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Conspiracy in Crisis

Representative Surveys on Belief in Conspiracy
Theories before and during the Covid-19 Crisis

Jochen Roose



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At a Glance

Conspiracy theories have gained special attention in the Covid-19 crisis. For instance, the impression emerged of a widely held belief in a Covid-19 conspiracy, according to which the virus was fabricated or its danger far exaggerated. Further, it was assumed that belief in conspiracy theories has increased significantly in the course of the Covid-19 crisis. The Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung investigated both questions in representative surveys.

Spread of Belief in a Covid-19 Conspiracy

- › 5 percent of the population consider the statement regarding a Covid-19 conspiracy (“The Coronavirus is only a pretext to oppress people.”) to be certainly true. Another 9 percent believe this statement is likely true.
- › Two thirds (66 percent) consider the statement regarding a Covid-19 conspiracy to be certainly false.
- › People with lower formal educational qualifications more frequently consider the statement regarding a Covid-19 conspiracy to be true than people with higher formal educational qualifications.
- › Supporters of the extreme right AfD consider the statement to be true far more frequently than supporters of other political parties.

Change in Belief in a Global Conspiracy

- › During the Covid-19 crisis, 8 percent of the population stated that they consider the statement regarding a global conspiracy (“There are secret powers that control the world.”) to be certainly true. Another 16 percent consider the statement to be likely true.
- › Belief in a global conspiracy theory has not increased in the Covid-19 crisis. In the months before the Covid-19 pandemic became a major topic in the German public, 11 percent of the population consider the statement regarding a global conspiracy theory to be certainly true; this figure is 8 percent in the Covid-19 crisis. Prior to the Covid-19 crisis, 19 percent consider the same statement to be likely true, while 16 percent do in the Covid-19 crisis.
- › There is still no gender difference or difference between Eastern and Western Germany in the distribution of belief in a global conspiracy. As was previously the case, more people with a migration background believe in a global conspiracy than people without a migration background.

- › Among AfD supporters, the share of people who consider a global conspiracy to be likely or certainly true has increased. Among supporters of Christian democrats CDU/CSU and social democrats SPD, the belief in a global conspiracy in the Covid-19 crisis has declined more strongly compared to the period before than in the overall population.

Contextualising Belief in a Covid-19 Conspiracy

- › People who believe in a Covid-19 conspiracy are more likely to think a global conspiracy is also probable than the overall population.
- › People in more difficult living conditions, who have been unemployed for a prolonged period of time and struggle to get by with their household income, more frequently consider a Covid-19 conspiracy to be likely or certainly true.
- › People who have experienced serious financial and personal stress as a result of the Covid-19 crisis, who perceive greater time pressure in the crisis and who generally struggle to deal with the crisis (according to their own statements), more frequently consider a Covid-19 conspiracy to be likely or certainly true.
- › People who consider a Covid-19 conspiracy to be likely or certainly true use public media and newspapers for political news to a lesser extent. They place less trust in public media than others.

Many people consider a conspiracy theory to be conceivable or are even convinced of one. However, conspiracy theories are false (this is evident in the exaggerated chances to control and the theory's internal contradictions); they are false accusations regarding the alleged conspirators. Countering them is a societal responsibility. Conspiracy theories must generally be rejected, while doubt in factual statements should be met with sincerity and arguments. Precisely distinguishing between conspiracy theory and doubt is key in order not to fuel the victim narrative of conspiracy theorists unintentionally.

The Study

The analysis is based on two telephone surveys. Prior to the Covid-19 crisis, a total of 3,250 people were surveyed with a dual frame approach (40 percent mobile network, 60 percent landline network) from October 2019 to February 2020. During the Covid-19 crisis, a total of 1,521 people were likewise surveyed with a dual frame approach (40 percent mobile network, 60 percent landline network) from August to September 2020, of which 522 respondents are from the federal states Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania, Brandenburg, Saxony-Anhalt, Saxony and Thuringia. The data is weighed according to socio-structural characteristics and data for whole Germany is weighed to correct for the higher numbers of interviewed in East Germany. Both surveys were conducted by the survey institute Infratest dimap. The results of the two surveys are representative of the population in Germany eligible to vote.

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Covid-19 Pandemic and Belief in Conspiracy Theory

The Covid-19 pandemic is putting our society under stress in many respects. The pandemic is demanding a lot from people. Some of these demands have been formulated as behavioural norms and moral appeals, while others have been imposed as regulations. At the same time, not every measure can be a precise fit due to the limited and dynamically changing state of knowledge.

Opposition to the measures for containing the pandemic is therefore little wonder – and indeed expectable in an open society. The demonstrations against some of the restrictions and regulations imposed due to the Covid-19 crisis should therefore come as no surprise. However, some of the reasons stated by protestors have caused irritation. Doubts were not directed against the appropriateness or proportionality of the measures, but against their rationale: the existence or danger of the pandemic itself. Moreover, conspiracy theorists claim that the pandemic is simply a pretext for achieving other sinister objectives. In short, the justification for rejecting the measures imposed for containing the pandemic can be regarded as a conspiracy theory.

Of course, the situation is more complex. At public protests, a wide range of different actors come together with heterogeneous motives. Some criticise individual measures, without rejecting the goal of combatting the pandemic itself. Right-wing extremists have evidently used the protests to express their disdain for the state and society, thereby misappropriating the occasion of a demonstration. Undoubtedly, however, a not insignificant portion of the demonstrators were actually convinced that the SARS-CoV-2 virus does not exist or that it is less dangerous and that the measures against the Covid-19 pandemic are part of a global conspiracy.

Protests draw particular attention to individual topics. Yet, it is unclear how prevalently the represented views and demands are held in the population. The demonstrations raise two questions. On the one hand, the question is actually how widespread the belief is that the Covid-19 pandemic is just a pretext for evil powers to pursue other objectives. On the other hand, the somewhat more general question is how widespread is the belief in conspiracy theories and how this has changed as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic. In research on belief in conspiracy theories, the argument is made that their spread increases in times of crisis. Conspiracy theories are therefore means of dealing with great uncertainty and a fundamentally precarious situation (Rees/Lamberty 2019: 207; van Prooijen/Acker 2015). Accordingly, the Covid-19 pandemic would provide an excellent breeding ground for conspiracy theories (for example Gollmer 2020; Sippel 2020; Thimm 2020).

Before the Covid-19 pandemic had become such a prevalent topic in Germany, the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung conducted a representative survey on belief in conspiracy theories (Roose 2021). A comparison is now possible with a further representative survey conducted several months after the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic in Germany.



The False Logic of Conspiracy Theories

The supposition that Covid-19 is only being used to oppress people is a conspiracy theory. Conspiracy theories are argumentative constructions according to which a secret power with evil motives pursues an objective of societal significance to harm the general public by following a detailed, long-term, secret plan. Conspiracy theorists claim that only minor hints regarding such plans become discernible and that these hints need to be interpreted, which only then reveals aspects of the secret plan (Butter 2018: 21; also see Giry/Tika 2020: 113 ff.).¹

Conspiracy theories are characterised by intentionalism and secrecy (Butter 2018: 22 f.). They deny coincidence in events and instead assume intention. A broad range of events are interpreted as the planned, intentional action of individual actors, people or organisations. In a sense, the maxim of conspiracy theories is: “Nothing happens randomly” (Butter 2018: 22). Plans are implemented in secrecy. The controlling actors operate clandestinely in order to execute their dark plans behind the back of the general public and against their values and interests. Conspiracy theories describe and criticise not only power differences, they claim to uncover a secret, malign conspiracy.

For conspiracy theorists and believers, these argumentative constructions can certainly be attractive (Douglas et al. 2019). They offer an explanation for unclear developments and relationships. Coincidence is replaced by causality that can be ascribed to certain actors. Even though conspiracy theories can be rather complex, they are simple in their logic of explanation.

For conspiracy theorists and believers themselves, they derive a special role from the theory and may feel a sense of duty in some cases. Those who are convinced of conspiracy theories claim to possess knowledge that many others do not have. Therefore, they see themselves as being able to explain “true” interrelations to the general public. The belief in conspiracy theories is consequently a form of self-elevation above the unknowing masses (Rees/Lamberty 2019: 208; Douglas et al. 2019: 8–10).

Since the claim of an evil conspiracy against the general public lies at the heart of the conspiracy theory, they represent an accusation against the conspirators. In the case of diffuse accusations, there may not be many consequences; informing the general public that the truth of a particular matter is different may suffice. In many other cases, however, the conspiracy theory goes far beyond this. It may claim that it is necessary to stop the conspirators and for the conspiracy theorists to take matters into their own hands, as they believe the general public and those worthy of special protection – such as children – are fundamentally in peril. The conspiracy theorists thus obtain the special duty to “save the world” from the conspirators in these frequent cases. Conspiracy theories then become aggressive constructs that give the conspiracy theorists a special role in uncovering and stopping the alleged conspiracy. Various perpetrators of violence refer to conspiracy theories.² Even if not every conspiracy theory makes the exercise of

violence plausible and not every conspiracy theorist becomes a perpetrator of violence, it is also true that there is no such thing as a harmless conspiracy theory. Conspiracy theories are always inaccurate accusations against certain individuals, groups or people associated with organisations.

Conspiracy theories are untrue (Butter 2018: 37). Undoubtedly secrecy and power differences exist and there are motives that may appear evil to others, and there are also people who meet in secret to execute a plan. But in the meaning described here, there is a key difference to conspiracy theories. Conspiracy theories assume a long-term plan drafted and pursued over years – sometimes over decades and even over generations. Conspiracy theories accuse a large number of participants who all contribute to their grand conspiracy in their respective functions. Conspiracy theories exaggerate the controllability of events and also rule out the possibility of coincidence and chaos. At the same time, they amplify the ability of people to coordinate and the ability of many individuals to commit to a joint goal. All this occurs in such a manner that runs contrary to everyday experience with the constant failure of plans and intentions. All too often we fail to keep the resolutions we make for ourselves. Moreover, the experience of reluctance toward rules others set for us is commonplace. It is simply impossible to bring together a very large number of people for a complex, secret plan to be executed over a very long period of time – and particularly to implement such a plan seamlessly.³

A second piece of evidence that conspiracy theories are untrue can be found in their internal contradictions. On the one hand, conspiracy theories assume a secret, long-term, complex plan that is perfectly executed. On the other, however, it is claimed that these incredibly powerful and fully coordinated conspirators constantly make mistakes and leave behind clues, which the conspiracy theorists can successfully interpret. Despite their comprehensive control of events, the alleged conspirators are thus unable to stop the conspiracy theorists from discovering their conspiracy and from spreading their conspiracy theories. But both cannot be true. If the accused conspirators were actually able to control all events, they could also ensure secrecy. And if they are not in such a position – as the “discovery” of the conspiracy shows – then the complex conspiracy that is claimed is likewise not possible as such.

Because conspiracy theories make obviously false assumptions and are internally contradictory, they run counter to a world view based on scientific evidence and have been increasingly labelled “illegitimate” knowledge in recent decades (Thalmann 2019, Butter 2018: 22). This is justified to the extent that conspiracy theories falsely accuse people of wrongdoing. However, there is also the danger that opposition, criticism and deviating views are branded as conspiracy theories, thereby giving legitimacy to them in discourse. It is therefore important to handle the term with great care.



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- 1 Much of this section overlaps with the explanation of conspiracy theories presented in an earlier publication (Roose 2021: 6 ff.).
 - 2 The claim of a Jewish conspiracy is one example (Butter 2018: 30 ff.; Blume 2019).
 - 3 Conspiracy theorists and their supporters suppose that others are far more influenceable than themselves. This is a clear example of the Third-Person Effect (Davison 1983, Perloff 1993). In communication research, the Third-Person Effect states that people often assume that they themselves are not influenced by media content but that others are. This assessment can have consequences in human action, even though a self-observation runs contrary to the assumption of the influenceability of others.

3

Investigation of Conspiracy Theories

Investigating how widespread the belief in conspiracy theories is raises a number of issues.⁴ When asking in a representative, standardised survey whether people believe in a conspiracy theory or consider one to be possible, it is necessary to outline briefly and clearly what is meant by conspiracy theory.⁵

In order to ascertain the extent to which people assume a conspiracy behind the Covid-19 pandemic, the respondents were asked to assess the truthfulness of a statement in the representative survey: "The Coronavirus is only a pretext to oppress people."⁶ This statement assumes a secret, global agreement to fabricate a virus or at least deliberately exaggerate its danger in order to realise an evil motive, i. e. the oppression of people. This would require an agreement between those in power in all affected countries – in other words, all countries in the world – and such an agreement would involve the spheres of politics, science, healthcare and media; a huge number of people would be implicated.

In the survey, additional statements had to be assessed for truthfulness. These included statements on particular topics in which conspiracy theories are likewise widespread (Nocun/Lamberty 2020). A general statement regarding a global conspiracy was also asked.

Specifically, the following statements were assessed in the survey:⁷

- › "Human impact is exacerbating climate change."
- › "The measles vaccine is more dangerous than the disease itself."
- › "The Coronavirus is only a pretext to oppress people."
- › "There are secret powers that control the world."

For all four statements, respondents were asked to state whether they consider them certainly true, likely true, likely false or certainly false.⁸ In the case of the last statement regarding secret powers controlling the world, a follow-up question was posed. Those who considered the statement likely or certainly true were also asked to state which powers they have in mind. The follow-up question makes it possible to identify ideas that do not meet the criterion of a conspiracy theory, for example a world controlled by markets, luck or God.⁹

While other studies are based on online surveys (for example Drochon 2019), this survey was conducted with telephone interviews. This approach guarantees a higher degree of representativeness of the results. Particularly because conspiracy theories are frequently spread via the Internet, it is important to choose a survey method that



equally includes people who use the Internet more or less often. While people who regularly use the Internet are more strongly represented in online surveys, this is not the case for telephone surveys (Schnell 2019: 299; Pokorny/Roose 2020).

The interviews were conducted by the opinion research institute Infratest dimap in the period from 9 August to 11 September 2020. A total of 1,521 people were questioned by telephone, 522 of which from the federal states Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania, Brandenburg, Saxony-Anhalt, Saxony and Thuringia, in order to enable reliable conclusions regarding eastern Germany. The respondents were chosen randomly with a mobile network share of 40 percent (dual frame approach). The data is weighed according to socio-structural characteristics and results for whole Germany are weighed to compensate for the higher number of respondents from East Germany. The results are representative for the population in Germany eligible to vote.

The statements about climate change, the measles vaccine and the global conspiracy were already assessed in an earlier survey by the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung. From October 2019 to February 2020 – i. e. directly before the Covid-19 pandemic became a prominent topic in the German public – Infratest dimap likewise surveyed 3,250 people by telephone, following a dual frame approach (40 percent mobile network, 60 percent landline network).

- 4 For research on the belief in conspiracy theories, see Butter/Knight (2020), Douglas et al. (2019), Giry/Tika (2020) and Uscinski (2019).
- 5 When investigating the belief in conspiracy theories, other studies take a less direct approach and ask questions that are not immediately recognisable as a question regarding a conspiracy theory. This is intended to prevent people giving answers out of “social desirability”, i. e. according to an answer supposedly expected of them (for example Decker/Brähler 2020: 198 ff.). This form of measurement produces a far broader distribution. However, it is then unclear whether the respondents actually consider a conspiracy to be possible or are thinking of completely different connections that may also be addressed by the questions posed (agreements behind closed doors, for example). The question posed here, which directly names the core of a conspiracy theory, permits a very reliable conclusion on the degree to which people are actually referring to a conspiracy theory with their answers.
- 6 In Germany, the SARS-CoV-2 virus and the Covid-19 pandemic are discussed under the name “Coronavirus”.
- 7 With the exception of the statement regarding the Covid-19 pandemic, all statements were included in the previous study in which interviews were conducted before the Covid-19 pandemic became a major topic in the German public (Roose 2021). In addition, the statement “The Russian secret service kills people in other countries” was assessed for truthfulness by respondents in both surveys. The assessments for this statement did not vary in the two surveys. Prior to the pandemic, 21 percent were certain that the statement is true. This figure is 23 percent during the pandemic. The statement was considered likely true by 49 percent of respondents prior to and during the pandemic. The statement was held to be likely false by 15 percent prior to the pandemic; this figure is 14 percent during the pandemic. In each case, 4 percent of respondents considered the statement certainly false prior to and during the pandemic. The remaining respondents stated they could not assess the statement. The relationship between this question and the belief in a conspiracy theory was already discussed in the first analysis (Roose 2021). Since no additional insights have emerged in this connection, this statement will not be considered further in the following.
- 8 Evidence for the well substantiated state of knowledge in each case is provided in Roose (2021).
- 9 For details, also see Roose (2021: 21).



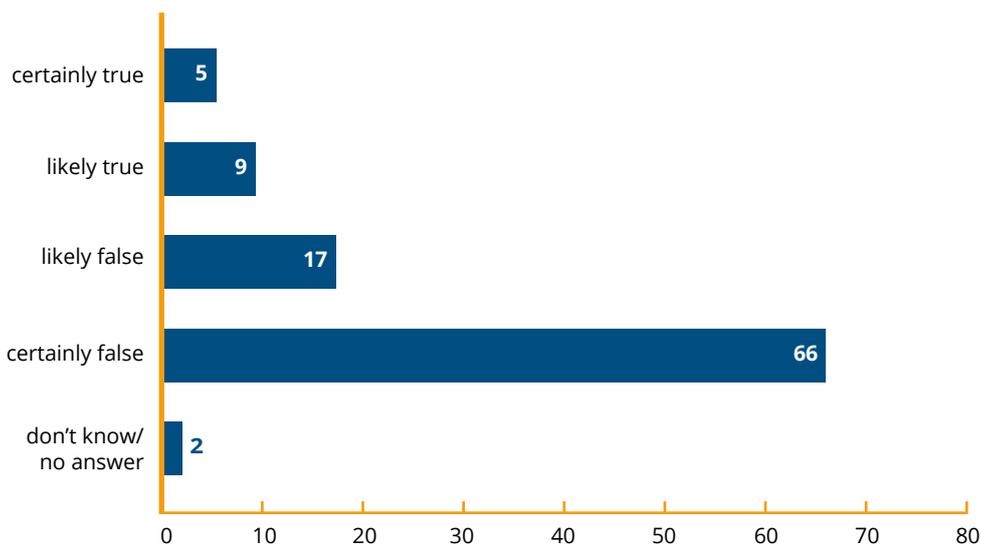
Covid-19 as a Pretext?

Two thirds of the respondents (66 percent) consider the statement “The Coronavirus is only a pretext to oppress people” to be certainly false. For them, it is clear that the measures are intended to contain a real pandemic. Another 17 percent consider the statement to be likely false. A vast majority sees the contact restrictions, mandatory masks or other rules for what they are: attempts to contain the spread of the dangerous Covid-19 pandemic.

However, a considerable minority views the situation differently. Indeed, 9 percent believe it is likely true that the Covid-19 pandemic is only a pretext for oppressing people, and another 5 percent are certain of this. They fundamentally mistrust the range of information from national and international health authorities, from the scientific community and the political sphere. In total, 15 percent¹⁰ of respondents are convinced or can at least imagine that the Covid-19 pandemic merely serves as a pretext for oppressing people. In other words, they firmly believe in a Covid-19 conspiracy or at least consider such a conspiracy to be possible.

Figure 1: Belief in Covid-19 as a Pretext for Oppression

Sometimes when claims are made you might be unsure if they are true. What do you think of the following claims? The Coronavirus is only a pretext to oppress people.



Source: Survey 1023 (former number 2020-07) by the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung e. V. 2020, values in percent. 1,521 respondents.



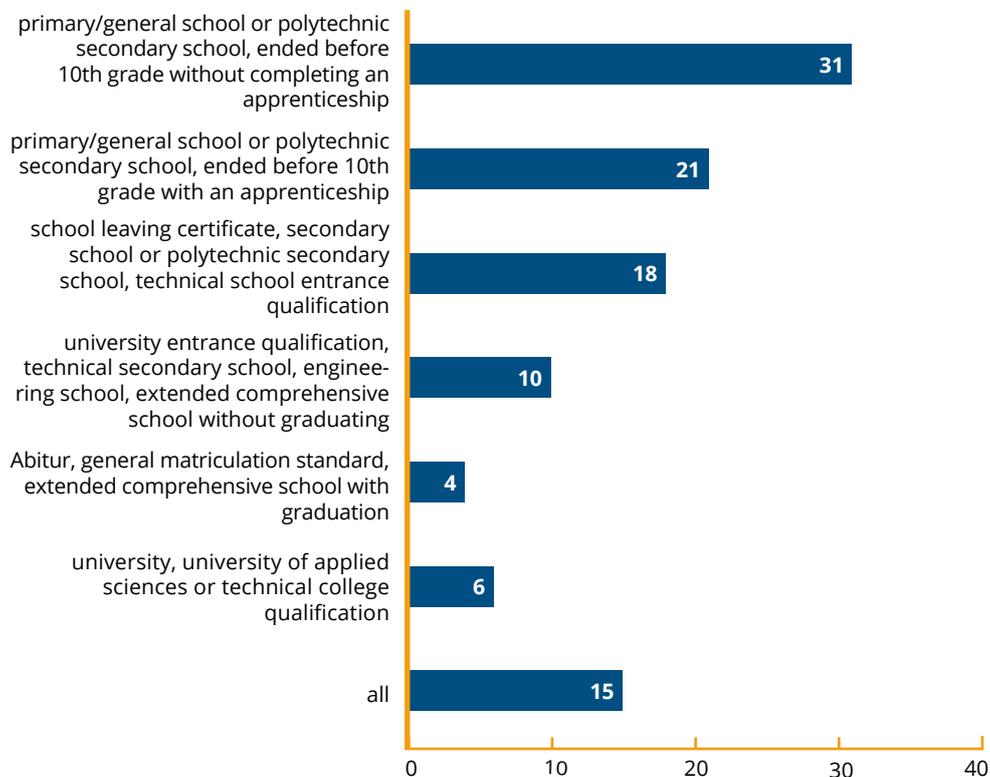
In the Eastern German federal states (excluding Berlin), the proportion of those who are convinced that Covid-19 is a pretext for oppressing people is, at 9 percent, somewhat higher than in the Western German federal states, where 5 percent are certain.¹¹ The statement is considered to be likely true by 12 percent in Eastern Germany and 9 percent in Western Germany.

There is no significant gender difference in the assessment that the Covid-19 is only a pretext for oppressing people. 6 percent of men are certain and another 12 percent consider the relevant statement likely true. Among women, 5 percent are certain and 7 percent consider the statement likely true.

In all age groups similar proportions of 4 to 6 percent of the respondents consider Covid-19 to be a pretext and are certain of this assessment. At 15 percent, within the age group of 35 to 49 years there is the largest share to consider the statement likely true, while the proportion is smallest among people aged 65 years and above at 5 percent. Among those aged 65 years and above, almost three quarters (74 percent) are certain that this statement is false, while only slightly more than half (52 percent) of the 35 to 49 years old consider the statement to be certainly false.

Figure 2: Belief in a Covid-19 Conspiracy according to Education

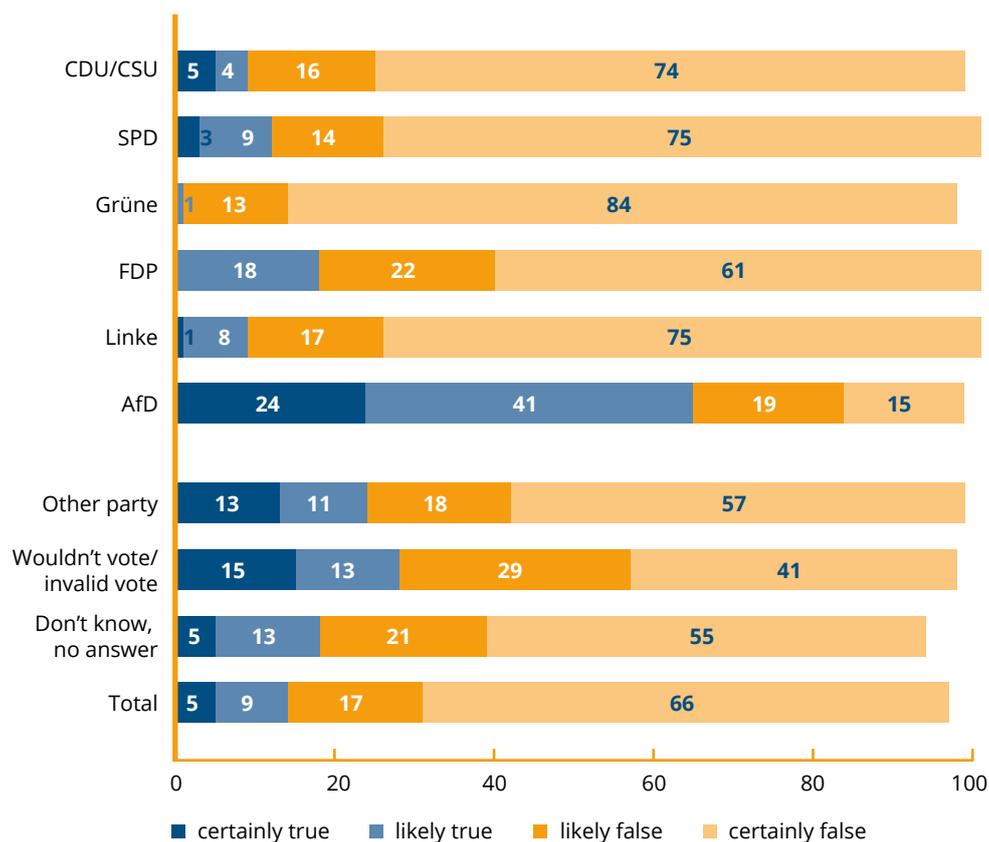
Sometimes when claims are made you might be unsure if they are true. What do you think of the following claims? The Coronavirus is only a pretext to oppress people. Here: certainly or likely true.



Source: Survey 1023 (former number 2020-07) by the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung e. V. 2020, values in percent. 1,521 respondents. Data is not individually shown for respondents still in school education, without a school qualification, other educational qualification or no answers.

The differences according to formal educational qualification are striking. Of those people who left school prior to 10th grade and did not complete an apprenticeship, almost a third (31 percent) consider a Covid-19 conspiracy to be certainly or likely true.¹² Among the respondents with 10 years of school, and an apprenticeship, 7 percent believe they know for certain that Covid-19 is just a pretext for oppression, and another 11 percent consider this to be likely true. By contrast, among the respondents with a qualification from a university, university of applied sciences or technical college, 1 percent are certain that Covid-19 is just a pretext for oppression, and another 5 percent consider it likely. 84 percent of respondents with a university qualification consider the statement regarding a Covid-19 conspiracy to be certainly false.

Figure 3: Belief in Covid-19 as a Pretext for Oppression According to Party Affiliation
Sometimes when claims are made you might be unsure if they are true. What do you think of the following claims? The Coronavirus is only a pretext to oppress people.



Source: Survey 1023 (former number 2020-07) by the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung e. V. 2020, values in percent. 1,521 respondents. Missing values out of 100%: no answer. Among Die Grünen and FDP supporters for the answer "certainly true": 0 percent



The differences according to party affiliation are substantial.¹³ Among supporters of Die Grünen, the conviction that Covid-19 is a pretext for oppressing people is the lowest.¹⁴ Only very few of them were certain and only 1 percent considered it likely that Covid-19 is a tool of oppression. Among supporters of CDU/CSU, SPD and Die Linke, 9 to 12 percent hold the view that Covid-19 is certainly or likely just a pretext for oppression. These proportions are barely lower than in the overall population. Belief in a Covid-19 conspiracy is more frequently represented among FDP supporters. Among the respondents with a preference for the FDP, none were certain that the pandemic is used as a pretext for oppression, but 18 percent stated that this is at least likely.

Among AfD voters, almost a quarter (24 percent) are convinced that the Covid-19 pandemic is a conspiracy to oppress people. Another 41 percent consider it to be likely. A clear majority of AfD supporters therefore consider a Covid-19 conspiracy to be at least likely. Among those who would not vote in an election, around a quarter consider a Covid-19 conspiracy to be likely or certain.

10 The difference compared to the sum of individual values results from rounding.

11 Berlin is considered separately in the comparison of Eastern and Western Germany. Due to the high mobility within the city between districts that formerly belonged to East or West Germany, as well as to influx of people from all parts of Germany, a distinction between East and West in Berlin is not reasonably possible.

12 In this group of respondents who left school prior to 10th grade and did not complete an apprenticeship, fewer than half (47 percent) are certain that the Covid-19 pandemic is not a pretext for oppression (not shown in the figure).

13 Translations and political positions of the parties can be found in the appendix.

14 Supporters of a party refer to people who stated that they would vote for the respective party if federal elections were held next Sunday.

5

Belief in Conspiracy Theories in Crisis

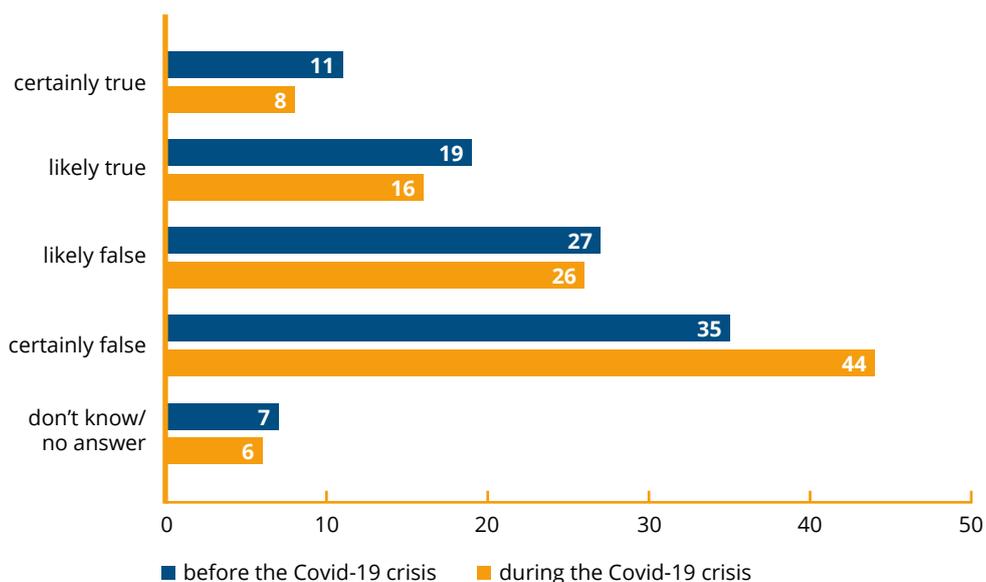
The Covid-19 pandemic not only involves considerable impositions for people, but also a great deal of uncertainty (Roose 2020). Even after many months, it is still unclear how the pandemic will continue to develop and what will be the consequences, and the situation regularly changes. This uncertainty puts people under additional pressure.

Belief in conspiracy theories provides a way to create order in chaotic situations – at least cognitively – and extract a coherent interpretation from complicated, uncertain developments (Douglas et al. 2019). It therefore seems only obvious to assume an increase in belief in conspiracy theories. The demonstrations mentioned earlier, where conspiracy theorists prominently appeared and evidently attracted much approval, already seem to be evidence enough for many observers.

However, a survey by the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung, just before the Covid-19 pandemic began to occupy the German public, already showed a high level of belief in conspiracy theories (Roose 2021). The survey after the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic in Germany now enables a direct comparison of the spread of belief in conspiracy theories before and during the Covid-19 crisis.

Figure 4: Belief in Conspiracy Theories

Sometimes when claims are made you might be unsure if they are true. What do you think of the following claims? There are secret powers that control the world.



Source: Survey 1021 (former number 2020-05) and survey 1023 (former number 2020-07) by the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung e. V. 2020, values in percent. Before the Coronavirus crisis: 3,250 respondents. During the Coronavirus crisis: 1,521 respondents. The sum of percentage values may differ from 100 due to rounding.



The result is remarkable. While 11 percent of the population were certain before the Covid-19 pandemic that the world is controlled by secret powers, only 8 percent are certain during the crisis. Prior to the Covid-19 crisis, a further 19 percent consider it likely true that secret powers control the world. At 16 percent, fewer people consider this to be likely during the Covid-19 crisis. On the other hand, the rejection of a conspiracy theory is substantially higher than before the crisis. While 35 percent were certain before the crisis that there are no secret powers controlling the world, 44 percent are certain during the crisis. Around half of the respondents now clearly reject the idea of a secret global conspiracy.

Contrary to the widespread assumption and media presence during the Covid-19 crisis, the belief in conspiracy theories has not increased with the Covid-19 pandemic – along with all the stresses including the mental burden due to uncertainty and contact restrictions – but rather it has declined somewhat. Nonetheless, the level remains very high. During the crisis, one in four still believes that a global conspiracy is certain or likely. For what is an internally contradictory claim that runs contrary to general everyday experience, this is an astonishingly high level of agreement.

Earlier studies had shown an amplifying effect of crises on the belief in conspiracy theories (Douglas et al. 2019: 8; van Prooijen/Acker 2015). This investigation is particularly well suited to examining this assumption with two population surveys, which included an identical question on a global conspiracy directly before and during the Covid-19 crisis. These surveys were conducted by telephone and had a relatively high degree of participation. Yet, no increase in conspiracy belief can be observed. In view of these results, it would certainly be advisable to reconsider whether the assumption is accurate.

However, it would also be conceivable that the Covid-19 crisis represents an uncertainty that amplifies belief in conspiracy theories only for a portion of the population. By contrast, others may place their trust in successful crisis management by the government and therefore may not experience excessive uncertainty. The surveys on trust in politicians and the general ability of Germany to deal with the crisis point in this direction (Neu 2020). Accordingly, trust in the federal government and Bundestag remained at a high level during the first lockdown in April and May 2020 and also in the months thereafter. General trust in the future was likewise very high. At the beginning of April 2020, more than 80 percent of respondents agreed with the statement “No one knows what the future will bring, but I believe everything will turn out OK” and thereby rejected the statement “No one knows what the future will bring, but I often fear what will come”. At the start of July 2020, agreement with the optimistic statement remained at the same level (Neu 2020: 9). The assumption that the Covid-19 pandemic represents an unsettling crisis for the population was possibly not as accurate as it initially seemed.

One can only speculate on the causes for the slight decline in the belief in conspiracy theories. Discourse addressing conspiracy theories may have contributed to a decline. The assumptions and insinuations postulated by conspiracy theories and the prominence of conspiracy theorists, who to some extent made confused arguments, may have made it clear that the theories are implausible. However, an effect of social desirability is also conceivable. Particularly since conspiracy theories have often been criticised in the media, fewer people may now feel comfortable admitting that they consider such theories to be plausible.

No notable changes can be seen in the alleged global conspirators before and during the crisis. Commercial enterprises, secret services, rich individuals or families and secret societies are among the somewhat more frequent mentions. But overall, the respondents name a very wide range of people, organisations and even states.

No gender difference could be observed in the belief in conspiracy theories prior to the Covid-19 crisis. This continues to be the case for conspiracy theories during the crisis. 9 percent of men and 6 percent of women are certain that secret powers control the world, while 15 percent of men and 18 percent of women consider this to be likely. Together, around a quarter of men and women respectively thus consider a global conspiracy to be certain or likely.

The age differences in the belief in conspiracy theories are low. Older respondents (from 50 years of age) are somewhat more frequently certain, at 51 percent, that there is no global conspiracy than younger respondents (under 50 years of age), of which 37 percent reject the idea of a global conspiracy with certainty. On the other hand, the intermediate age group is notable in their conviction of a conspiracy. At 13 percent, these respondents are somewhat more frequently certain of a global conspiracy than the other age groups (6 to 7 percent).

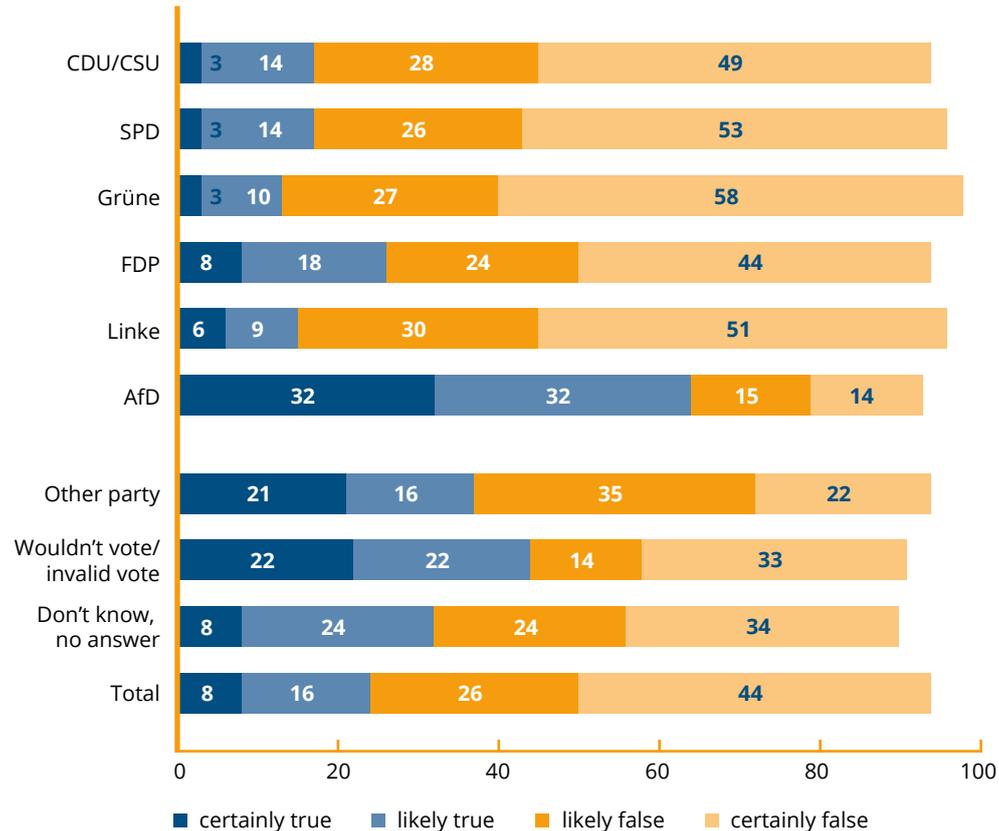
As was the case with the survey prior to the crisis, the propensity to believe in conspiracy theories varies considerably according to formal educational qualification. Among those who left school education before 10th grade, 11 percent are certain that secret powers control the world and a further 22 percent consider it likely. Among all respondents with a university qualification (university, university of applied sciences and technical college), 4 percent are certain that there is a global conspiracy and a further 12 percent consider it likely. Thus, just like before the outbreak of the pandemic in Germany, firm believers or conspiracy theories and others who consider a global conspiracy possible can be found in all education groups. However, there are noteworthy differences in the frequency according to the formal educational qualification.

As was the case before the crisis, no difference between Eastern and Western Germany can be observed in the belief in conspiracy theories during the crisis. The difference between people with and without a migration background seen prior to the crisis persists in the Covid-19 crisis. 14 percent of people with and 7 percent of people without a migration background are convinced that the world is controlled by secret powers. Such a conspiracy is considered likely by 26 percent of people with a migration background and 15 percent of people without a migration background.



Figure 5: Belief in Conspiracy Theory According to Party Affiliation

Sometimes when claims are made you might be unsure if they are true. What do you think of the following claims? There are secret powers that control the world.



Source: Survey 1023 (former number 2020-07) by the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung e. V. 2020, values in percent. 1,521 respondents. Missing values out of 100%: no answer.

Similar to the question on the plausibility of a Covid-19 conspiracy, clear differences according to party affiliation can also be seen for the question on an unspecified global conspiracy. Among supporters of CDU/CSU, SPD, Die Grünen and Die Linke, the belief that there are certainly or likely secret powers that control the world is similarly distributed. Only a very small portion (3 to 6 percent) is certain that there is a global conspiracy, and around one in ten consider it to be likely (9 to 14 percent). Among FDP supporters, the belief in a global conspiracy is somewhat more prevalent. 8 percent of FDP supporters are certain and another 18 percent consider it likely that secret powers control the world.

Belief in a conspiracy is more frequent among AfD supporters. Here, a majority consider a global conspiracy to be certain or likely. Among AfD supporters, 32 percent are certain that the world is controlled by secret powers and just as many consider this to be likely. In other words, almost two thirds of AfD supporters consider a global conspiracy to be certainly or likely true.

Among those who would not vote in an election, a considerable portion likewise believe a global conspiracy is possible. 22 percent of non-voters are certain and another 22 percent consider it likely that the world is controlled by secret powers.

Compared to the distribution of belief in a global conspiracy prior to the Covid-19 crisis, the decline among CDU/CSU and SPD supporters is more pronounced than for the overall population. Prior to the crisis, 10 percent or 12 percent of supporters of CDU/CSU and SPD respectively were certain of a global conspiracy. These proportions have both declined to 3 percent. Likewise, supporters of Die Grünen and Die Linke stated less frequently that they consider a global conspiracy to be certainly or likely true, although the decline is less pronounced. FDP supporters corresponded to the average for the overall population before the crisis; this is still the case during the crisis.

The picture is different for AfD supporters. Even before the crisis, the belief in a global conspiracy theory was by far most frequent among AfD supporters. Here, 27 percent were certain and another 29 percent thought a global conspiracy is likely true. In both cases, these values have risen further slightly to 32 percent during the crisis.

Two processes may be accountable for these changes in terms of party affiliation. On the one hand, the distribution of belief in conspiracies has changed in the population generally, as the overall analysis shows. Accordingly, it is plausible that party supporters have also changed their views. Indeed, party preferences have likewise shifted with the Covid-19 crisis. It is certainly conceivable that, for example, previous supporters of the AfD who do not believe in a global conspiracy have switched to other parties to a greater extent than other party supporters. This process is equally conceivable in the reverse direction. While all other parties have clearly positioned themselves against conspiracy theories, the AfD remains ambivalent in this respect. It would only be possible to determine the exact processes behind these changes if identical people were repeatedly surveyed in a panel study over the relevant period. Our data is unable to provide an answer to this question.

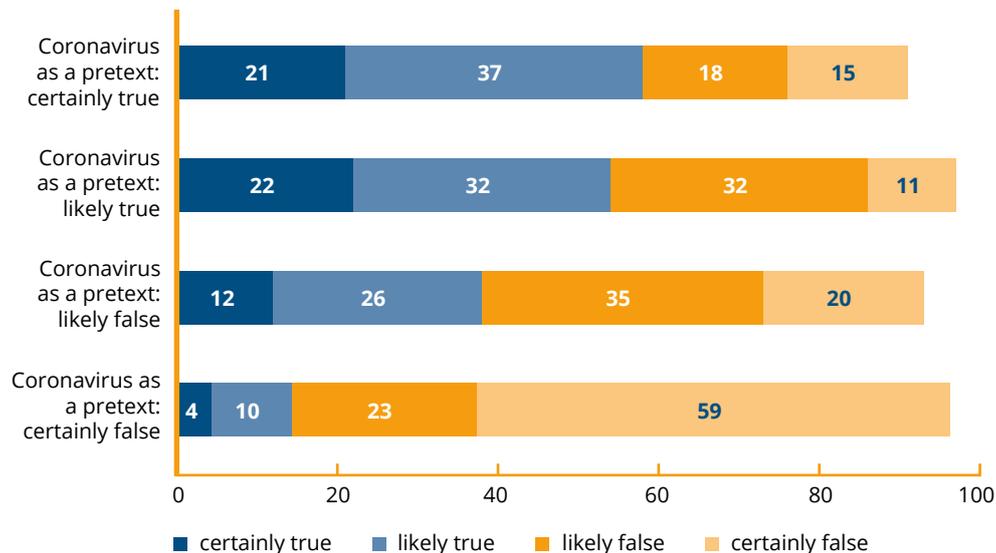
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Belief in a Covid-19 Conspiracy and a Global Conspiracy

Research on the belief in conspiracy theories assumes a propensity toward conspiracy theories as a generalized attitude (Douglas et al. 2019: 7). Accordingly, people have a different propensity to recognise patterns even where there are none. This propensity increases the tendency to consider conspiracy theories to be plausible.

In the case of a correlation between the belief in a global conspiracy and a Covid-19 conspiracy, such a propensity becomes identifiable. Those who believe in a conspiracy related to Covid-19 also tend to be more frequently convinced of a global conspiracy. Among all those who claim they know for certain that the Covid-19 pandemic is a pretext for oppression, 21 percent are certain of a global conspiracy. Only 15 percent of them consider the hypothesis of a global conspiracy to be certainly false. By contrast, among all those who are certain that the Covid-19 pandemic is no pretext for oppression, only 4 percent are certain of a global conspiracy. 59 percent of them are certain that there is no global conspiracy.

Figure 6: Belief in a World Conspiracy According to Belief in a Covid-19 Conspiracy
Sometimes when claims are made you might be unsure if they are true. What do you think of the following claims? There are secret powers that control the world. The Coronavirus is only a pretext to oppress people.



Source: Survey 1023 (former number 2020-07) by the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung e. V. 2020, values in percent. 1,521 respondents. Missing values out of 100%: no answer. Reading example for value in the top left: Among all respondents who consider the statement “The Coronavirus is only a pretext to oppress people” to be certainly true, 21 percent assess the statement “There are secret powers that control the world” as certainly true.

There is also a correlation between the belief that the measles vaccine is more dangerous than the disease itself and the belief in a global conspiracy. Among all those who are certain that the measles vaccine is more dangerous than the disease itself, 28 percent are certain that there is a global conspiracy, and 24 percent believe there is certainly no global conspiracy. Conversely, among all those who are certain that the measles vaccine is by no means more dangerous than the disease itself, 4 percent are certain of a global conspiracy and 57 percent consider a global conspiracy to be certainly false.

A correlation can also be observed between doubts regarding the human impact on climate change and the belief in conspiracy theories. Those who doubt the human impact on climate change also tend to believe in a global conspiracy. However, the correlation is weaker.

The most striking correlation is found between the belief that Covid-19 is a pretext for oppressing people and belief in a global conspiracy. Furthermore, the assessment that the measles vaccine is more dangerous than the disease itself is frequently associated with the belief in a global conspiracy.¹⁵ The belief in a Covid-19 conspiracy and the danger of the measles vaccine likewise correlate strongly with each other.¹⁶ People who see a greater danger in the measles vaccine than in the disease also tend to believe in a Covid-19 conspiracy. This correlation, however, is not quite as close as the correlation between the belief in a global conspiracy and the belief in a Covid-19 conspiracy. Although the rejection of vaccination is a strong theme in at least some conspiracy theories surrounding the Covid-19 pandemic, the belief in a global conspiracy among proponents of a Covid-19 conspiracy is even more prevalent.

The correlation between the belief in a global conspiracy and the dangerousness of the measles vaccine already existed prior to the Covid-19 pandemic. The previous survey conducted before the pandemic became a prominent topic in the German public also showed that people who believed in a greater danger in the measles vaccine were more likely to believe in a global conspiracy. Even before the pandemic, this correlation was stronger than the relationship between doubt in the human impact on climate change and a global conspiracy.¹⁷

The relationships between the assessment of the factual questions and the question regarding a global conspiracy have become stronger in the course of the Covid-19 pandemic. During the pandemic, people who consider the measles vaccine more dangerous than the disease itself are more frequently of the view that the world is controlled by secret powers. By contrast, people who consider the measles vaccine less dangerous than the disease are less frequently convinced of a global conspiracy than was the case prior to the pandemic. The survey data allows no conclusions to be drawn on the causes of this change. However, it would be conceivable that the public debates on conspiracy theories may have put off some of the previously less convinced believers from these theories. Those who firmly believe in conspiracy theories and in particular those whose beliefs in conspiracies already related to health and vaccinations with the rejection of the measles vaccine, and thus also to the Covid-19 pandemic, continue to be convinced of a conspiracy.



Conspiracy in Crisis

Belief in a Covid-19 Conspiracy and a Global Conspiracy

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- 15 Goodman and Kruskal's Gamma serves as a measure of the strength of the relationship between two questions with ordered answers (from certainly true and likely true to likely false and certainly false). For the correlation of the question regarding Covid-19 as a pretext for oppressing people and the question regarding a global conspiracy, this gamma metric amounts to 0.623. This means that someone who considers one of the statements to be certainly true (for example the Coronavirus is just a pretext for oppression) also tends to consider the other statement (there is a global conspiracy) to be certainly or at least likely true. If this correlation were to apply without exception to all respondents (both statements are always certainly true or likely true etc.), the gamma would be 1.0. The relationship between the question regarding the danger of the measles vaccine and the question regarding a global conspiracy has a gamma of 0.430. Conversely, the relationship between the question regarding the human impact on climate change and a global conspiracy has a gamma of 0.213.
 - 16 The assessments of the truthfulness of the statement "The Coronavirus is only a pretext to oppress people" and the statement "The measles vaccine is more dangerous than the disease itself" have a gamma of 0.535.
 - 17 The gamma of the correlation between the question regarding the measles vaccine and a global conspiracy amounted to 0.336 before the Covid-19 pandemic. The correlation of the question concerning the human impact on climate change and a global conspiracy amounted to 0.127.



Belief in a Conspiracy and Life Circumstances

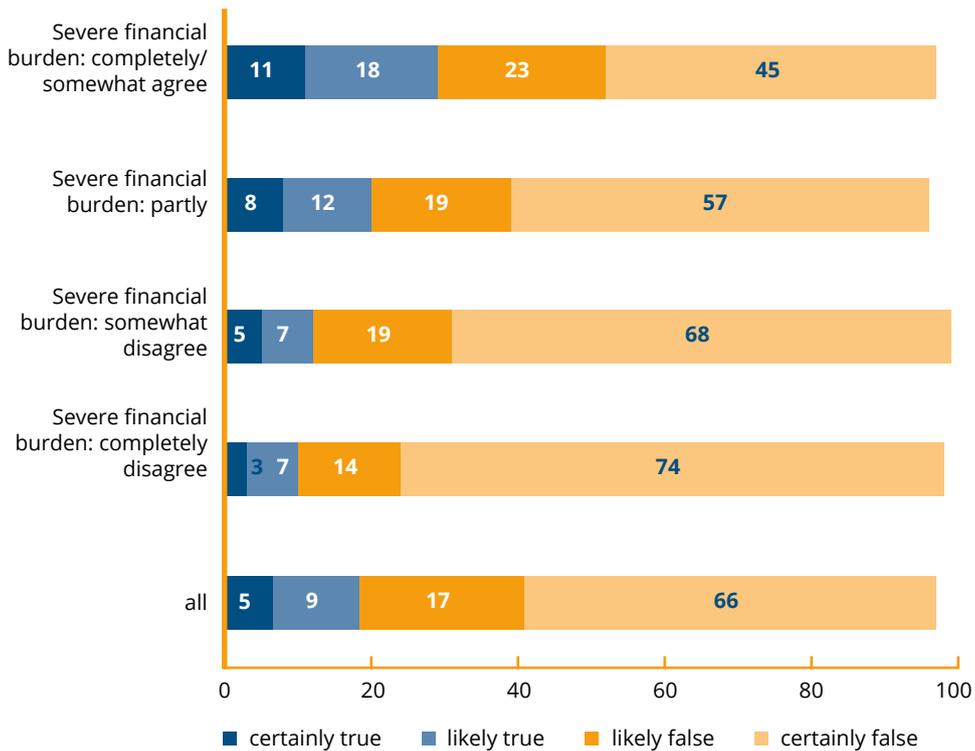
The assumption that the difficult situation of the pandemic – with the restrictions in many areas of life and the uncertainty – would amplify the belief in conspiracy theories has not been confirmed in the comparison of the period before and during the pandemic. Belief in conspiracy theories has declined slightly in the overall population.

In terms of those who believe in a conspiracy related to the pandemic, however, difficult life circumstances appear as an influence.¹⁸ People are more likely to think that Covid-19 is a pretext for oppression if they also state that the Covid-19 crisis has been a severe financial stress. Among all respondents who fully or somewhat agree with the statement “The Covid-19 crisis is a heavy financial burden for me”, 11 percent are certain that the Coronavirus is only a pretext for oppression. By contrast, among the respondents who do not agree with the statement regarding the Covid-19 crisis as a financial stress, only 3 percent are certain that the Covid-19 crisis is used as a pretext for oppression. Instead, among the respondents who have not experienced the crisis as a severe financial stress, almost three quarters (74 percent) are certain that the statement regarding Covid-19 crisis as a pretext for oppression is false. For all respondents experiencing a severe financial stress due to the crisis (full or partial agreement), fewer than half – at 45 percent – are certain that a Covid-19 conspiracy does not exist.



Figure 7: Belief in a Covid-19 Conspiracy According to Severe Financial Burden Caused by the Crisis

Sometimes when claims are made you might be unsure if they are true. What do you think of the following claims? The Coronavirus is only a pretext to oppress people. Agreement with/ rejection of the statement: The Coronavirus is a severe financial burden for me.



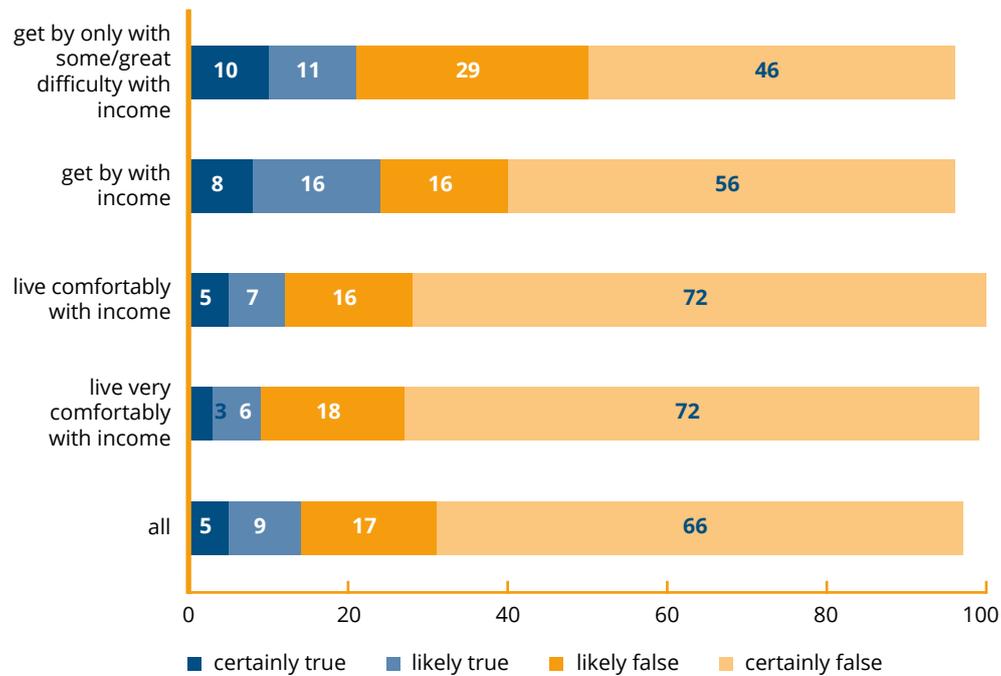
Source: Survey 1023 (former number 2020-07) by the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung e. V. 2020, values in percent. 1,521 respondents. Missing values out of 100%: no answer. Reading example for value in the top left: Among all respondents who fully or somewhat agree with the statement "The Coronavirus crisis is a severe financial burden for me", 11 percent are certain that the statement "The Coronavirus is only a pretext to oppress people" is true.

The financial burden caused by the crisis is only one aspect of the difficulties resulting from the Covid-19 crisis. The general effect of the crisis is stronger among those who tend to regard Covid-19 as a pretext for oppression. Believers of a Covid-19 conspiracy theory state with less frequency that they are coping well with the changes brought about by the Covid-19 crisis. They report more time pressure as a result of the Covid-19 crisis and also tend to perceive personal stress.

But not only the burdens caused by the Covid-19 crisis itself increase the probability that respondents view Covid-19 as a pretext for oppression. References to a generally difficult life situation are also given more frequently among believers of a Covid-19 conspiracy than for other respondents. They more frequently have experienced a prolonged period of unemployment (over six months) and tend to worry about their job. Moreover, the believers of a Covid-19 conspiracy more frequently state that they are unable to get by well with their household income and that they are struggling to

cope. Among all those who say they only get by with some or great difficulty with their household income, 10 percent are certain that the Coronavirus is just a pretext for oppressing people. Only a minority of 46 percent is certain that there is no Covid-19 conspiracy. Among all those who are able to live very comfortably with their household income, however, only 3 percent are certain that Covid-19 is a pretext for oppression, while 72 percent are certain that this claim is false.¹⁹

Figure 8: Belief in a Covid-19 Conspiracy According to Assessment of Household Income
Sometimes when claims are made you might be unsure if they are true. What do you think of the following claims? The Coronavirus is only a pretext to oppress people. Which of the following statements best describes how you assess your current household income. With our current household income, we are able to get by with great difficulty, get by with some difficulty, live comfortably or live very comfortably.



Source: Survey 1023 (former number 2020-07) by the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung e. V. 2020, values in percent. 1,521 respondents. Missing values out of 100%: no answer. Reading example for value in the top left: Among all respondents who say that they only get by with some or great difficulty with their household income, 10 percent consider the statement "The Coronavirus is only a pretext to oppress people" to be certainly true.

The Covid-19 crisis is putting a portion of society under considerable stress. The personal life circumstances of these people were already difficult prior to the crisis; during the crisis, they feel further under severe pressure. In such a situation, some of these people tend to believe that Covid-19 is only used as a pretext to oppress people.



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- 18 The correlations presented in the following are significant at the 5 percent level in a multivariate analysis. The analysis considered gender, Eastern/Western Germany, migration background, education, age, estimated household income, life satisfaction, assessments on statements regarding personal situation during the Covid-19 crisis and assessments on statements regarding the personal effects of the Covid-19 crisis.
- 19 The presented correlations apply in addition, i. e. while statistically controlling for the education effect discussed in chapter 4.



Media Use by Believers of a Covid-19 Conspiracy

The Covid-19 pandemic is initially only visible to people in the media. Interest in the news regarding the crisis was at a high level for a long time. In the week from 29 June 2020 to 4 July 2020, more than half of those eligible to vote in Germany (55 percent) followed the news about the Covid-19 crisis one to five times per day, and another 8 percent even more frequently (Neu 2020: 3). At the same time, among the 300 respondents of the study only a limited number of individuals tested positively for the virus, and 5 percent noticed symptoms without taking a test. 75 percent of the respondents stated that they did not know anyone who became ill with Covid-19 (survey 1017 by the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung in January 2020). The danger of the Covid-19 pandemic did not arise from the spread of the virus in personal surroundings in the summer of 2020, but emerged from the rapid development with an exponential rise in the number of cases, as was seen in the spring of 2020 prior to the lockdown as well as in the autumn of the same year. For the vast majority, the Covid-19 pandemic was therefore initially a phenomenon confined to the media. For this reason, the media consumed and the credibility of media played an important role for the belief in a Covid-19 conspiracy.

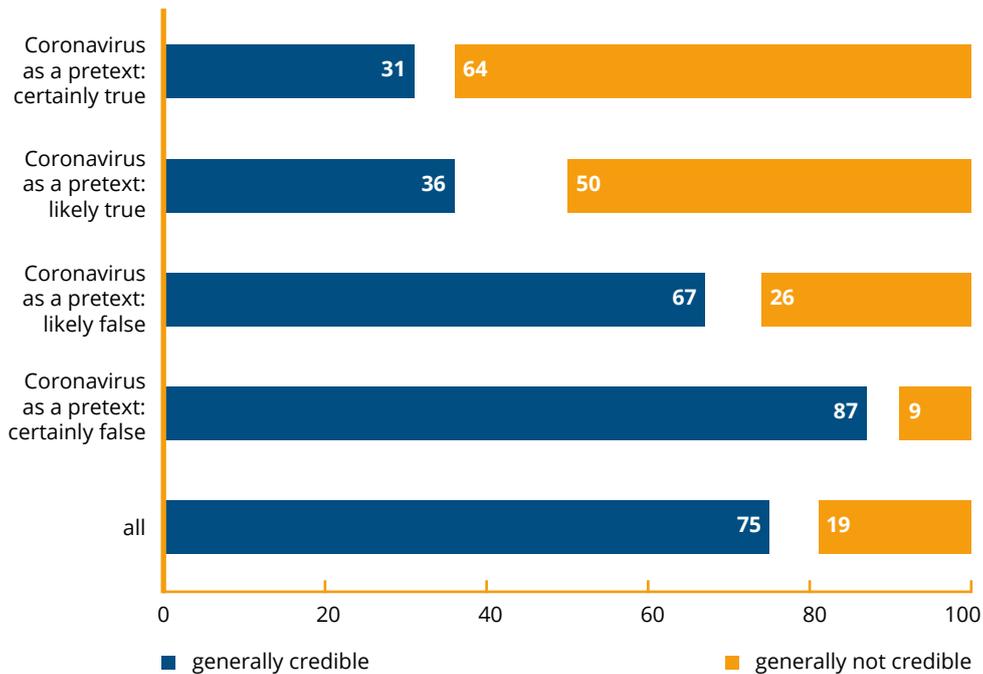
Those who use newspapers, public radio and television, somewhat less frequently consider the statement on the Covid-19 conspiracy to be certainly true or likely true than the average. A more striking difference can be seen in the consumption of political news from social networks. Among those who obtain what they perceive as credible political news from social networks (such as Facebook or Twitter), 29 percent consider the statement on a Covid-19 conspiracy to be certainly or likely true, while 13 percent of people who do not mention social networks as a source for credible political news consider the statement to be certainly or likely true.

Believers of a Covid-19 conspiracy theory mistrust public media. Among those who are certain that the Covid-19 crisis is a pretext for oppressing people, 64 percent consider the political news in public media such as ARD and ZDF as generally not credible, while 31 percent consider this source of news as generally credible. Likewise, among those whose assessment for the statement on the Covid-19 conspiracy is "likely true", 50 percent regard the political news from public media to be generally not credible. Whereas, a different picture emerges for those who regard the statement on Covid-19 as a pretext for oppressing people as certainly false. At 87 percent, they typically consider the political news from public media to be credible and only 9 percent state that this source of news is generally not credible.



Figure 9: Credibility of Public Media According to Belief in a Covid-19 Conspiracy

All in all, do you consider political news from public media such as ARD and ZDF to be generally credible or generally not credible? Sometimes when claims are made you might be unsure if they are true. What do you think of the following claims? The Coronavirus is only a pretext to oppress people.



Source: Survey 1023 (former number 2020-07) by the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung e. V. 2020, values in percent. 1,521 respondents. Missing values out of 100%: no answer. Reading example for value in the top left: Among all respondents who consider the statement "The Coronavirus is only a pretext to oppress people" to be certainly true, 31 percent assess the news from public media to be generally credible.

The data does not permit any clear conclusions to be made on whether the belief in a conspiracy is a result of mistrust in public media or vice versa, that the belief in a conspiracy leads to mistrust. Both processes are plausible and likely amplify each other reciprocally. Those who regularly consume and largely trust public media, are presumably only less receptive for a completely different interpretation of current events that assume a conspiracy. On the other hand, the presumption or merely the suspicion that there could be a conspiracy behind current events may produce mistrust in entirely different reportings. It is difficult to ascertain whether this process begins with media mistrust or belief in a conspiracy.



The Thin Line between Doubt and Belief in Conspiracy

Explanations are often complicated because the world is complicated. Relationships transcend our comprehension, and even experts are able to understand only a fraction of the whole picture more closely. When something new and abstract happens like a pandemic with a new, dangerous virus that spreads across the world, this complexity and our limited knowledge become painfully clear. Experts have to answer key questions on the basis of limited, provisional knowledge. Drawing on this fragmentary expertise, policymakers then have to take far-reaching decisions – and due to the speed at which the pandemic spreads, any hesitation in decision-making can have potentially fatal consequences.

The pandemic not only calls for difficult decisions in the scientific and political spheres, but also every individual faces this problem. Everyone needs to decide for themselves how to deal with the pandemic, what precautions to take, which risks to accept, as well as which statements to trust and how to form an opinion. A problem as central and comprehensive as the Covid-19 pandemic challenges everyone to formulate an opinion. This is no easy task in view of the incomplete information.

One possible, more easily understood explanation for all the events and decisions can be offered by conspiracy theories. They do not need to deal with the complicated information on exponential growth, airborne transmission or the sensitivity of test results. For them, it is enough to know that certain people are evil. But conspiracy theories are false and they are dangerous. Unlike errors that arise in complex matters and quick developments, conspiracy theories are logically incorrect intrinsically. They are illogical because the exposure of conspiracy theories cannot occur in the world of total control and secret powers that conspiracy theorists fabricate. The theories stretch the notion of the controllability of the world beyond experience and what is possible. Furthermore, they falsely accuse certain actors of malicious intentions and actions.

In connection with the demonstrations against the pandemic restrictions and the prevalence of conspiracy theories among protesters, the impression emerged that the belief in conspiracy theories has increased considerably with the Covid-19 crisis. This assumption is wrong. Even before the Covid-19 pandemic, the belief in conspiracy theories was widespread. However, the spread of such convictions has not substantially increased with the Covid-19 crisis. Instead, a slight decline can be observed. For some people, the many discussions about conspiracy theories in the mass media may have played a part in underlining the logical errors of these explanations.

But even during the crisis, many believe that “evil powers” may control the world and specifically that the measures imposed to contain the spread of the virus could actually serve entirely different, sinister motives. The claim of a Covid-19 conspiracy is associated with opposition to vaccines and falls on fertile ground among those who already mistrust the proven protection of vaccines.



Belief in conspiracy theories can be found in all social strata, in all voter groups, among men and women, in the east and the west, north and south. However, the belief in conspiracy theories is not evenly distributed. People with lower formal educational qualifications and people in difficult life situations tend more strongly to believe in conspiracy theories.

Countering conspiracy theories is a societal responsibility. They are incorrect and falsely accuse people of wrongdoing. Nonetheless, special care should be exercised when opposing conspiracy theories. The accusation of supporting a conspiracy theory delegitimises positions and arguments at a fundamental level. It is therefore all the more important that the accusation is then accurate. If merely objections, questions or mistakes were to be termed and disparaged as conspiracy theories, conspiracy theorists would soon perceive that as confirmation for their positions – and people with perhaps unsubstantiated but legitimate doubts would feel that they are only taken seriously by conspiracy theorists. A clear distinction must be made between false claims, which should be countered with arguments and evidence, and conspiracy theories that require a discussion regarding their inconsistency and the moral problems associated with insufficiently substantiated accusations. This distinction is not always easy to determine, and arguing with facts and evidence is often difficult. But clear differentiation here is important in order not to fuel the defamatory game played by conspiracy theorists.

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Appendix: Parties in Germany

CDU/CSU	Christian Democratic Union/Christian Social Union	center-right
SPD	Social Democratic Party Germany	center-left
Bündnis 90/ Die Grünen (Grüne)	Federation 90/The Greens	center-left
FDP	Liberal Democratic Party	center-right
Die Linke	The Left	far-left
AfD	Alternative for Germany	far-right

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In a representative survey, the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung investigated the extent to which the belief in a “Covid-19 conspiracy” is widespread and whether the belief in conspiracy theories has increased in the course of the Covid-19 pandemic. Only a small minority of respondents consider the statement “The Coronavirus is only a pretext to oppress people” to be certainly or likely true. No increase in the belief in a global conspiracy can be determined during the Covid-19 crisis compared to the level before the pandemic.