



Conspiracy theories in the information society – between the perception of threats and the destabilisation of security. A Polish perspective

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Abstract

In the information society, conspiracy theories have become a permanent feature of information cycle and important means for interpreting complex and uncertain social phenomena. Their increased presence is particularly evident in crisis situations, such as health, climate, technological or geopolitical threats, as well as in the context of information overload, declining trust in public institutions and the growing role of digital media. This phenomenon raises important questions about the relationship between subjective perceptions of threats and real consequences for security. The aim of this article is to analyse conspiracy theories functioning in the information society as narratives shaping the perception of threats and to identify the mechanisms through which these narratives can lead to the destabilisation of individual, social and state security. In particular, an attempt has been made to answer the question of how conspiracy theories influence cognitive processes, social trust and information resilience. The article uses qualitative theoretical analysis and a critical review of scientific literature in the fields of security sciences, media studies and social psychology. The analysis is based on Polish and foreign scientific publications and institutional reports on disinformation, information security and the functioning of the information society. The analyses indicate that conspiracy theories serve to reduce subjective feelings of uncertainty and threat, but at the same time lead to an erosion of trust in expert knowledge, public institutions and democratic procedures. Their dissemination contributes to social polarisation, reduced security and a weakening of the state's ability to respond effectively to crises. Conspiracy theories are a significant factor destabilising security in the information society, especially in situations of heightened uncertainty and crises. Effective countermeasures against this phenomenon require an integrated approach combining media education, strengthening information literacy, and a consistent communication policy on the part of public institutions.

Keywords: Conspiracy theory, Disinformation, Information security, Information society, Social resilience, Threat.

1. INTRODUCTION

Conspiracy theories are a persistent and multidimensional part of contemporary public discourse, the significance of which has clearly increased with the development of the information society. In an environment of widespread access to content, intensified digital communication and the dominance of social media, conspiracy narratives have ceased to exist on the margins of debate, but are becoming an important component of the circulation of information and the interpretation of social reality. Their appeal stems not only from individual cognitive predispositions, but also from deeper cultural and structural processes. The characteristic features of information society, including data overload, fragmentation of communication and algorithmic content selection, are conducive to the spread of conspiracy narratives. In such an environment, the boundaries between information and disinformation are blurred, and recipients increasingly construct their worldviews based on emotional and selectively chosen messages. Conspiracy theories fit into this mechanism, exploiting sensationalism, the "us-them" opposition, and narratives of hidden threats, which make them particularly effective communication tools.

From the perspective of security studies, conspiracy theories can be analysed as specific narratives that identify threats, give them meaning and offer simplified explanations for complex phenomena. On the one hand, they serve to reduce anxiety and uncertainty by providing a seemingly coherent interpretative framework for events that are difficult to comprehend. On the other hand, they contribute to the creation of new threats by undermining trust in public institutions, science and the media, thereby weakening society's resilience to crises.

The aim of this article is to analyse conspiracy theories as narratives functioning in the information society, with particular emphasis on their determinants and consequences for individual and national security. The perspective assumes a departure from treating conspiracy theories exclusively as a cognitive or cultural problem in favour of seeing them as a phenomenon with real destabilising potential, affecting decision-making processes, social cohesion and information resilience of contemporary societies.

2. INFORMATION IN THE INFORMATION SOCIETY

The idea of an information society began to take shape in the 1960s and 1970s as a result of reflections on the consequences of the third industrial revolution, associated with the popularisation of computers, the development of information and communication technologies (ICT) and computerisation processes (Goban Klas, Sienkiewicz, 1999). These changes initiated a gradual transition from the industrial model to a new type of social organisation, where information and the ability to process it effectively became a key resource.

One of the first researchers to attempt a systematic description of these processes was Daniel Bell. As early as 1959, he formulated the concept of a post-industrial society, underlining the growing importance of information and theoretical knowledge as fundamental factors organising social and economic life. He indicated that the role of ICT in the new type of society is comparable to the role of industry in the industrial era. A similar perspective was proposed by Alvin Toffler, who analysed the development of civilisation in terms of successive waves: agrarian, industrial and information. The last of these, a groundbreaking one, was associated with the expansion of knowledge, information and

ICT and represented a qualitatively new stage in the development of civilisation (Toffler, 2001).

The term "information society" (Jap. *johoka shakai*) was first used by Tadao Umesao in 1963 in his analyses of the evolution of society developing on the basis of information technology. In the following years, the concept gained widespread interest in Japanese scientific reflection. In 1968, Keinichi Koyama, in his work on information theory, presented a vision of a society in which information becomes a key resource for development. Yoneji Masuda also made a significant contribution when, in 1972, he proposed a comprehensive programme of social transformation resulting from the dynamic development of ICT. Masuda described the advent of an "information civilisation", emphasising its intangible and systemic nature (Tomaszczyk, 2010).

The concept of "information society" became widespread internationally in the 1990s, mainly thanks to European initiatives. Of particular importance was the 1994 report prepared under the leadership of Martin Bangemann, entitled "Europe and the Global Information Society. Recommendations to the European Council". The document, known as the Bangemann Report, did not contain an unambiguous definition of the information society, but pointed to its essential feature – the ability to effectively use information systems and telecommunications services in information transfer and remote processing (Tomaszczyk, 2010).

Contemporary information society operates in the context of the fourth industrial revolution, characterised by the convergence of digital technologies, automation, artificial intelligence and global communication networks. The Internet has become the dominant technological infrastructure, determining the course of social, cultural, economic and political processes. It serves as the primary channel for the distribution of knowledge, the main source of information about the world and a key environment for social interaction (Lasota-Kapczuk, 2023). The concept of information society is an attempt to provide a synthetic description of the essential features, functioning mechanisms and consequences of new civilisational phenomena resulting from the widespread use of ICT (Goban-Klas, Sienkiewicz, 1999). It refers to a society achieving a high level of technological development, where information becomes a strategic resource used in all domains of human activity (Lasota-Kapczuk, 2023).

The information society has an extensive technical infrastructure enabling the acquisition, processing, collection and dissemination of information on a massive scale. The consequence of the ubiquity of these technologies is the intensification of the flow of messages of diverse form and content, which on the one hand satisfy the growing information needs of individuals, but on the other hand lead to information overload and difficulties in assessing the reliability of sources (Krzewniak, 2023). In this sense, the information society is becoming not only a space for the production and distribution of data and information, but also an area that generates new threats, including vulnerability to disinformation, fake news and conspiracy narratives, making the issue of information security one of the key challenges facing contemporary societies.

Sienkiewicz (2018, p. 25) defines information as "a set of facts, events, characteristics, etc. of specific objects (things, processes, systems) contained in a message (communication), presented and provided in such a way (form) that it allows the recipient to respond to the situation and take appropriate mental or physical action". In this sense, information is not merely a neutral description of reality, but serves as a tool for orienting oneself in one's environment and making decisions. In turn, Fehler (2023, p. 163) points out that

information "is a specific intangible asset, the essence of which is determined by content drawn from the outside world in the form of messages (communications) concerning facts, events and characteristics of specific objects and processes, which, when combined in the course of intellectual processing into specific new wholes, reduce ignorance and the accompanying uncertainty." This definition emphasises primarily the functional dimension of information, highlighting its role in reducing uncertainty through the systematic expansion of knowledge about the social world and about the cognising entity itself.

Information is a strategic resource, determining the ability of individuals and communities to act rationally in a complex and dynamically changing environment, including in the area of security. It influences cognitive mechanisms, shaping the ways in which social phenomena are perceived and interpreted, and thus enables adaptation to new conditions and conscious shaping of reality. As a result, it strengthens the agency of individuals, increases their level of security and enhances the effectiveness of their actions in the social dimension. With its potential, information functions on a par with traditional instruments of political and military power, becoming a key element of contemporary authority and security strategies (Krztoń, 2017). False, manipulated or intentionally hostile messages can lead to an escalation of social tensions, destabilisation of international relations and the perpetuation of distorted images of reality, which legitimise violent actions.

At the same time, efficient information and communication systems are a prerequisite for stability, security and long-term social development. Access to reliable content enables the identification of threats, coordination of actions in crisis situations, social control over institutions of power, as well as the development of cognitive skills and active participation in public and cultural life. In this context, information appears to be the foundation of civil society, determining the ability to make rational decisions and engage in conscious civic activity. Entities with competencies in effective information management gain a competitive edge, increasing their chances for sustainable and balanced development.

In order for information to effectively fulfil its constructive functions, it should correspond to the actual needs of its recipients and find practical application in cognitive and decision-making processes. This means that its value is conditioned by specific properties that determine its usefulness and functionality. Szyłkowska (2019, pp. 20-21) points out that the key attributes of information include, above all: its timeliness, understood as obtaining information at a time adequate for decision-making needs; accuracy, referring to the consistency of the message with the actual state of the phenomena described; quality, understood as the totality of features allowing to meet the user's needs; reliability, including objectivity, diligence and correctness of the message; informational value and sufficiency, allowing for rational decision-making.

In turn, Liderman (2017, p. 16) proposes a more comprehensive approach to the characteristics of information, emphasising criteria directly related to the recipient's perspective. In his approach, the relevance of information is of key importance, i.e. its compliance with the user's needs and expectations, as well as accuracy, understood not only as the precision of the content, but also as the appropriate adaptation of the form of presentation to the recipient's competence. The author includes other criteria such as timeliness, which involves ongoing updates and modifications of information along with changes in the object being described; completeness, meaning the availability of information in a scope and level of detail adequate to the user's needs; consistency, understood as the absence

of internal contradictions in the message; and appropriateness of form, minimising the risk of misinterpretation. An important part of information quality is also its credibility, resulting from premises confirming the reliability and truthfulness of the message.

Nowadays, information is treated as a market product, whose value is more often determined by the form of communication than by its content. Individuals are constantly exposed to content from many sources, varying in terms of cognitive value and degree of credibility. This content may come from both the natural and social environments, as well as from the media, in particular the Internet, which in recent years has dominated other channels of content distribution (Kęsy, 2018).

The multi-channel and intensive flow of messages leads to information overload, which makes it difficult to select, evaluate and integrate. However, the problem is not limited to the quantity of information, but also includes the inconsistency of messages resulting from different interpretations of reality and conflicting interests of participants in the information process. Such conditions lead to manipulative practices, consisting of deliberate selection, distortion and reinterpretation of facts. These phenomena, combined with a low level of information literacy of an average recipient, lead to information chaos, which hinders rational content processing and decision-making (Kęsy, 2018; Krzewniak, 2022). In this context, there is increasing talk of an infodemic, understood as an excess of information, both true and false, spreading in a massive and uncontrolled manner, especially in crisis situations. It leads to the disintegration of the communication system and undermines the foundations of social communities. Its presence means that contaminated information is no longer an exception, but has become part of everyday circulation, coexisting with reliable knowledge based on verified sources (Sikorski, 2021; Śliwka, Pluta, 2023).

Humans do not have innate mechanisms for selecting relevant information or natural protection against an excess of unnecessary or unwanted content. In an information society, one may increasingly observe the phenomenon of information consumerism, consisting of unjustified, excessive use of information resources and the replacement of critical analysis with passive assimilation of content (Kisilowska-Szurmińska, 2014). A lack of competence in filtering and evaluating information leads to cognitive overload, resulting in superficial thinking and a limited capacity for deep reflection. This phenomenon is referred to as information stress and is the basis for many dysfunctions characteristic of the information society (Ledzińska, 2009; Furmanek, 2014; Kęsy, 2018).

Constructing an image of the world based on incoming content does not guarantee its consistency or conformity with reality. These concerns are confirmed in media practices, where information is sometimes combined with persuasion and propaganda, and manipulation has become part of the standard communication repertoire. The dynamic influx of inconsistent and contradictory messages hinders reliable analysis and interpretation, which encourages the replacement of reflection with intuitive understanding and pragmatic acceptance of the usefulness of content. An apt description of this attitude is the metaphor of the "cognitive miser", which refers to the tendency of individuals to seek sufficient rather than optimal solutions – requiring minimal cognitive effort to construct an image of themselves, others and the surrounding world (Filipczak-Białkowska, 2018; Grzyb, Wojciszke, 2024). Information literacy, understood as the ability to select, critically evaluate and interpret content, should be treated as a key element in counteracting the negative consequences of information overload. Their development determines not only the quality of individuals'

cognitive processes, but also the ability of information society to maintain a high level of reflection and rationality in the face of an excess of qualitatively diverse content.

3. CONSPIRACY THEORIES IN THE PUBLIC SPACE

Conspiracy theories pose a particularly serious threat, which is exacerbated by information chaos and the limited competences of recipients. In conditions of infodemic, when distorted and disinformative content intermingles with reliable knowledge, the lack of critical analysis skills promotes susceptibility to narratives constructed on the basis of emotions and simplifications rather than facts. As a result, conspiracy theories become a tool of manipulation that destabilises the process of social communication and hinders rational decision-making.

An analysis of the definition of conspiracy theories indicates that they are primarily a specific interpretative model that explains events by referring to a hidden collusion of people acting illegally or immorally. According to Knight (2003, p. 15), conspiracy theories are based on the assumption that a secret agreement is behind a specific event, while Sunstein and Vermeule (2009, pp. 206-211) emphasise that it is an intrigue formed by individuals with considerable influence who are trying to conceal their role until their objectives have been achieved. Guzowski (2016, p. 88) notes that this understanding accurately reflects the essence of most conspiracy theories, without prejudging their truthfulness or falsity. The literature emphasises that the term 'conspiracy theory' does not refer exclusively to false narratives, but in everyday language it mainly has negative connotations, which is related to the etymology of the word 'conspiracy' understood as a secret agreement between a group of people aimed against the authorities or an individual. Elements of secrecy, contestation and potential harmfulness mean that activities described as conspiratorial arouse mistrust and suspicion (Sama, Tyc, 2024, pp. 61-62).

The following prerequisites are among the characteristic features of conspiracy theories: 1. they refer to the actions of a group of people, 2. they are carried out in secret, 3. they aim to change institutions, conceal the truth or attain benefits, 4. they are implemented at the expense of the general public (Wasiuta, Wasiuta, 2019, p. 20; as cited in: Uscinski and Parent, 2017). At the structural level, conspiracy theories are distinguished by a number of elements. Firstly, they are based on fragmentary and incomplete information, often taken from the media. Secondly, they have a strong emotional component, which makes them appealing and facilitates dissemination. Thirdly, they create a simplified picture of reality, interpreted through morality and a Manichean division of the world into good and evil. In conspiracy narratives, social and political processes are personalised, and members of the alleged conspiracy are attributed extraordinary abilities, resources and influence. Arguments in conspiracy theories are usually based on induction, intuition and appeals to 'common sense', while marginalising empirical evidence. They contain numerous logical errors, and the narratives are created and disseminated by individuals who are not familiar with the subject matter and lack specialist knowledge. There is no verification or review process, and attempts at scientific falsification are treated as part of a hostile conspiracy. Conspiracy theories are also characterised by repetitive themes – they usually focus on the same "suspicious" groups: secret organisations, government agencies, corporations or minorities. The more popular a given narrative becomes, the greater its reach and the greater number of people who believe in its existence (see Wasiuta, Wasiuta, 2019, pp. 19-20). Conspiracy theories are therefore a specific way

of interpreting reality, which reduces its complexity, gives it apparent coherence and responds to the social need to explain uncertainty. At the same time, their structure, based on emotions, simplifications and the lack of falsification, makes them particularly susceptible to instrumental use in manipulation and disinformation processes.

Czech (2020, p. 93) points out that conspiracy narratives are a reification of social fears and frustrations. Conspiracy theories are not an isolated phenomenon, but are embedded in the real emotions and experiences of individuals and social groups, which legitimise them and reinforce their impact. Fears related to uncertainty about the future, a sense of threat or lack of control over the surrounding reality are reflected in conspiracy narratives, which give them a concrete form and apparent logic. Reification here consists in transforming abstract emotions, such as frustration, distrust of institutions or a sense of marginalisation, into material narratives that identify culprits and construct simplified explanations for complex phenomena. In this way, conspiracy narratives serve a compensatory function – they reduce the complexity of the world by offering recipients a seemingly coherent picture of reality, even if it is based on false assumptions.

From a social perspective, conspiracy narratives strengthen the sense of community among their followers, who share similar fears and frustrations. At the same time, however, they deepen polarisation, undermine trust in public institutions and science, and encourage the spread of disinformation. In this sense, they can be seen as a mechanism for coping with uncertainty, but instead of leading to constructive solutions to problems, they perpetuate irrational attitudes and destabilise social communication.

4. CONDITIONS FOR SUSCEPTIBILITY TO CONSPIRACY THEORIES

Conspiracy theories are a permanent feature of public discourse, but their significance has clearly increased with the progression of the information society and digital communication environments. Susceptibility to conspiracy narratives is the result of the interaction of individual, social and technological factors, rather than a simple deficit of knowledge (Douglas et al., 2019, pp. 3–5).

One of the best-documented areas of research on the predisposition to share conspiracy theories is the psychological motivations of individuals. Douglas, Sutton and Cichocka (2017) show that a belief in conspiracy theories fulfils three basic categories of needs: epistemic, existential and social. Epistemic motives refer to the need to understand the world and reduce uncertainty. Conspiracy theories, by offering seemingly coherent and comprehensive explanations for even the most complex events, satisfy this need, especially where clear official information is lacking. Research indicates that belief in conspiracy theories correlates with lower levels of analytical thinking and education. Existential motives, in turn, are linked to the needs for security and a sense of control. When individuals experience powerlessness or anxiety, conspiracy theories can provide an illusory sense of control by rejecting official narratives and providing a sense of being privy to a "hidden truth." Empirical research shows that people who experience a sense of lack of control are significantly more likely to accept conspiracy narratives that offer seemingly coherent and intentional explanations for complex phenomena (van Rooijen & Acker, 2015, pp. 570–572). Social motives, on the other hand, relate to the desire to maintain a positive image of oneself and the group with which they identify themselves.

Conspiracy theories can serve to emphasise one's own uniqueness or moral superiority of one's own group over the "corrupt elites".

In addition to motivation, specific aspects of an individual's cognitive functioning play an important role. A study by Pennycook et al. (2025) showed that people who believe in conspiracy theories are characterised by excessive self-confidence – they overestimate their cognitive and perceptual abilities, even when their actual performance is poor. This combination of low competence and high self-confidence is consistent with the well-known Dunning-Kruger effect and makes it difficult to correct erroneous beliefs (Grzyb, Wojciszke, 2024).

From a cognitive perspective, specific heuristics and inference errors are also crucial for susceptibility to conspiracy theories. These are a natural element of the human way of processing information, but in the context of complex or uncertain situations they favor the creation of simplified and often erroneous narratives. Among the most important are: the tendency to assign meaning to random events (known as apophenia), confirmation bias, and proportionality bias (Douglas et al., 2019; Grzyb, Wojciszke, 2024).

Apophenia, or the tendency to see patterns and meaning in random events, leads to attributing significance to random phenomena that are in fact the result of chance factors or complex systemic processes. In the context of conspiracy theories, apophenia manifests itself through the interpretation of coincidences, disasters or political events as the result of deliberate actions by hidden groups or secret plans. This phenomenon is particularly pronounced in crisis situations, when the lack of clear causes increases the uncertainty of individuals and society (Douglas et al., 2019, p. 5).

Confirmation bias, on the other hand, involves selectively assimilating information that is consistent with existing beliefs and ignoring or depreciating data that contradicts them. In practice, this means that people who believe in conspiracy theories are more likely to seek evidence that confirms these narratives, interpret them in a way that is consistent with their own world-view, and reject critical information, even if it comes from reliable sources. This mechanism reinforces conspiracy beliefs and limits openness to revising opinions (Douglas et al., 2019, p. 6).

The proportionality bias, on the other hand, is the tendency to attribute proportionally significant causes to major events. People often do not accept explanations based on chance, unpredictability or complex socio-economic processes. As a result, dramatic events such as terrorist attacks, natural disasters or global health crises are interpreted as effects of deliberate actions by powerful actors. This bias increases the appeal of conspiracy theories, as they offer clear culprits and orderly, albeit simplistic, explanations for complex phenomena (Douglas et al., 2019, pp. 6–7).

Research on personality traits indicates that belief in conspiracy theories correlates with increased levels of distrust, social cynicism and paranoid tendencies, although it cannot be clearly attributed to a specific personality profile (Imhoff and Lamberty, 2018, pp. 910–912). A meta-analysis conducted by Goreis and Voracek (2019) showed that the classic Big Five traits (openness, agreeableness, conscientiousness, extraversion, neuroticism) have limited predictive value, supporting the idea that conspiracy beliefs are more a product of situational and cognitive interactions than stable individual traits (pp. 6–8).

Social factors provide the context in which individual predispositions are reinforced and triggered. Periods of profound social destabilisation and disorganisation, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, wars or economic crises, create fertile ground for

conspiracy narratives. In situations of threat and unpredictability, conspiracy theories offer a simple cause for evil, reducing the sense of chaos (Zeng, Schäfer, & Oliveira, 2022).

Conspiracy theories often function as a tool in intergroup conflict. They serve to depreciate external groups (e.g. political opponents, elites, minorities) and to strengthen the cohesion and sense of moral righteousness of one's own group. In monopolised information environments, these narratives become entrenched, leading to deep polarisation. At the same time, conspiracy theories often serve as compensatory narratives in groups that perceive themselves as marginalised or deprived of influence on decision-making processes. In this sense, they reinforce the "us-them" divisions, promoting social polarisation and the delegitimisation of democratic institutions (Douglas, Sutton, & Cichocka, 2017, p. 544).

Lack of trust in public institutions, science, mainstream media or authority is one of the strongest predictors of belief in conspiracy theories. These theories thrive where the legitimacy of official explanations is low and citizens feel excluded or betrayed by the establishment. Research indicates that low levels of trust in the state, the media and science correlate significantly with the spread of conspiracy narratives (van Prooijen & Douglas, 2018, pp. 899–901).

The digital age has introduced new, powerful factors influencing the dynamics of conspiracy theories, although their role is often moderated by individual traits. Social media is optimised to maximise user engagement. Because conspiracy content, which is often sensational and emotional, generates more interaction than factual explanations, algorithms unknowingly promote its distribution. This leads to the formation of "filter bubbles," where users are constantly exposed to content that confirms their prior beliefs (Zeng, Schäfer, & Oliveira, 2022; Grzyb, Wojciszke, 2024).

At the same time, the digital environment encourages the emotionalisation of communication, which reduces the ability to critically analyse information. Conspiracy theories are particularly effective as a tool for disinformation because they do not require the recipient to be convinced of a single version of events – it is enough to undermine trust in expert knowledge as such (Lewandowsky et al., 2017, pp. 360–362).

The internet breaks down geographical and social barriers, enabling people with marginal views to find thousands of like-minded individuals around the world. This gives them a sense of legitimacy and community, reinforcing beliefs that might be seen as deviant in a local context. Research shows that conspiracy believers drastically overestimate public support for their views (the false consensus effect), and digital communities reinforce this illusion (Zeng, Schäfer, & Oliveira, 2022; Pennycook, Binnendyk, Rand, 2025).

However, meta-analyses indicate that the relationship between social media use and belief in conspiracy theories is not simple and straightforward. Enders et al. (2021) demonstrated that social media most strongly reinforce conspiracy beliefs in individuals who already exhibit a predisposition towards conspiratorial thinking. For individuals with a low predisposition, the influence is negligible or non-existent. This means that technology acts as an accelerator and amplifier of existing tendencies rather than their primary cause.

An analysis of scientific literature leads to the conclusion that conspiracy theories are a multidimensional phenomenon, rooted in basic cognitive and social mechanisms, and that their contemporary dynamics are strongly reinforced by the information environment. Understanding these conditions is a key prerequisite for designing effective strategies to strengthen resilience and information security in the information society.

5. SELECTED EXAMPLES OF CONTEMPORARY CONSPIRACY THEORIES AND THEIR IMPACT ON SECURITY

Conspiracy theories are a permanent and dynamic element of contemporary information

Chart 1. Selected conspiracy theories in Poland

Conspiracy theory	Main claims	Counterarguments
Hiding the "cure for cancer"	There is one universal and effective cure for all cancers, which is being concealed by pharmaceutical companies for profit.	Cancer is not a single disease, but at least several dozen different diseases with different biology. A universal therapy is biologically impossible.
Vaccines as a tool of control (genome modification, chipping)	mRNA vaccines alter the human genome. Vaccines contain nanochips (e.g. 5G) for tracking and controlling the population.	mRNA does not penetrate the cell nucleus (where DNA is located), it acts in the cytoplasm and cannot integrate with the genome. A chip with the required functionality would not fit in a syringe and would be technically unfeasible.
Scepticism about vaccinations (e.g. COVID-19)	Vaccinations are dangerous, destroy natural immunity, and their effectiveness is negligible or unproven.	Vaccinations are a safe imitation of infection that trains the immune system without the risk of serious illness. They are one of the most effective public health tools in history.
NATO/EU as oppressive and colonising forces	Western alliances seek political and economic domination over their members, depriving them of their sovereignty. Support for Ukraine serves only the interests of the US, not the security of Europe.	A central element of Russian disinformation, distributed through a network of portals (e.g. NewsFront), social media and local collaborators in Europe.
The fall of demoralised Western civilisation	The West is in a state of deep crisis of values: it has abandoned tradition, family and religion, promoting "rotten" liberalism and LGBT, thereby losing its strength and moral right to leadership.	Actively promoted by Russian media and politicians as a contrast to the supposedly "traditional" and "healthy" Russian values. In Poland, reinforced by extremely conservative circles.
Russia as an invincible power	Russia, as a nuclear power and eternal superpower, is invincible. Its victory in Ukraine is inevitable, and Western resistance is pointless and harmful.	A constant theme in Kremlin propaganda, intended to intimidate opponents and discourage support for Ukraine. In Poland, it is repeated in pro-Russian messages.
Climate change as a natural cycle	The current warming is part of natural climate cycles lasting centuries or even millennia. Natural factors (solar activity, volcanoes) outweigh human influence.	The pace of change is unprecedented in at least the last 10,000 years. Climate models show that only greenhouse gas emissions from human activity can explain the observed warming.
Undermining the EU's climate policy	The EU's targets (e.g. Fit for 55, 2050 neutrality) are too ambitious, costly and harmful to the economy and energy security. The EU is losing competitiveness to China and the US.	This policy aims to mitigate the catastrophic and even more costly effects of climate change. Despite internal disputes, the EU remains a global regulator (e.g. through CBAM), although its leading position is weakening.
Attacks on activists and climate science	Activists are extremists, vandals or political puppets. Climate science is uncertain, biased or a form of "eco-dictatorship".	The scientific consensus on anthropogenic climate change is overwhelming. Activism, even when controversial, raises awareness of the problem, although radical methods can reduce support for the organisations themselves.
Harmfulness of 5G networks	5G networks are harmful to health (cancer, DNA damage). 5G causes or activates COVID-19. 5G is a military weapon for espionage.	5G radiation is non-ionising and does not damage DNA. No evidence of a link to COVID-19; viruses are not transmitted by radio waves. Safety standards are established and adhered to (e.g. 10 W/m ² limit in Poland).
False flag operations	Terrorist attacks or armed incidents are in fact provocations carried out by governments or internal forces to achieve political gains (e.g. to declare a state of emergency or start a war).	No credible evidence for specific accusations. The method involves selectively combining facts and creating a seemingly coherent but false cause-and-effect narrative.
The "deep state" controlling the pandemic	The COVID-19 pandemic was planned or is being exploited by hidden groups (the "deep state", global elites) to introduce totalitarian control over society (compulsory vaccination, restriction of freedoms).	The pandemic has a scientifically confirmed natural origin (the SARS-CoV-2 virus). Government actions (lockdowns, vaccinations) are responses to a real threat to public health, based on scientific advice.

Source: author's own elaboration.

An analysis of the consequences of contemporary conspiracy theories, regardless of their thematic roots, indicates that their fundamental significance is revealed not at the level of content, but at the level of their impact on the security of individuals and the stability of the state system. They serve as alternative interpretative frameworks for reality that compete with scientific and institutional knowledge, leading to lasting cognitive and normative deformations (Kuś, 2024; Wenzel, 2024).

From the perspective of individual security, the internalisation of conspiracy narratives reduces the ability to rationally assess risk and make decisions based on expert knowledge. People who accept conspiracy narratives are more likely to reject medical recommendations, undermine the authority of doctors and health care institutions, and seek alternative, unproven forms of help (Makowska, Ozaki, Boguszewski, 2025). The individual consequence is an increased risk of illness and complications for individuals who succumb to these narratives. On a macro scale, this effect accumulates, leading to lower vaccination rates and erosion of herd immunity, which poses a challenge to the healthcare system, increases treatment costs and puts entire social groups at risk, including those who cannot be vaccinated. In Poland, belief in conspiracy theories is one of the significant factors associated with vaccine refusal (Jankowiak, 2022; Wilczek, Ciesek-Ślizowska, 2025). Distrust of scientific and medical institutions creates fertile ground for broader political narratives.

These consequences are particularly significant in the collective dimension, where conspiracy theories contribute to the erosion of social trust, which is one of the key resources for state security. The systematic undermining of the credibility of public institutions, science and the media contributes to the delegitimisation of the state as a guarantor of security and social order (see Goban-Klas, Sienkiewicz, 1999; Wasiuta, Wasiuta, 2019). In such an environment, acceptance of anti-system narratives grows, and citizens increasingly perceive the actions of the authorities not as part of protecting the public interest, but as a form of oppression or manipulation.

Theories presenting NATO and the EU as oppressive forces and the West as demoralised serve the strategic goal of weakening Poland's internal and allied cohesion. The consequence at the individual and group level is the radicalisation of views and the polarisation of society, which makes it difficult to reach a national consensus on key security issues. At the state level, the result is the erosion of the legitimacy of membership in the transatlantic alliance and the EU, which are the pillars of Polish security policy. The narrative of an "invincible Russia" further introduces defeatism and paralyses the will to resist, undermining the sense of defense investments and support for threatened partners such as Ukraine. This directly weakens the country's international position and its ability to deter potential aggressors. Geopolitical and anti-Western narratives increase the vulnerability of society to hostile information operations and cognitive warfare activities (see Wasiuta, Wasiuta, 2019; Jankowiak, 2022). Perpetuating an image of the world based on the "us-them" dichotomy promotes social polarisation (Grzyb, Wojciszke, 2024), weakens the cohesion of the political community and limits the state's ability to build consensus around strategic security policy directions.

Similar effects can be observed in the case of climate and technological disinformation, which lead to decision-making paralysis, resistance to adaptation measures and increased distrust of experts and regulatory institutions. Climate disinformation has a negative impact on the pace of energy transition and on the state's

ability to become independent of external pressure on raw materials. Questioning the scientific consensus on anthropogenic climate change and undermining the legitimacy of EU climate policy delays the modernisation of the energy sector, which has become particularly important since Russia's aggression against Ukraine in 2022. The reduction in gas and oil supplies to EU countries has highlighted that the lack of diversification of energy sources and delays in the development of renewable energy sources and energy efficiency pose a real threat to the security of Member States.

At the individual level, climate misinformation translates into a decline in public acceptance of investments related to renewable energy sources, transmission infrastructure and thermal modernisation measures, which hinders the implementation of local and regional projects to increase energy resilience. At the national level, the result is continued structural dependence on fossil fuel imports, which, as events after 2022 have shown, can be exploited as a tool for political and economic pressure.

Finally, technological and crisis theories attack security by undermining trust in critical infrastructure and the state in emergency situations. False narratives about the harmfulness of 5G, in addition to generating individual fears, have a measurable effect in the form of real attacks on physical telecommunications infrastructure, which disrupts communications and can hinder the operation of emergency services. Theories about the "deep state" or false flag operations during pandemics or armed incidents lead to a profound erosion of public trust in state institutions. As a result, citizens may not only evade recommendations in a crisis situation, but also begin to question official communications and actions by the authorities in the face of a real threat, such as a natural disaster or a hybrid attack. This paralyses the state's ability to effectively manage crises and protect citizens, and also makes society more susceptible to manipulation and external provocations.

Overall, conspiracy theories circulating in the public domain should therefore be treated as a significant factor destabilising the security of modern information societies. Their impact extends beyond individual beliefs, affecting the state of public debate, the level of institutional trust, and the state's ability to perform its basic protective and defensive functions. In the context of intense infodemic, conspiracy theories become not only a symptom of the information crisis, but also an active factor exacerbating threats to individual and collective security.

6. CONCLUSION

Conspiracy theories should be seen not as a marginal element of contemporary information culture, but as an important narrative component of the information society, which directly and indirectly affects the security of individuals and the stability of the state. Conspiracy theories not only provide an interpretation of social reality in terms of threat and hidden intentionality, but also actively contribute to the creation of new areas of risk, undermining trust in public institutions, scientific knowledge and democratic procedures.

The analysis has shown that the impact of conspiracy theories is multi-layered. At the individual level, it leads to cognitive distortion, increased anxiety and a reduced ability to assess risk rationally, which directly translates into decisions about health, personal safety and participation in social life. In the collective dimension, it results in the erosion of social trust, polarisation and a weakening of information resilience, which is one of the key pillars of national security in the context of contemporary hybrid threats. Of particular importance here is the feedback loop between conspiracy narratives and the digital environment, where algorithmisation of

communication and the attention economy favour the escalation of emotional and antagonistic content.

In light of the above findings, countering conspiracy theories cannot be limited to isolated or purely reactive measures. It requires an integrated approach that simultaneously encompasses information education, strengthening the cognitive and emotional competence of individuals, responsible institutional communication, and systemic solutions in the area of information security. Of key importance here is building long-term social resilience, understood as the ability to function in conditions of uncertainty, interpretative pluralism and information overload without resorting to simplified, untrue explanations of reality. Conspiracy theories thus reveal a tension characteristic of the information society: between the need for meaning and control and the complexity and unpredictability of the modern world. Understanding this tension is a prerequisite for both effective practical action and further development of security research in the information age.

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