

## CONSPIRACY THEORIES AND THEIR ARGUMENTATION STRATEGIES AS AN EXAMPLE OF IDEOLOGICAL DISCOURSES.<sup>1</sup>

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### **Abstrakt**

*Konšpiračné teórie ako špecifický typ fám (alebo neoficiálnych správ) patria k relatívne novým oblastiam výskumu vo folkloristike na Slovensku. Článok predstavuje tento žáner ako argumentatívny typ rozprávání so silným ideologickým pozadím. Autorka sa zameriava na špecifické argumentačné stratégie využívané v diskusiách na vybraných internetových fórach. Preto sa snaží namiesto „klasických“ folkloristických metód využívať niektoré prvky diskurzívnej analýzy, pomocou ktorých sa sleduje spôsoby, akými sa tieto texty prostredníctvom internetu šíria a propagujú.*

**Kľúčové slová:** konšpiračné teórie, konšpirativizmus, ideológia, diskurz, argumentačné stratégie, Slovensko

### **Abstract**

*Conspiracy theories as a specific type of rumours (or unofficial news) belong to the relative new field of research in the Slovak folklore studies. The paper presents this genre as an argumentative type of narratives, with a strong ideological background. The*

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<sup>1</sup> This contribution is a shortened and revised version of the study, which was published in the journal *Slovenský národopis/Slovak Ethnology* in 2011 (Panczová, 2011). The study was based on the author's dissertation (Panczová, Z.: *Conspiracy theory as a narrative phenomenon. / A Genre Analysis /*. [Manuscript] Institute of Ethnology SAS, Bratislava, 2009) supervised by doc. PhDr. Anna Hlôšková, CSc.

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*author focuses on specific argumentation strategies used in discussions on the selected internet forums. For that reason she tries utilize instead of the „classic“ folkloristic analytic methods some elements from discourse analysis in an effort to follow the ways of dissemination and propagation of this texts through the internet.*

**Key words:** *conspiracy theories, conspiracism, ideology, discourse, argumentation strategies, Slovakia*

## **Introduction**

In folkloristics, as in other disciplines, the theoretical or methodological inspiration in related disciplines is not uncommon. Sometimes the interdisciplinary approach appears to be pressing, given the changes and uncertainties related to the fundamental paradigms, including the very notion of folklore as a subject of research (for example: Abrahams, 1993, in Slovakia: Kiliánová, 2006, 284).

In my research, I focused on the fringe areas of communication that confront old and new ways of understanding folklore, but also those that forced me, on the other hand, to seek appropriate tools for their analysis beyond the traditional folkloristics. I refer to a broad group of rumours among which I focused on the genre of conspiracy theories - stories that reveal the conspiracy aimed at controlling, damage to or destruction of society as a whole (global conspiracy theories), or at least a certain social group.<sup>2</sup> The aim of this paper is to present conspiracy theories as a narrative-argumentative type of rumour-like interpretation, and within this, determine and demonstrate on the basis of text analysis, some of their characteristic argumentation strategies determined by the ideological discourse. I perceive this thematic scope also as an attempt to push the boundaries of contemporary folkloristics research that extends the area of its interest in accordance with the current trends in social communication.

The conspiracy theories are not purely a modern phenomenon (although the basic thematic motif of global conspiracy theories were developed in the aftermath of the French Revolution in the 18th century; it can be observed on the example of stories about Jewish, and alternatively also Christian, ritual murders not only during the Middle Ages, but also back in the ancient times<sup>3</sup>). However, I agree with the statement that in the research conditions of this type of current

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<sup>2</sup> D. Pipes in his essay divides the conspiracy theories into a “global” and a “trivial”. (Pipes, 2003, 35)

<sup>3</sup> In addition to Jewish ritual murder and other types of conspiracy accusations of the Jews (Dundes, 1991) there is also a well-known example from the history: a propaganda of Philip IV. against the Knights Templar in the early 14th century. (Pipes, 2003, 71, 77-78.)

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communication, in which I examine conspiracy theories in my paper, this genre does not meet the criteria of a folklore, as determined in Slovak folkloristics by for example, M. Leščák and O. Sirovátka.<sup>4</sup> Even if we were to recognise the legitimacy of the concept “modern folklore” as a designation for the current phenomena of non-professional art that have a direct genetic connection to the traditional culture,<sup>5</sup> the conspiracy theories as a whole do not necessarily have any artistic or aesthetic qualities. These are stories based primarily on a factual and argumentative level with a clear ideological background. That is why I contemplate them in this paper in the context of broader narrative, not folk genre categories. It is still an open question for the debate, just as the very concept of folklore still remains open. Anyway, I consider the inclusion of conspiracy theories into the focus of attention of the Slovak folkloristics as legitimate, because also the folkloristics in Slovakia has long exceeded the narrow confines of the folklore expression study as part of the traditional culture and addresses, for example, also those expressions of contemporary culture, which serve as signs of group communication and identification.<sup>6</sup>

I base it on the understanding of conspiracy theories as an argumentative type of narrative genre, where the focal point here is the monitoring the processes of persuasion. A certain paradox of the conspiracy argumentation lies in the fact that on the one hand, it emphasizes the logic of its judgements and its obviousness of the submitted evidence and on the other hand, argues that most people do not see the reality. At first glance it joins together the mutually incompatible or unrelated phenomena, arguing that the real reality is altered beyond recognition by the enemies.

Given that this paper is a summary of a more broadly conceived research (Panczová, 2009) and there is no space for detailed textual analysis in the original scope, I decided to keep a larger part of the analysed themes and their conclusions on a general theoretical level. As an example of the analysis of

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<sup>4</sup> Leščák – Sirovátka, 1982, 29-30.

<sup>5</sup> An example would be the genre of contemporary legends, which, like conspiracy theories, have the characteristics of rumour-like interpretation, but which can also be in terms of their poetics, seen, at least from certain point, as modern or urban developed branch of traditional tales. See, for example Galiová, 2003; Bennett, 1984; Ellis, 1997.

<sup>6</sup> Other than this realm of folklore expressions how it was assessed also by G. Kiliánová, the interest expands into two lines. The first is the research of the social reality at present and recent past monitored by folkloristics through the selected cultural expressions, while examining the processes leading to the portrayals of a social reality. The second is the “study of the groups, communities and individuals through cultural phenomena, that help to construct a group identity and (socio-cultural) differences (Community and Communication). (Kiliánová, 2006, 285).

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a specific textual medium I will be using monitoring tools for the legitimisation of the negative ethnic stereotypes in the conspiracy theories about Hungarian anti-Slovak conspiracies that I refer to in a separate paragraph.

### **A brief description of conspiracy theories**

Based on the available literature to me on the subject (Pipes, 2003, Hofstadter, 1965, Spark) and my previous research findings I would describe *conspiracy theories* as unverified information about public events that inform and warn against a dangerous conspiracy, while offering the identification of an enemy, his associates, their activities, objectives as well as the means to achieve them. In connection with the major historical events they highlight the role of conspiracies and do not believe the official justifications and “obvious” truths. The purveyors of the conspiracy are typically portrayed as almost ubiquitous, and yet as if invisible, while their identity and activity is obscured by those in power, especially in cooperation with the media. Even the ultimate goals of the very complicated alleged conspiracy theories are uncertain. Many of them centre around the notion of “world government”, or “New World Order”, which takes strong apocalyptic dimension not only in religious but also in political and environmental discourse. Their claims are unsubstantiated by the official news sources (which is a part of the basic definition of a rumour), and so, as there is not available evidence of their veracity, there is not always available evidence of their falsity.

Various former narrative templates of conspiracy theories have been documented in Europe at least since Classical antiquity and many themes have their roots in medieval attacks at various types of collective enemies (a typical example is the allegations of Jewish ritual murders or the propaganda waged against heretics, witches, foreigners and the like, regularly appearing in times of epidemics, famines and wars – see e.g. Delumeau, 1997; Pipes, 2003, 67-168; Trachtenberg, 1997; Dundes, 1991). However the topic of a global conspiracy aimed to establish a new world order occurs in Europe and the US mainly from the late 18th century. One may agree with an opinion that its latter-day expansion is linked with a fashion of secret societies during the Enlightenment and the French Revolution. At that time, a large part of the population of the old continent was exposed to the fear of a collapse of values, linking Christian ideology with the ideology of the feudal, clearly stratified society of estates. Violent threat of this ideological monopoly was often interpreted not as a result of social crisis, but as a pre-planned and controlled attack (Pipes, 2003, 87 ff. and Delumeau, 1997, 219-222.). Already at that time we can find many images and themes recurring in

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conspiracy theories (especially in religious and political ideologies) that express a pessimistic, apocalyptic vision of mankind's future that can also be found in the contemporary narrative.

While summarizing the characteristics of conspiracy theories as an argumentative type of narrative genre it is important to follow its polemical style. The basic definition of a rumour suggests that this is unverified information, which aims to persuade. The rumour disseminator may not be convinced of its truthfulness, and many times is his attitude rather ambivalent or doubting – but even then the rumour is presented as information that can claim its veracity or refers to those who believe in it. Even in the case of conspiracy theories the informative part alone is usually extended by a comment that refers to the narrator's attitude to the credibility of a rumour – whether in terms of its support or denial. He selects appropriate strategies which legitimise his belief while he also tries to influence his audience. Conspiracy theories have traits of polemic, equally in monologic and dialogic texts. In both cases, these discourses show signs of rivalry between the “official” and the “unofficial” interpretations of the events or between supporters and opponents of established views. The controversy may be so-called synchronous or asynchronous, since in these discourses there are very often found present or active opponents, but also the “voice” of absent opponents. These “voices” are derived either from real declaration of relevant ideological opponents, or the opinions ascribed to them.

Conspiracy theories can be attributed the following functions, for instance: *Cognitive function*. Conspiracy theory helps to find one's bearings in the world, eliminating the uncertainty of a random course of events, and with a direct narrative way reveals the logic of seemingly random events or a power structure of a society. Conspiracy theories perhaps most clearly demonstrate the attributes of rumours that show a simplified picture of the world in which it is easy to identify the good side and the dark side, and in which there are no coincidences, but deliberateness. The responsibility for what is happening in the world can be clearly attributed to the particular individuals or institutions. The basic conspiracy scheme of a global conspiracy provides universal guidance on unveiling a culprit of any disaster (global conspirators in stereotypically attributed tasks, universal enemies – Jews, USA, secret societies and the international financial group, whose aim is ultimately their own enrichment, destruction of traditional values and establishment of a new World Order). Even the conspiracy theories that are local in nature and are not involved in the context of a global conspiracy can later easily enter into the discourse on global conspiracy and become a part of its information database. In discussions about conspiracy theories, the term *conspiracism* by F. P. Mintz was as a way of interpreting the surrounding world that is subjected to a “belief in the primacy of conspiracies in the unfolding

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of history” (Mintz,, 1985, 4). It is a certain ideological filter, which reflects the different types of collectively shared social frustrations. A communication network of internet discussion forums is not just a communication channel and an Areopagus of “alternative” views, but acts as a refuge for the people connected by a mentality of a “besieged village”.<sup>7</sup>

*The function of a group identification.* The relatively stable narrative part of the conspiracy theories seems to be the characteristic of “their” as well as the “other” group, according to a more or less stable criteria: typical activities, goals, values, relative position to other social groups and membership criteria (Van Dijk, 1998, 314). This is because the conspiracy theories more or less participate in certain ideological systems. Given the focus of my work I use the notion of ideology as a certain, more or less coherent set of beliefs about the principled patterns of behaviour of human society or of a certain social group; about the distribution of power, set group values and goals. The ideological systems usually clearly define the morally acceptable and unacceptable realms of thinking and acting, and within that define also the confrontational line of rival groups of “us” and “them.” In this sense, also the ideologically anchored conspiracy theories could be perceived as an indication of a struggle for the correct interpretation of the existing world order.

As in other countries, also in Slovakia there is fertile ground for *conspiracism* especially in an environment of radical, or for the ideological change aspiring streams. Yet different ideologies have often lend to each other a relatively limited set of stereotypical enemies or lines of reasoning and have created, even within seemingly unrelated spheres of public debate, a sort of opinion coalition. It was eloquently expressed by D. Pipes: “Conspiracism that is the mentality rather than a specific set of attitudes can accommodate any political viewpoint or ideology.” (Pipes, 2003, 190). In Slovakia in the past as well as today can be seen the ideological relationship between an extreme right-wing concept of Christianity and extreme nationalism (they are connected, among other things, by their anti-liberal and in some cases also anti-Semitic and xenophobic attitudes).

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<sup>7</sup> The term “besieged village” as a symbol of collectively shared fear I took from the subtitle of J. Delumeau’s work on collective manifestations of fear in medieval Europe, where he deals with a historical analysis of collective fear experienced in different historical situations. He notes that within the period he monitored, the population of the West was affected by an aggression that caused a shock in all social classes of the population, and as a consequence that gave rise to the “land of fear”, a persistent anxiety. In this dangerous situation the contemporary ecclesiastical elite enabled people a way out - the designation of the enemy: these were Turks, Jews, heretics or witches. (Delumeau, 1997, 34).

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In the monitored discussions, mainly Jews, Freemasons, Jesuits, the USA and the powerful financial and mass media “corporations” linked with them are blamed for participation in the worldwide conspiracy. However, the Jews play a key role – this centuries-old stereotyping role of enemies, the Jews are freely interchangeable and are used as a cliché that no longer needs to be proved. They are supposed to be responsible for such key tragedies of the 20th century as the origin and consequences of Communism and Nazism, irrespective of the fact that they became their first victims (in the conspiratistic argumentation schemes this is, in fact, the evidence of their sophistication).

### **The discourse and the strategies of persuasion**

The discourses in a wider sense in linguistics are understood as actual manifestations of language use, the individual differences in their definitions are further determined by the specific problem definition. Even here, however, there are disputes about whether it is considered to be the entire communication act, or just a product of its final speech act. When analysing ideological discourse, various philosophical concepts emphasizing the role of discourse as a means of exercising social power and influencing public opinion, are applied. In the work of M. Foucault (1972) the concept of discourse works as a principal tool for the creation of social constructs. Discourse in his understanding does not represent just a passive instrument of communication, which plays a role only at the very articulation of formulated ideas, but on the contrary – it is a historically variable, but always present factor creating and structuring our thinking, forming the border of conceivable, recognisable and acceptable (Less 2006, 283-298).

In the area of social science, the discourse is thus a concept which involves the exchange and negotiation within the rules of knowledge that determine what is important and what unimportant, right and wrong, as well as the value horizons in which common or different targets and interests are formed. The focus of discursive analyses is for example on argumentation methods that may justify some objective or a path leading to it, so that they are clear and acceptable for the participants. A part of discourse characteristics are also specific competencies that determine who and how is allowed to participate in the discourse. In these broader philosophical concepts the notion of discourse seems like it takes over precisely the characteristics of a “group ideology” or eventually a “public opinion”.

From the outset it is important to emphasize that the discourse analysis is not in itself a particular scientific method. It is a broad interdisciplinary field, an area of a scientific interest, that deals with the notion of discourse and

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applies different types of analysis, from a formal linguistic methods of syntax or conversational exchanges, through different types of narrative analyses, analyses of argumentation strategies to the methods of experimentally oriented cognitive psychology focused on the observation processes of production and understanding of the text.

I considered relevant to this topic particularly the theses of a sociolinguist T. A. van Dijk devoted to critical discourse analysis of ideological texts marked by prejudices. Van Dijk, who in his work tries to theoretically define the notions of ideology and discourse, limits the concept of a discourse to verbal expressions of social communication. In his monograph *Ideology* he emphasizes linking cognitive, social and discursive parameters of investigated manifestations (Van Dijk, 1998). His theoretical model tries to describe the processes that occur with the receiver of a speech; when the isolated experiences, arguments and symbols are attributed to the general scheme and confirm the existing prejudices.

In discourse analysis, in addition to the text itself the equally important aspect of research is a “context”. Van Dijk characterizes it as “a structured set of all properties of social situations that are potentially important for the formation, structure, function and interpretation of a text and a speech” (Van Dijk, 1998, 211).<sup>8</sup> Dijk draws attention here to the fact that a text and a speech affects not so much the actual context as any objective phenomenon, but rather contextual models of speakers. These contextual models reflect how participants during a communication event see and interpret the characteristics of a social situation that concerns them at that moment (Van Dijk, 1998, 212-214).

While observing discussions about conspiracy theories as a particular expression of sharing certain ideological discourse, the discourse analysis can bring to light several factors that help to create more or less effective strategies in the process of dissemination. The methods of persuasion are, indeed, in specific discussions strongly conditioned by the overall ideological focus of the group and the relevant context, but there are still common elements, which are also known from other situations and types of discourses. Among the classical rhetorical strategies there are, for example, various forms of analogies. Rom Harré who is engaged in narrative psychology, considers the analogy as one of the most popular tools in the process of persuasion and manipulation, used for example, in scientific discourses (see Harré, 1985). Its purpose is to put the new information on the same level to the familiar, accepted or prized beliefs, knowledge and attitudes. The process of persuasion, however, in the discussions

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<sup>8</sup> There are several linguistic schemes describing the basic structure in the area of discursive analysis. The summary of the notions of context within discursive analyses see e.g. in Brown, Yule. 198, 38-39.



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about conspiracy theories I followed, is not based only on the aforementioned analogies, but also on other strategies, including manipulative tools.<sup>9</sup>

These theories have helped me to better formulate, for example, an answer to a question, why despite more tenacious argumentation between supporters and opponents of conspiracy theories it never came to more fundamental changes of assertions.

I decided to follow some authentic internet chats and analyse them, not only as texts, but in particular, as examples of discourses in certain contexts resulting from technical, situational and personal factors.<sup>10</sup> As a research method I chose a non-participating observation of discussions on those websites (realized between 2004 – 2008), which clearly showed belonging to a certain ideological group.<sup>11</sup> Based on these observations, taking into consideration the efforts to identify the essential characteristics of conspiracy theories as an argumentative type of a narrative, I identified some specific genre characteristics. These I have analysed directly by means of selected texts of conspiracy theories and the discussions about them.

## Theories about Hungarian anti-Slovak conspiracies

As I mentioned above, conspiracy theories are a significant tool of instrumentalization of group antagonism and demonization of the second group. As a part of the group ideology these become arguments for legitimising the negative attitudes of members of one group against the other. In the international conflicts (open and latent) there is no shortage of these theories, and they are often a part of the ideological heritage of previous generations. “Heritagaged” images of the group translate into petrified stereotypes, but only by using conspiracy

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<sup>9</sup> In this context, there is an interesting analytical tool the criteria of so-called “critical discussion”, formulated by Frans van Eemeren and Rob Grootendorst in their work *A Systematic Theory of Argumentation. The Pragma-dialectical Approach*. This was mainly devoted to matters of the components of argumentation, which remain verbally unexpressed, argumentative structures, patterns, and so-called “fallacies”, i.e. violation in argumentative discourse or text. The so-called pragma-dialectical theory of argumentation aimed to identify the logical and ethical rules of argumentation. As main rules of critical discussions held in an effort to solve a real problem, they set out the principles of clarity, truthfulness, honesty, efficiency and relevance. (Van Eemeren, Grootendorst, 2004, 1, 158).

<sup>10</sup> In the context of the Internet there were completely new possibilities for conspiracy theories in terms of their everyday dissemination and possible ideological links. This medium replaced the pamphlets, whose main characteristic was the anonymity and low cost.

<sup>11</sup> These were mainly a Christian discussion forum on the domain christnet.sk, and discussions on websites dedicated to “alternative news” on prop.sk and mwm.cz.

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theories or the impending threat from this group, the discourse of nationalist ideology gains a legitimacy dimension and thus a moral duty to defend “their” people.

Propaganda of these conflicts draws primarily on substantiation of historical injustices and highlighting the positives and assets of “their” nation throughout the history. One can notice in the Slovak discourse the residues of nationalistic propaganda of the 19th and the first half of the 20th century, especially in revitalizing the clichés and stereotypes about the millennial oppression and about the progression of a fall of Great Moravia, the origin and collective nature of Hungarians and Slovaks etc. Even within these conflicts it is typical for the ideological propaganda to perceive the enemy in a conspiratorial light.

Among the Slovak internet forums the discussions on the domain [www.prop.sk](http://www.prop.sk) (now on [www.protiprudu.sk](http://www.protiprudu.sk))<sup>12</sup> proceeded in this direction. It was a domain which from the ideological point of view seems to be favouring Slovak and Slavic nationalism, yet often explicitly promotes the so-called white nationalism<sup>13</sup> that is close to racism. Its proclaimed ideological adversary was the cosmopolitanism combined with the principles of multiculturalism and liberalism.<sup>14</sup>

Except the proclaimed Jewish-Slovak, Jewish-Christian and in general the Jewish-civilisational conflict (linked, naturally, to the US, to the ideas of an open and liberal society, etc.) there, on the internet forums is also emphasized the Slovak-Hungarian tension. This is reflected not only in the belief in a serious danger of Hungarian chauvinism that threatens the dissolution of Slovakia, but also in condemning and negatively stereotyping Hungarians, their ethnic characteristics, symbols and history.

In the discussions on that domain, for example, a well-known case of Hungarian nationality student Hedviga Malinová, who becomes a victim of ethnic violence on 25<sup>th</sup> August 2006 in Nitra, was formed into a conspiracy

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<sup>12</sup> At the end of my research (2009) the website [www.prop.sk](http://www.prop.sk) was forced to cancel its activity on the internet just because of proven offence of defamation of nation, race and belief. It resulted from a complaint lodged by Member of Parliament Natália Blahová in May 2010. Despite this, the page continues even today on <http://www.protiprudu.org/>, where one can find the explanation that one of its supporters decided to renew it again.

<sup>13</sup> White nationalism (in the discourse of its opponents often called white supremacism) as an ideology, includes not only the different forms of presentation of pride of belonging to the white race but also the arguments in favour of racial segregation and the need to combat immigration, multiculturalism and so-called Jewish supremacism negating the traditions and values of the white race. Its leading ideologist is a politician David Duke, who was, among other things, a member of the Ku Klux Klan, unsuccessfully aspired to the candidacy for President of the United States, but earned a PhD. from history in Ukraine for the work entitled “Zionism as a form of Ethnic Supremacism.”

<sup>14</sup> <[http://www.prop.sk/kto\\_za\\_koho\\_kope.htm](http://www.prop.sk/kto_za_koho_kope.htm)>

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theory. Malinová testified that shortly before the attack she was heard speaking to someone in Hungarian, after that she was brutally beaten and had written on her shirt “Hungarians behind the Danube”. This event not only vigorously stirred Slovak and Hungarian public opinion, but had a violent response in the diplomatic field. In addition to the “everyday” latent ethnic tensions, the political climate was whipped by the fact that after election in 2006 the Slovak National Party became part of a government (2006-2010), which led to various mutual provocations, such as provocative slogans on posters on the tribunes of Hungarian football fans or a video of the Hungarian national flag being burned. The aforementioned video attracted media attention also abroad, while on the internet discussions some conspiratorially tuned interpretations could be found.

On the internet forums that I followed, there were initially no discussions about the report of a girl being attacked. The situation changed only when there was a change in the official interpretation of the act, thus when the victim became the accused and on the basis of public speech of the Interior Minister, Malinová became a target of suspicion of a perjury.<sup>15</sup> At that point this interpretation resonated with the people discussing it at the forum [www.prop.sk](http://www.prop.sk) so much that this event found itself at the forefront of discussion topics by a number of contributors. Some discussants, except the invective on her head and “Hungarians”, expressed an inkling but also a strong belief in the conspiracy of the ‘Hungarian’ Party (Hungarian politicians, or their allies from the Party of the Hungarian Coalition.) A conspiratorial interpretation of the events were a year later supported by the announcement of Prime Minister R. Fico, who, according to an article taken from the Reuters agency in an electronic version of a daily newspaper *Pravda* claimed, that “the case ... of the Nitra student was a case, which should have led to the termination of this government,” and “because the truth is proving quite different, someone needs to keep this case still alive at all costs.”<sup>16</sup>

The stance of the Slovak Interior Minister and Slovak police was consistent with the ideological orientation of the participants to the discussion, for whom it was a matter of some satisfaction as oppose to their ideological opponents (i.e. those “who still did not know”) and within the accepted context model confirmed one of its fundamental ideological axioms. An example of a local type of a conspiracy theory in the interpretation of the attack on Hedviga Malinová

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<sup>15</sup> Source: An article in the electronic edition of the daily SME: “Student: They ambushed me. Police: There was no assault.” SME.sk, 14.9.2006. Accessible on 20.10.2006 at < <http://www.sme.sk/c/2895506/studentka-prepadli-ma-policia-prepad-nebol.htm>

<sup>16</sup> Source: An article in the electronic edition of daily *Pravda* - Fico: The Case Malinová should have lead to the fall of the government. *Pravda*. sk, 22.8.2007. Accessible on 23.8.2007 on <[http://spravy.pravda.sk/fico-kauza-malinova-mala-viest-k-padu-vlady-f2f-/sk\\_domace.asp?c=A070822\\_175103\\_sk\\_domace\\_p04](http://spravy.pravda.sk/fico-kauza-malinova-mala-viest-k-padu-vlady-f2f-/sk_domace.asp?c=A070822_175103_sk_domace_p04)>

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as a planned anti-government activity, is also the rumour that in fact she was not attacked by the Slovak skinheads, but by Hungarian extremists (specifically by the members of the organisation ‘64 Counties’) to artificially provoke condemnation of the Slovak chauvinism.

A similar analysis of the case found an analogy with the French case of a stage-managed racist attack, known as the Leblanc case, where the alleged victim was convicted of making false accusation and fraud. The mentioned case took place in Paris in 2004 and the main protagonist was the then 23 year-old Marie-Leonie Leblanc, mother of a 13 month-old baby. According to the testimony, she made to the local police, on 9<sup>th</sup> July 2004 on the train she was allegedly verbally and physically assaulted by a group of six young men of Arab origin, because she was considered Jewish. They were alleged to have overturned the pushchair with her child, rip down her dress and draw a swastika on her stomach. While this was happening the passengers apparently did not react at all. The scandal, which broke out on the basis of this, was internationally recognised, because Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon responded to it. It turned out though that it was a fictional incident – after four days she withdrew her testimony and admitted that the injuries were self-inflicted (She retracted her story four days later, saying she had inflicted the wounds on herself), the reason was allegedly an attempt to attract the attention of the world. She received a public condemnation by the French Prime Minister, as well as a two-year suspended prison sentence.<sup>17</sup>

Using this analogy H. Malinová could have also invented the incident, while the injury – according to the discussants – might have been caused by her boyfriend. This interpretation created a parallel in an effort to stay in the set ideological framework where intrigue within the Party of the Hungarian Coalition and the main person responsible – Pál Csáky, the party’s chairman himself, could have initiated the incident. Perhaps a certain form of an established tool in the ideological struggle can be seen- *to replace the role of an aggressor and a victim*.

In these discussions (with few exceptions) there was no process of persuasion among the contributors, because almost none of them admitted that Malinová might be right, and with their opinions they were mutually supportive. The controversy here runs on a different level – with the passively present “voice” of that part of media and public opinion which believed Malinová’s version.

On the basis of the discussion contributions it can be clearly seen that in addition to the facts themselves, the creation of relevant interpretations is based especially on the previous stances against the current Slovak government,

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<sup>17</sup> More about it for example in a newspaper article by J. Henley „Women sentenced for anti-semitism lie“ v *The Guardian* from 27<sup>th</sup> July 2004. Accessible on 28.7. 2006 on <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2004/jul/27/france.jonhenley>>

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the police, the representatives of the politics of Hungarian minority and the Hungarian minority as such.<sup>18</sup> Also this example shows that the development of mental models about an event which could have been in itself ideologically neutral (two thugs attacking a girl), was clearly affected by the previous beliefs about Slovak-Hungarian tensions, hence they were based on the sharing of relevant ideological beliefs. The incident became a part of the existing rival ethnic ideological schemes, relatively stable and so stereotyped that for the people involved, the conspiracy explanations became a relevant substitute for the missing facts.

Typical for the site [www.prop.sk](http://www.prop.sk) were analogies interconnecting local conspiracies and images of an enemy with stereotyped global conspiratorial system. The case of Hedviga Malinová in the monitored period was not the only issues where the Slovak-Hungarian antagonism was growing. Here we find also the theories that link the local Hungarian enemy with a global conspiracy.

One such a theory is the thesis linking claims about the Khazar origin of the European Jews with theories of Turkic origin of Hungarians. According to this the Ashkenazi living in Europe are in fact from the ethnic point of view not Semitic, but of Turkic origin. Ethnic kinship also creates historically immutable character traits and common interests of the Hungarians and ungentine “Jews” (who have nothing to do with the Biblical chosen people). And since it is “obvious” that these Khazar Jews want to rule the world by creating a “new world order” and the destruction of the original peoples of Europe, their relatives – Hungarians, focus on the same, either consciously or as a Jewish instrument.

One of the contributions to the discussion on the domain [www.prop.sk](http://www.prop.sk) even attributed to the Hungarians the old anti-Semitic theories about the natural tendency to occultism and vampirism. The tendency to perversions that are attributed to the Jews and which are to be – in the context of other analogies – also typical for today’s decadent period (the “homosexualization” of society, the decline of the male population, promotion of gender equality, family breakdown, an increased tendency to mental disorders etc.) relate to their hereditary degeneration. This theory, which is a partially modified thesis about the degeneration of society by the Russian author A. Klimov (*The Red Inquisition*; an author popularized by the [prop.sk](http://www.prop.sk) web site) is in many ways close to Nazi racial theories. It is also consistent with the concept of impurities known from the perception of the opposition “us” versus “them”/“foreign”, while in the observed discussion it is transferred into theories of a degenerated Hungarian

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<sup>18</sup> Accesible on the internet on 3.3.2008 at: <[http://hnonline.sk/3-19601420-Malinov%E1-k00000\\_detail-a8](http://hnonline.sk/3-19601420-Malinov%E1-k00000_detail-a8)>

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ethnic group, which is from the genetic point of view compared to Slavs equally worthless, or even more harmful than the Jewish group.

## Conclusions and discussion

Here I will try to evaluate briefly the results of my observations of the internet forums. In the context of a reflection of the group tensions (we observed tension between the extreme Slovak nationalists and “Hungarians”, or between the Christians, Jews and the Freemasons) the main underlying strategy also in the conspiracy theories seems to be the *replacement of the aggressor and the victim* – a conspiracy theory persuades about the eligibility of aggressive stances against the members of “their” group due to the fact that it reveals a prepared conspiracy by “them” against “us”. It is similar in the realm of conspiracy theories about deliberately classified negative effects of some technical, medical and food products on human health – a significant component of the argumentative line is the revelation legitimising the intuitive mistrust of “artificial” or “unnatural” products of science and industry.

The prediction that in the discussions where the direct or indirect controversy was important usually does not result in fundamental changes of ideological attitudes and beliefs was confirmed. In cases of such controversy the creation of subjective mental models about the discussed facts and about the discourse itself (about its participants, strategies and objectives) is too firmly anchored in corresponding ideological barriers. For the tendency to incline towards a certain opinion, or reject it, had, in this case, a great importance and a variety of broader context influencing the creation of a model for this discussion. Similarly, in the discussions concerning the Hungarian conspiracy in the case of Hedviga Malinová cause, is the importance of the contextual models of events related particularly to their previous stances to “Hungarians”, Slovak-Hungarian Coalition Party, Slovak politicians or the Slovak police. The important elements of the argumentation appeared to be for example the components of *the authority of resources* and *the competences of the discussants*. This study also showed that the conspiracism can offer effective discursive tools that prevent rapid changes in the ideological beliefs of discussants. The discursive manifestation of these barriers were the following “defence strategies”:

- enforcement of the argumentation type *ad hominem* – excluding of the opponents from the discourse not only because of their accusations of incompetence and bias. They are discredited on charges of (conscious or unconscious) adherence to the side of evil as a victim of manipulation of the conspirators or as direct supporters;

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- bridging the conflicts when confronted by facts contradicting the theories through rich interpretative possibilities of universal conspiracy symbols and images of the enemy (the rich connotations associated with notions of Jewish conspiracies, secret societies, international corporations);
  - ignoring time, geographical and psychological limits in the image of an enemy, what facilitates the accumulation, links the particular theories and confirms the cross-linking and non-randomness of the given phenomena.

As an important strategy for argumentation seems to also be the use of *analogies* that are a frequent tool of persuasion in scientific discourses as well (Harré 1985). In the case of conspiracy theories, the analogies often occur in the logically weakest defensible claims connected to explanation of a morally negative image of the enemy. In the texts I followed, these were for example the analogies between stereotyped images of a hostile group that aims to reinforce the impression of threats deriving from the alliances between different types of enemies (Jews, Hungarians, Gypsies, Freemasons and Satanists as an interrelated group of traditional enemies of Slovaks and Slavs in general) or analogies with similarly perceived national characteristics replacing the missing evidence in case of concrete allegations of conspiracy.

New possibilities open up for research in the topic of conspiracy theories to monitor current and urgent manifestations of collectively shared feelings of threat or frustration. They reflect the current desire of man to orientate himself in the excess of information in this Internet age, or let us say, defeat the current information chaos, fight the feeling of being manipulated by the ubiquitous media – while addressing the existing philosophical and political dilemmas using already formulated and proven ideological schemes. A. Spark, in this regard, explains that the scientific research of conspiracy theories should focus on understanding the high popularity of conspiracy theories, which he calls the effort for narrativization of feelings of confusion and complexity of the world in the lives of people from the end of the 20th century. Only after realising the internalised logic of conspiratorial thinking – in a sense of conspiracism – can scientists contemplate the causes of the increase in popularity as well as the free circulation of conspiracy theories from the late 1980s (Spark). Ultimately also this study has opened only one of many possible themes and pathways to explain this multidimensional phenomenon.

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