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Conspiracy beliefs in Britain and North Macedonia: A comparative study

Abstract

The psychological research on conspiracy beliefs to date has focused predominantly on conspiracy beliefs in Western democracies. The current study sought to fill this gap by examining beliefs in conspiracy theories in a democratic society and a society in transition. British ($N=298$) and Macedonian ($N=312$) participants completed an online questionnaire measuring conspiracy beliefs, trust in media and institutions and support for democratic principles. Macedonian participants endorsed conspiracy theories more than British. In addition, support for democratic principles, low trust in institutions and media were significant predictors of conspiracy beliefs. The relationship between trust and conspiracy beliefs was moderated by country, such that it was significantly stronger in the British group. This study draws attention to the need for cross-societal research on belief in conspiracy theories.

Keywords: conspiracy theories, democracy, transition, authoritarianism, predictors, conspiracy beliefs, support for democratic principles, trust

Introduction

Conspiracy theories propose that significant social and political events such as the assassination of President John F. Kennedy, the 9/11 attacks, and the disappearance of Malaysia Flight MH370 are the result of secret malevolent plots by (typically powerful) groups and usually contradict the explanations offered by the relevant epistemic authorities (Douglas et al., 2019; Stojanov & Halberstadt, 2019). Psychological research on conspiracy theories has expanded significantly in recent years, and much is now known about the demographics, personality characteristics and cognitive factors that predict conspiracy belief (Douglas, et al, 2017). Research has also revealed that conspiracy theories can decrease engagement with politics, health, the environment, and the workplace (e.g., Douglas, 2021). However, although much is known about the psychological predictors and consequences of conspiracy beliefs, the majority of studies to date have been conducted with participants living in Western democracies, with rare exceptions such as China (van Prooijen & Song, 2020), Malaysia (Swami, 2012), Indonesia (Mashuri and Zaduqisti, 2015), Serbia (Lukić, et al, 2019) and North Macedonia (Stojanov, 2015). There are even fewer studies comparing conspiracy beliefs and their predictors cross culturally (Hornsey et al, 2018; Adam-Troian et al., 2021) and those that do exist sometimes compare similar political systems (Drochon, 2018). Therefore, the current study sought address two questions: (1) Are conspiracy beliefs higher in a society in transition compared to a democratic society? and (2) Are common psychological predictors of conspiracy beliefs consistent and equivalent across the two societies?

North Macedonia is classified as a hybrid regime, that is, a system that combines democratic and autocratic elements (Hale, 2010), For example, democracy in North Macedonia has been equated with voting during elections but minimal involvement of the citizens in

creating state policies (Блажевска (Blazhevsk), 2014). The country has been ranked partly free in the Freedom House 2015 report, and “political interference in the work of the judiciary” has been noted in the 2015 European Commission Progress Report (p.5). Also, conspiracy theories in North Macedonia are a common feature of political discourse – a characteristic of authoritarian regimes that tend to blame external forces for internal problems (Giry & Gürpınar, 2020). Britain, on the other hand, has a centuries long process of democratization at its core, which has led to free elections and safeguarding of freedoms of speech, association and press (Garrard, 2002). Therefore, the hybrid context in North Macedonia and the socialist system background provides a counterpoint to the long-standing democratic tradition of the UK and a valuable sample for comparison of beliefs in conspiracy theories.

The extent to which people believe in conspiracy theories may depend on the organizational system of the society in which they live (e.g., democratic vs. hybrid). For example, in open societies that practice transparency and that are characterized by free media, an independent legal system and a strong civil society, conspiracy theories might be less likely to flourish (Moore, 2016) compared to societies where people get mixed messages (i.e., free elections but with irregularities), experience uncertainty, have low confidence in institutions and have an impaired sense of personal responsibility, and where they would be more likely to blame external agents for negative events (Abed, 2005). In such societies, people might be more likely to turn to conspiracy theories to explain their lack of power and the position the country is in. However, the greater transparency of the government in democratic societies might lead to conspiracy beliefs by arousing suspicion (Nyhan et al., 2016). Likewise, over-saturation with information in open societies might lead to uncertainty and thus foster conspiracy beliefs (van Prooijen & Jostman 2013). Nevertheless, empirical studies to date suggest that conspiracy beliefs

should be more prevalent in less democratic societies. For example, Bruder et al. (2013) found that Turkish respondents scored higher on a measure of conspiracy beliefs compared to German or British/US participants. Furthermore, van Prooijen and de Vries (2016) found that employees who have despotic leaders (i.e., those that behave in an authoritarian manner and contribute to feelings of uncertainty in employees) believe to a greater extent that conspiracies are occurring in their workplace. In addition, conspiracy theories have been discussed in the context of authoritarian societies and the functions they may serve such as legitimizing and reinforcing authoritarian rule (Giry & Gürpınar, 2020). Thus, based on the empirical work to date, as well as theoretical discussion we expect conspiracy belief to be higher in the hybrid context of North Macedonia than the more democratic context of Britain.

Furthermore, the psychological predictors of conspiracy beliefs in Western democracies may not operate in the same way in other political systems. For example, support for democratic principles has been found to be robust predictor of conspiracy beliefs in western democracies (e.g. Swami et al ,2010; , because presumably questioning authorities and holding them accountable , a hallmark of democracy and a value in democracies, is also a hallmark of conspiracy theories: questioning the “official story”. Also, as conspiracy theories are propagated by the minority and pertain to a minority (often marginalized) views and opinions, it is conceivable that conspiracy theorists should support democratic principles because this guarantees their freedom of speech. On the other hand, in less democratic societies, conspiracy theories usually pertain to external enemies, are disseminated by the authorities (Giry & Gürpınar, 2020) and refer to an outgroup, thus they stem from the top and are directed towards a scapegoat (as opposed to conspiracy theories in western societies that arise from the masses and are directed towards those in power). As such, espousing these conspiracies seems to be

officially sanctioned and encouraged, thus supporting, or not supporting democratic principles does not seem to be functional for belief in conspiracy theories. . Therefore, we predict that support for democratic principles will not emerge (or be significantly weaker) as a predictor of conspiracy beliefs in North Macedonia.

Other, thus far unexamined variables in the literature may also relate differently to conspiracy theories in both countries. One example is trust in the media. We reasoned that distrusting media feeds into the epistemological doubts that lead to conspiracy beliefs (Franks et al, 2017) and thus expected low trust in media to predict higher conspiracy beliefs. However, given that in North Macedonia there is tradition of state-controlled media space and journalism is highly politicized (Georgieva et al., 2015) we reasoned that trust in media would be at floor levels, and thus a weaker (or non-significant) predictor of conspiracy beliefs, because people will tend to disbelieve media regardless of their belief in conspiracy theories. We have similar expectations for trust in institutions. Due to high corruption (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, 2011) and politicization of institutions (Saliu, 2016) in North Macedonia, we expected that trust in institutions would not be as strong a predictor of conspiracy beliefs in North Macedonia since people will tend not to trust the institutions regardless of their conspiracy beliefs. On the other hand, based on previous findings with western democracies (e.g., Goertzel, 1994) we expected to observe stronger relationship among the Britons.

In the current research, participants from North Macedonia and the UK completed scales of conspiracy beliefs, and also scales measuring the psychological predictors highlighted in this introduction¹. We also controlled for demographic variables such as age and gender as well as political ideology as previous studies have found relationship between right wing ideology and

¹ We also administered other scales (Socio-political control, left-wing authoritarianism, right-wing authoritarianism, collective narcissism and paranoia), but these variables were included as part of another study.

conspiracy beliefs (van Prooijen et al., 2015). We hypothesized that conspiracy beliefs would be higher in Macedonian participants, and that the relationship between trust and conspiracy beliefs, as well as between support for democratic principles and conspiracy beliefs would be stronger in British participants.

Method

Participants

A total of 725 participants (340 in the British group and 385 in the Macedonian group) completed an online questionnaire. However, 46 participants (25 from the Macedonian and 21 from the British group) were excluded because they did not report their nationality or reported it as other than Macedonian or British. A further 57 participants (38 from the Macedonian and 19 from the British group) were excluded because they failed one or both attention checks (To make sure you are reading this please select "definitely true") and 12 participants (eight from the Macedonian and four from the British group) were excluded because their location at the time of taking the survey was other than Britain or Macedonia. This left a total of 610 participants – 298 British (95 males, 199 females, four did not disclose their gender) and 312 Macedonian (85 males, 227 females). The mean age of the British subsample was 34.42 years (range 18 – 68 years) and for the Macedonian sample 29.13 years (range 17-63 years).

The British participants were either undergraduate students from a British university, who participated for partial course credit, or participants recruited from Prolific– an online crowdsourcing platform similar to Amazon’s Mechanical Turk. The Macedonian participants were recruited by sharing the questionnaire on social media such as Facebook and Twitter, by contacting university professors and asking them to share the link with their students and by sharing the link with a Macedonian market research organization participant database (which

consists of about 500 entries). As an incentive for the Macedonian participants, they were entered into a draw in which seven winners received a gift card for a local shopping mall.

Materials and Procedure

Two individuals fluent in both English and Macedonian translated the instruments into Macedonian. Any disagreement in wording between the translators was settled by discussing the subtle differences with a native English speaker and deciding on the most suitable word choice. The two versions of the survey were set up in the online platform Qualtrics. The order of presentation of the scales was randomized, except for the three measures of conspiracy beliefs, which always appeared at the end of the questionnaire (but presented in random order). Before completing the survey, participants gave their informed consent and on completion of the study, participants were debriefed and thanked. Where appropriate, they were paid or awarded their participation credit.

Conspiracy beliefs

A challenge for the current research was to decide upon scales to measure conspiracy beliefs in both countries. Much of the research on conspiracy beliefs has been conducted in Western democracies (see Douglas et al., 2019 for a review), and measures have often been designed with specific conspiracy theories and specific contexts in mind (e.g., about the death of Princess Diana; Douglas & Sutton, 2008). However, there are three scales measuring conspiracy beliefs on which responses are supposed to be culturally invariant (Bruder et al, 2013; Brotherton et al, 2013; Lantian et al, 2016). These scales have good internal reliability, and good content, convergent, discriminant and predictive validity (however see Swami, et al., 2017 for some concerns). As none of the scales had a clear advantage over the other and given the rare

opportunity to collect cross cultural data, we decided to employ all three measures as a way to test the robustness of the results.

The Generic Conspiracist Beliefs Scale (GCBS; Brotherton et al., 2013) consisted of 15 items. It measures the tendency to believe in generic conspiracies and the items are free from specific conspiracy theory content. A sample item was “A small, secret group of people is responsible for making all major world decisions, such as going to war”. The participants gave their answer on a five-point scale ranging from 1 = definitely not true to 5 = definitely true; $\alpha_{\text{Overall}} = 0.87$ ($\alpha_{\text{British}} = 0.93$; $\alpha_{\text{Macedonian}} = 0.71$). Higher scores indicated higher beliefs.

The second measure was the Conspiracy Mentality Questionnaire (CMQ; Bruder et al., 2013). This scale also measured generic conspiracist beliefs. A sample item was “I think that events which superficially seem to lack a connection are often the result of secret activities”. The participants gave their answers on an 11-point scale, ranging from 0 (0% - certainly not) to 10 (100% certain); $\alpha_{\text{Overall}} = 0.82$ ($\alpha_{\text{British}} = 0.83$; $\alpha_{\text{Macedonian}} = 0.75$). Higher scores indicated higher beliefs.

The third measure was the Single-Item Conspiracy Belief Scale (SICBS; Lantian et al., 2016). The participants read that “Some political and social events are debated (for example 9/11 attacks, the death of Lady Diana, the assassination of John F. Kennedy). It is suggested that the “official version” of these events could be an attempt to hide the truth to the public. This “official version” could mask the fact that these events have been planned and secretly prepared by a covert alliance of powerful individuals or organizations (for example secret services or government). What do you think? To answer, please indicate to what extent the sentence below represents how you think about this.” Then participants indicated on a nine-point scale (1 =

completely false, 9 = completely true) whether they “(I) think that the official version of the events given by the authorities very often hides the truth.”

Support for democratic principles

Support for democratic principles (Kaase, 1971) was measured using a nine-item six-point Likert type scale (1 = full agreement, 6 = complete rejection). Example items are “Every citizen has the right to take his/her convictions to the street if necessary” and “It is not conceivable to have a viable democracy without a political opposition”. The items that required recoding were re-coded in such a way that higher scores indicated higher support for democratic principles. Due to measurement non-invariance issues, an average score for items one, two, three and eight was calculated only (see Supplementary Materials); $\alpha_{\text{Overall}} = 0.68$ ($\alpha_{\text{British}} = 0.61$; $\alpha_{\text{Macedonian}} = 0.71$).

Trust in institutions

A four-item scale was used to obtain an index measure of trust in institutions (“I have trust in the legal system”, “I have trust in the parliament”, “I have trust in the police”, “I have trust in the civil service”). Higher scores indicated higher trust in the institutions. The scale was anchored at 1 = strongly disagree and 6 = strongly agree; $\alpha_{\text{Overall}} = 0.90$ ($\alpha_{\text{British}} = 0.86$; $\alpha_{\text{Macedonian}} = 0.89$).

Trust in media

A bipolar scale used in Quenette (2013) based on Tsfati (2010) was administered to measure trust in media. A sample item was “Do you believe journalists incorporate a specific partisan agenda in their reporting or are their stories unbiased?” Participants were asked to indicate their answer on a seven-point scale with the two options at each extreme of the scale.

The answers were coded on a 1 to 7 scale, so that higher scores indicated higher trust in media, $\alpha_{\text{Overall}} = 0.77$ ($\alpha_{\text{British}} = 0.83$; $\alpha_{\text{Macedonian}} = 0.65$).

Demographic information such as political ideology (“On a scale ranging from -3 to +3 indicate your political orientation in a sense whether you find closer to left-wing ideas, or right-wing ideas, where -3 stands for extreme left wing and +3 extreme right wing”), age and gender was also collected. Intermixed among the items of the scales were two attention check items.

Results

Measurement Invariance

Given that participants came from two distinct cultures and that the instruments needed to be translated into the Macedonian language, a question arises whether the instruments measure the same construct in both samples, that is, whether the items have the same meaning and are thus valid measures in both contexts (Smallpage et al. 2020). Therefore, before proceeding with the main analysis, we addressed the question of measurement invariance. In particular, we focused on configural and metric invariance for the predictors (as for comparison of regression coefficients only metric invariance is needed), and scalar for the conspiracy belief scales (as for comparison of difference in means scalar invariance is needed).

In most cases (GCBS, CMQ, trust in institutions, trust in media), metric invariance (equivalence of factor loadings) was established. However, in the case of support for democratic principles, only partial configural and metric invariance was established, and slight adjustments were made to the scales to achieve invariance and proceed with the main analyses. However, we did not manage to establish partial or full scalar invariance (equivalence of the intercept of the regression slopes that represent the association between the items and the latent construct they measure) for the CMQ, and thus we were unable to test the hypothesis that beliefs in conspiracy

theories are higher in North Macedonia compared to Britain as operationalized with this scale (though metric invariance was met and we included this scale in the regression analysis). All analyses testing measurement invariance are presented in the Supplementary Materials.

Comparison of Conspiracy Beliefs Across Cultures

Testing our first hypothesis, conspiracy beliefs, operationalized as a score on the single item scale, were higher in the Macedonian group ($M= 7.10$; $SD=1.76$) compared to the British ($M=5.15$, $SD=2.20$) and the difference was significant, $t(608) = -12.12$, $p < 0.0001$, $d = 0.98$. Similarly, when operationalized as a score on the GCBS the Macedonian group ($M= 3.13$, $SD = 0.58$) reported higher conspiracy beliefs than the British group ($M= 2.49$, $SD= 0.78$) and the difference was significant $t(608) = -11.56$, $p < 0.0001$, $d=0.93$. These results remained the same even when we controlled for age, gender and political ideology.

Predictors of Conspiracy Beliefs Across Cultures

Means, standard deviations and the intercorrelations between the variables for each subsample are given in Table 1 and 2.

To test the hypothesis about differences in slopes (metric invariance for the three scales was obtained, see Supplementary Materials), we first conducted a factor analysis on the three conspiracy scales and used the obtained factor scores as a dependent variable in the subsequent analysis. The factor analysis enabled us to extract the overlapping information about belief in conspiracy theories obtained with each scale and get a “cleaner” measure of conspiracy beliefs. The factor loadings ranged from 0.76 to 0.89.

Next, we conducted hierarchical regression analysis. In the first step (Model 1 in Table 3) we entered the demographic variables, age, gender and political ideology, as well as support for

democratic principles, trust in media and institutions, and group (British =0, Macedonian =1). In the next step, we added the interaction terms (see Model 2 in Table 3).

As seen in Table 3 (Model 2), support for democratic principles was a significant positive predictor, while trust in institutions was negative predictor; group moderated only the relationship with trust in institutions.

Simple slopes analysis (see Figure 1) indicated that the relationship between trust in institutions and conspiracy beliefs was stronger in the British group, $B = -0.36, p < 0.01$, compared to the Macedonian, $B = -0.10, p = 0.06$.

Figure 1. Simple slope analysis of the interaction between trust in institutions and group on conspiracy beliefs

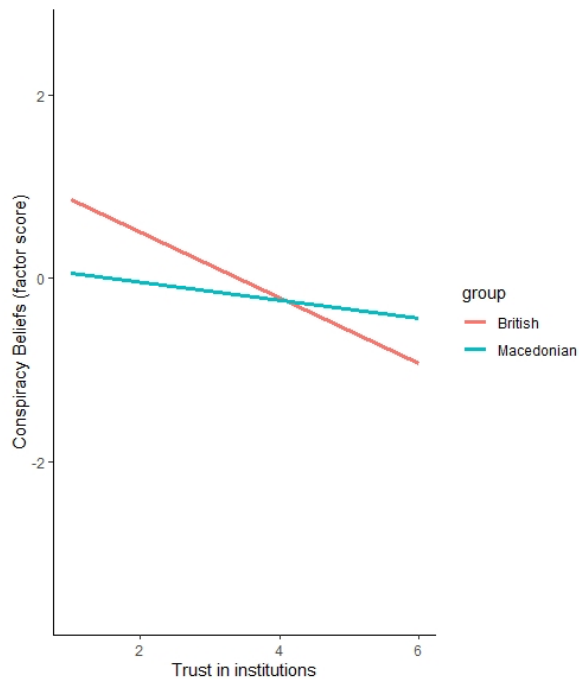


Table 1. Means, standard deviations, and the intercorrelations of the main variables for the British group

	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
1. Conspiracy beliefs (Factor score)	-	-	1									
2. Conspiracy beliefs (GCB)	2.49	0.78	0.89**	1								
3. Conspiracy beliefs (CMQ)	7.02	1.80	0.74**	.69**	1							
4. Conspiracy beliefs (Single item)	5.15	2.19	0.84**	.63**	.59**	1						
5. Trust in institutions	3.48	1.06	-0.43**	-.38**	-.39**	-.35**	1					
6. Trust in media	2.95	1.05	-0.24**	-.21**	-.28**	-.15**	.48**	1				
7. SDP	2.19	0.73	0.07	.12*	0.02	0.04	0.10	.16**	1			
8. Age	34.42	11.87	-0.50	-0.08	-0.08	0.03	0.06	0.07	-.24**	1		
9. Gender	-	-	-0.03	-0.01	-0.04	0.04	-0.05	-0.04	0.10	0.08	1	
10. Political ideology	-0.58	1.23	0.16**	-.12*	-.17**	-.12*	.29**	.24**	.26**	.13*	-0.05	1

Note: ** $p < 0.01$, * $p < 0.05$

Table 2. Means, standard deviations, and the intercorrelations of the main variables for the Macedonian group

	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
1. Conspiracy beliefs (Factor score)	-	-	1									
2. Conspiracy beliefs (GCB)	3.13	0.58	0.76**	1								
3. Conspiracy beliefs (CMQ)	8.53	1.48	0.82**	.46**	1							
4. Conspiracy beliefs (Single item)	7.10	1.76	0.77**	.36**	.48**	1						
5. Trust in institutions	2.18	1.17	-0.14*	-0.09	-.17**	-0.08	1					
6. Trust in media	2.30	0.91	-0.22**	-.11*	-.21**	-.19**	.36**	1				
7. SDP	1.80	0.90	0.14*	.20**	0.05	0.09	.13*	.13*	1			
8. Age	29.13	10.68	-0.13*	-0.09	-.13*	-0.09	0.02	0.09	-.13*	1		
9. Gender	-	-	0.02	0.06	-0.03	0.02	-0.04	0.01	0.10	-.11*	1	
10. Political ideology	-0.40	1.23	-0.01	0.02	-0.04	0.01	.38**	.27**	.17**	0.01	-0.09	1

Note: ** $p < 0.01$, * $p < 0.05$

Table 3. Hierarchical regression analysis with Factor scores as DV

Model 1	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	β	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
(Constant)	0.95	0.27		3.53	0.00
Gender	-0.04	0.09	-0.02	-0.52	0.61
Age	0.00	0.00	-0.04	-1.04	0.30
Political ideology	0.00	0.03	0.00	0.08	0.94
Trust in institutions	-0.20	0.04	-0.26	-5.09	0.00
Trust in media	-0.16	0.04	-0.16	-3.62	0.00
Support for democratic principles	0.18	0.05	0.16	3.76	0.00
Group	-0.30	0.10	-0.15	-3.11	0.00
Model 2	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	β	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
(Constant)	1.02	0.38		2.67	0.01
Gender	-0.10	0.12	-0.05	-0.83	0.41
Age	0.00	0.01	0.03	0.52	0.60
Political ideology	-0.06	0.05	-0.08	-1.30	0.20
Trust in institutions	-0.36	0.06	-0.47	-6.01	0.00
Trust in media	-0.06	0.06	-0.07	-1.06	0.29
Support for democratic principles	0.21	0.08	0.18	2.54	0.01
Group	-0.32	0.50	-0.16	-0.64	0.52
Group x Trust in institutions	0.26	0.08	0.36	3.32	0.00
Group x Trust in media	-0.16	0.09	-0.21	-1.86	0.06
Group x Support for democratic principles	-0.03	0.10	-0.03	-0.28	0.78
Group x Age	-0.01	0.01	-0.18	-1.57	0.12
Group x Gender	0.09	0.17	0.08	0.51	0.61
Group x Ideology	0.12	0.07	0.10	1.68	0.09

Discussion

This study examined cross-cultural differences in conspiracy belief between participants from North Macedonia and Britain. Three different measures of beliefs in conspiracy theories were used. It was predicted that Macedonian participants would score higher on conspiracy beliefs, which the results confirmed. We also examined and compared three predictors of conspiracy beliefs across the groups. We predicted that trust in institutions would be significantly weaker predictor of conspiracy beliefs in the Macedonian group and this was confirmed, but our hypothesis that the same would be true for trust in the media was not. We found no support for the hypothesis that support for democratic principles would predict conspiracy beliefs in Britain but not in Macedonia.

To test for differences in conspiracy beliefs we needed to establish scalar invariance, which we managed to do only for the GCBS (as the single item scale consists of single item, scalar invariance is not relevant). This means that we were not able to compare conspiracy beliefs as measured with the CMQ. One reason for this is that the scale items may not reflect conspiracist beliefs in both samples equally. For example, as Swami and colleagues argued (Swami et al., 2017, see also Stojanov & Halberstadt, 2019) some of the items reflect factual knowledge, not conspiracist beliefs (e.g. “Government agencies closely monitor all citizens.”). But even factual items such as this may convey different meaning to participants coming from a post-communist country, where such activities were routinely carried out and are understood to be “normal” and expected part of everyday life. On the other hand, for participants coming from countries with democratic traditions such activities might be considered a political scandal. Nevertheless, conspiracy belief comparisons using the two other scales revealed that they are believed to a higher extent in North Macedonia compared to the UK. As argued in the introduction, this was expected given that conspiracy beliefs are a hallmark of authoritarian societies, and being hybrid regime, North Macedonia has both authoritarian and democratic features.

We ran hierarchical regressions to establish the significant predictors of conspiracy beliefs, and we also examined the moderating role of country. Support for democratic principles emerged as significant positive predictor, and trust in media and institutions as negative. Moderation analysis provided support for our hypothesis that trust in institutions would be a stronger negative predictor in the British sample. We did not find evidence to support the hypothesis that trust in media and support for democratic principles would be a stronger predictor in the British sample. Lowering of trust in the media in democratic societies may be one reason for this finding (Newman & Fletcher, 2017).

One reason why our hypotheses concerning the relation between conspiracy belief and support for democratic principles was not supported might be due to the measurement instrument itself. For example, the internal consistency of the support for democratic principles scale was rather low, thus making the findings questionable. In addition, measurement invariance issues made it impossible to use the whole scale, so these conclusions are not based on the full scale. Of course, it is also possible that lack of moderation stems from the relationship between conspiracy beliefs and support for democratic principles being equally strong in both societies.

The importance of this study is that it focuses on conspiracy beliefs in two societies with different political backgrounds and draws attention to the need to further explore conspiracy beliefs cross-culturally and in different political systems. However, one limitation of this study is the sampling method. Specifically, the British and Macedonian samples were not nationally representative. Also, the sampling methods used to recruit participants for each group were not equivalent. While for the British group the sample was obtained predominantly from Prolific, with participants from the relevant university student pool, for the Macedonian participants several different sampling strategies were used: distribution over the survey to university students, and distribution of the survey over social media and distribution using a local market research agency. Nevertheless, the samples do not differ in a systematic way. In fact, the different strategies used to obtain the Macedonian sample ensured that there were participants representing a variety of ages,

education and living area (urban and rural). To minimize the impact of the sampling strategies we also controlled for age, gender and political ideology. In addition, since this study was conducted more as a preliminary investigation rather than to uncover generalizable differences between national groups in conspiracy beliefs, we believe its insights are valuable to researchers and inform them about the cross-cultural dimensions of beliefs in conspiracy theories and as such will stimulate further research.

Another limitation is that we only focused on three predictors, but there are many potential others, such as social dominance orientation and power distance. Whether the results will hold after controlling for other such variables is an empirical matter that future studies should answer. Related to this issue, we only focused on two societies. We only had access to British and Macedonian participants and were therefore unable to include other countries. It may be argued that Macedonia, as a society in transition characterized by both autocratic and democratic elements, may be at the middle of a continuum, whose one extreme might be represented by Britain and the other, say, by North Korea. Thus, future research may look at conspiracy beliefs in political systems that are located further towards the extremes.

The current findings underscore the importance of cross-cultural research on conspiracy beliefs. In particular, this study offered some evidence that conspiracy beliefs may not be constant across societies, and that the relationship between trust in institutions and conspiracy beliefs may be stronger in more democratic (vs. hybrid regime) context. Future research should acknowledge cross-cultural differences in the predictors of conspiracy beliefs.

Ethical Compliance Section

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All procedures performed in studies involving human participants were in accordance with the ethical standards of the University of Kent and with the 1964 Helsinki Declaration and its later amendments or comparable ethical standards.

The authors declare they have no conflict of interest.

Informed consent was obtained from all individual adult participants included in the study.

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