusian events to the Euromaidan revolution of 2013–14, which attracted little support in the south-eastern parts of the country, and by their obsession with George Soros. This obsession found fertile ground in the Soros conspiracy theory, which had been maturing for some time under the influence of a broad trend among European populist authoritarian leaders such as Hungary's Viktor Orbán.¹⁰⁶

This 'Belarus effect' finding is important, because it shows that conspiracy beliefs do not necessarily evolve organically. Given the right conditions, a critical juncture event can act as a sudden catalyst that pushes conspiracy theories into the mainstream, where they find broader engagement and, therefore, greater potential for societal polarization. The question is whether an undeniably positive critical

¹⁰⁵ Alexander Lanoszka, 'Disinformation in international politics', *European Journal of International Security* 4: 2, 2019, pp. 227–48.

¹⁰⁶ Corneliu Pintilescu and Attila Magyári, 'Soros conspiracy theories and the rise of populism in post-socialist Hungary and Romania', in Astapova et al., eds, *Conspiracy theories in eastern Europe*, pp. 207–31.

junction event, such as a fully successful democratic breakthrough followed by increased prosperity and security, would tip the balance in the opposite direction.

For these reasons, our findings are an invitation to further research in at least two areas. First, having found evidence that conspiracy theories can align with and even amplify existing geopolitical fault-lines, we need to know more about when, how and why they are effective. Second, we need to examine the link between critical juncture events and the dynamics of conspiracy belief more closely. Is the Belarus effect a post-Soviet idiosyncrasy, or do comparable phenomena take place elsewhere? For example, what impact has the aftermath of the storming of the Capitol in Washington DC on 6 January 2021 had on conspiracy beliefs? Unfortunately, the question is difficult to approach quantitatively as it relies, to some extent, on natural experiments that are dependent on an element of chance. A valuable alternative would be to use a comparative cross-cultural qualitative research design specifically targeting popular understandings of critical juncture events. In the meantime, however, we note that conspiracy beliefs are more volatile than expected, and flexibly exploitable.

Figure 1a–d: Logistic regression results (odds ratios)

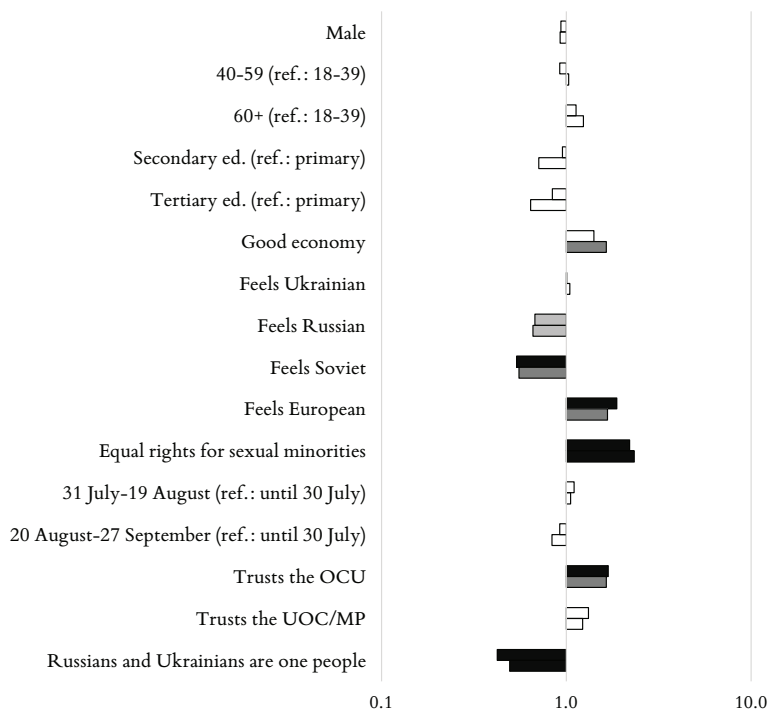
Note: Results plotted on a logarithmic scale. The upper bar reports the odds ratio for the unweighted dataset, whereas the lower bar refers to the weighted version. The weights correct for the age-sex composition of Mariupol’s population (see note 69). White bars denote non-significant results. Light grey is significant at the 5% level, dark grey at the 1% level, and black at the 0.1% level.



Shelling of Vostochnyi



American medical experiments



Ulana Suprun

