Beliefs in conspiracy theories (CT): the role of country context

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ABSTRACT
While there is an increasing body of research on the individual predispositions affecting conspiracy beliefs, little research has to date analysed potential effects on the context level. In this research note, we develop the argument that socialization and communication factors on the context level may directly affect aggregate levels of generic conspiracy beliefs. Second, we analyse whether these context level factors also interact with specific characteristics of the conspiracy theory—in our case, the actors involved in the CT. Running survey experiments in Germany, Poland, and Jordan (total N = 4,113), we find evidence for aggregate level differences between countries and for interactions between country-specific heuristics and characteristics of the CT. These findings are in line with expectations based on context level socialization and communication mechanisms. In closing, we discuss remaining limitations and outline promising avenues for future research.

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Introduction
What makes an individual believe in conspiracy theories (CTs)? In the past ten years, a plentitude of studies has analysed why some people believe in narratives about a secret group of malevolent actors that pursues a hidden plot with the intent to secure or strengthen its own power (see for similar definitions, Uscinski and Parent 2014 or van der Linden 2015),—among others, by hurting or even destroying the in-group of the believer. This research has been most prominently undertaken in social and personality psychology and has focused on personality traits and individual-level attitudes towards society and politics (for a systematic review see, Goreis and Voracek 2019).

Yet, more recently and especially during the COVID-19 pandemic, initial evidence accumulated that the level of CT belief may be more volatile over time and contexts than could be expected if such beliefs were purely a function of long-term predispositions (Decker et al. 2020; Roozenbeek et al. 2020; but see Uscinski et al. 2020). Hence, in this research note we propose to take the context level of an individual’s country more strongly into account—as a socializing context and as a context in which the most effective form of
political communication takes place. We start by outlining the ideas of scholars from cultural and social studies who indicate that individual CT belief should be also shaped by socialization instances. Then, we move on to insights from political communication research and develop the argument that individual CT beliefs may also be the effect of whether governmental communication in the individual’s country is containing higher or lower levels of conspiracy theories. Finally, we argue that both, socialization and communication factors, not only have an impact on how likely citizens are to believe in CTs more generally but also affect which specific CTs are more believable than others. To illustrate how our argument may then be used to further understand context-level factors influencing CT beliefs in addition to individual-level predispositions, we derive two expectations regarding the effects of context-level factors on generic and specific CT beliefs.

First, the context level should have an impact on the mean level of CT beliefs per country based on factors such as a country’s religiosity, level of actual conspiracy experiences, and governmental communication containing CTs (Expectation 1: direct context effect). Second, and focusing more on the content of specific CTs, we expect that a CT becomes more believable to citizens if it contains a conspiratorial actor that is more negatively stereotyped in a given country’s societal context or political communication (Expectation 2: moderating context effect).

Using an explorative research design in the framework of this research note that sets out to inform future and more rigorous research testing our arguments, we analyse survey experiments fielded in Germany, Poland, and Jordan with about 1,300 respondents in each of the three countries that vary significantly in their degree of religiosity, level of conspiracy experiences, and conspiratorial content of political communication. Our findings demonstrate, first, that citizens in these three countries indeed vary in their levels of CT beliefs, indicating that the context may actually matter. Second, we find no significant differences for CT credibility in regard to the conspiratorial actor among all citizens, hence refuting the socialization argument underlying our Expectation 2. Yet, when we analyse the data only for respondents supporting their government to explore the communication argument underlying Expectation 2, we find significant differences for government supporters for Poland but not for Germany as theoretically expected. In the conclusion, we outline the implications of these findings for future research on the role of context-level explanations for CT beliefs and discuss the limitations of our research note.

**Context level factors affecting generic and specific conspiracy beliefs**

Psychological research over the last ten years has provided a plentitude of evidence on individual-level factors influencing generic conspiracy beliefs and beliefs in specific conspiracy theories (see again the meta-analysis in Goreis and Voracek 2019, but also the more recent research connected to the COVID-19 pandemic, e.g. Heiss et al. 2021).¹

In the remainder, we will elaborate the argument that the context level may also have an additional influence on both generic and specific conspiracy beliefs of individuals. Combining ideas from two different literatures, we argue that the context level may have two effects, a direct and an indirect one. First, in some countries we expect CT belief to be generally stronger than in others which may be due to country characteristics regarding levels of religiosity, of experience of actual conspiracies and of governmental...
communication embracing conspiracy theories. Second, the credibility of a CT may be dependent on the varying levels of negative stereotypes towards different potential conspiratorial actors in a given country.

**Context effects: the level of generic CT beliefs**

In contrast to psychological research, scholars from the fields of cultural studies and sociology have highlighted the potential effects of context level factors. In essence, their main point is that some countries might be more attentive towards CT beliefs than others. Their argumentation is twofold: First, in contrast to what they consider to be the main storyline of previous psychological and political research, they claim that conspiratorial thinking is not something bizarre or abnormal but can be prevalent, and, thus, a shared cultural phenomenon (Butter and Knight 2016). Second, that conspiratorial thinking might be a shared cultural phenomenon is supported, according to these scholars, by the perception that countries differ in the credibility of CTs to a wider public. In their view, hence, treating such a cultural or societal phenomenon as something that can only be reduced to individual level factors seems to be misguided.

We term these kinds of argument the *socialization effect of the context level* as it expects citizens being shaped by their societal surrounding over a longer-term period. Scholars in this research tradition hence propose to think of individuals’ conspiracy beliefs to be affected by long-term collective factors, such as the role of specific religious traditions within a given society or the collective experiences of actual conspiracies throughout a society’s history (Butter and Knight 2016; Butter and Reinkowski 2014). In the case of the US, for example, an argument in cultural studies is that the Puritan tradition of the founding generations, especially its perception of the devil being behind any negative event happening, prepared the way for a society being substantially fascinated by conspiracy theories (Butter 2014). As a second example, the history of experiencing actual conspiracies as a group might be a factor explaining the assumingly higher levels of conspiracy beliefs among citizens in the Arab region and among Afro-American citizens in the US (again, see Butter and Knight 2016; Butter and Reinkowski 2014).

A second strand of research grounded in research of political communication has most recently proposed to analyse more consistently the effects of *political communication* using conspiracy theories (e.g. Plenta 2020; Hameleers 2021; Huang 2017; Yablokov 2015). Such political communication effects may also be considered as context level effects since the use of conspiracy theories obviously varies between political and societal elites of different countries. From that perspective, in countries in which the political and societal elites use conspiracy theories more frequently, the societal stigma of believing in such theories more generally should be lower. As a result, more citizens should be willing to agree to conspiracy theories in general. We call this the salience effect of political conspiracy communication. Note, however that both strands of research are compatible, as there is a higher likelihood of conspiracy-intense political communication in countries shaped by higher religiosity and higher degrees of actual conspiracy experiences. In sum, we exploratively expect in this research note that the general likelihood of believing in conspiracy theories – a conspiracy mentality – is higher among citizens living in a country with higher religiosity, higher degrees of actual conspiracies, and / or higher degrees of political conspiracy communication (Expectation 1).
Context effects: the varying credibility of specific CT beliefs

Second, the content of conspiracy theories might also play a role for the credibility of conspiracy theories among the public in a way that is dependent on the country context. Recent events related to the COVID-19 pandemic and the media coverage reporting about these events have indicated that the conspiratorial actors that are most dominant in conspiracy communication seem to vary over countries. CTs focusing on Bill Gates as the secret agent behind the conspiracy seems more popular in Western Europe, while China as the secret agent seems to be more plausible to US Americans (see, e.g. Douglas 2021).

We assume this to be a context level effect, the mechanism of which may be explained from the socialization or the political communication perspective or a combination of both. The emphasis on specific characteristics of CTs may either affect the CTs credibility by the characteristics being in line with long-term stereotypes widely distributed in society or being in line with the communication of trusted political and societal elites or being in line with both, long-term stereotypes and short-term political communication.

Take Hungary under Viktor Orban as an example: Probably the single most important conspiracy theory used by Orban and his government is the theory of George Soros aiming to destroy the real Hungary through secret plots such as the increase of (Muslim) mass immigration to Hungary or the implementation of anti-Hungarian civil society organizations and universities inside Hungary. The focus on Soros not only builds on anti-Semitic and anti-capitalist stereotypes that have been prevalent in parts of the society for a long time, but by insisting on them in the repeated use of the Soros conspiracy theory, it makes these stereotypes and their socialization effects even more enduring (e.g. Plenta 2020).

Hence, we argue that specific characteristics of CTs as their content make them more or less believable dependent on whether these characteristics (a) are more salient in political communication in a given country and / or (b) are more in line with socialized stereotypes in a given country. In this first investigation of this argument, we focus on the CT actor as a key CT characteristic, as the examples above indicate that specific actors make a CT more or less credible in a country or regional context (again, see Douglas 2021).

More formally, we argue that the credibility of a conspiracy theory depends in parts on whether the malevolent actor (as one important characteristic of a conspiracy theory) triggers an accessible social heuristic or stereotype. From the socialization perspective, a conspiracy theory should become more credible to an individual if the malevolent actor is an actor that is already perceived negatively from larger parts of the society the individual is living in. An individual takes the negative societal opinion towards the actor as a straightforward and accessible heuristic to decide whether this actor may in fact be able to conspire or not – and, hence, whether the conspiracy theory is believable or not. From the political communication perspective, a conspiracy theory should become more credible to an individual if the malevolent actor is an actor who has repeatedly been part of the conspiracy theory issued by political or societal elites that a citizen trusts. We hence exploratively expect in this research note that citizens’ belief in a specific conspiracy theory is higher if the conspiratorial or malevolent actor is in line with common long-term stereotypes widely distributed in society and / or in line with conspiracy theories promoted by trusted political or societal elites (Expectation 2).
Research design

In this research note, we do not aim to comprehensively test the theoretical expectations that we outlined above. Instead, we understand our empirical analysis to be a first explorative test of two expectations that contain the broad lines of both, a socialization and a political communication line of argumentation. To do so, we designed and conducted a survey experiment in three countries – Germany, Jordan and Poland. We will first discuss this selection of cases in a somewhat broader and more qualitatively enriched way. This allows us to illustrate why we consider these cases as a first but revealing look at whether our theoretical argumentation may find evidence in reality. Thereafter, we will turn to the more methodological details of our research design, including sampling, data collection and variables.

Case selection

In selecting Germany, Jordan, and Poland – as well as originally Lebanon,³ – we choose to use a sample of countries that might seem surprising on first sight. However, for shedding empirical light on the plausibility of our theoretical argumentation, this sample has great advantages. In our survey experiment, we use a conspiracy theory that focusses on what has been called the migration crisis. To ensure that this topic is of equal relevance to all respondents, we sampled countries where this crisis was of enduring salience in public communication and politics.⁴ From this larger sample, we then selected two countries from Europe and two countries from the Middle East, the latter of which are said to be more prone to conspiracy theories at both the elite and the mass level and to have experienced more actual conspiracies than is true for European countries (Butter and Reinkowski 2014). However, to gain even more variance regarding our arguments, we chose to use countries from the European context of one which is more known for conspiracy communication and the other one less so (Davies 2016; Soral et al. 2018). In addition, we wanted countries to vary in terms of religiosity among its citizenry.

Obviously, creating an ideal sample based on these conditions would have resulted in a much larger number of countries but as for most social scientists, our budget only allowed to sample for a limited number of countries: in our case, four – in the end: three – countries. Still, we are quite confident that this sample allows to explore the plausibility of our argumentation.

For Expectation 1, we mentioned three potential mechanisms, two from a socialization and one from a political communication perspective. If the level of religiosity is decisive, we should observe the following pattern of generic conspiracy beliefs: Jordan > Poland > Germany, as religiosity should be most important to citizens in Jordan, followed by Polish and German citizens (PEW 2008; Theodorou 2015). If the level of actual conspiracies experienced in a given country or region is decisive, then we should observe the following patterns: Jordan > Poland = Germany, with Poland and Germany having experienced less conspiracies undertaken by external conspiratorial actors – which we are focusing on in our experiment – taking place in the past compared to Jordan (Butter and Reinkowski 2014).

Finally, if the level of conspiracy theories in the communication of political and societal elites is decisive, we should expect the following pattern: Poland > Jordan > Germany. While we do not observe a salient distribution of conspiracy theories – at least not
before the COVID-19 pandemic – among political and societal elites in Germany, the opposite is true for Jordan and Poland. Especially since the Kaczynski-led PiS (Law and Justice party) in Poland took over power with the general elections in 2015, governmental communication in Poland has been filled with conspiracy theories. After his twin brother died in an airplane accident over Russian ground in 2010, Kaczynski has ever since argued that the Russian government has purposively shot the airplane. Furthermore, the Polish government has often indicated that there is a secret German-led plot that – under the framework of European integration – wants to recolonize Poland and destroy Polish values. Both conspiracy schemes are fed by the long term of Soviet (that is, Russian) suppression of Polish sovereignty during the Cold War (Davies 2016). The prominence of these and other – ‘gender’ and ‘Jewish’ – conspiracy theories have led Soral et al. (2018, 372) to state that ‘Poland is a country in which conspiracy beliefs seem ubiquitous in social and political life.’ In Jordan, the prominence of conspiracy theories in political communication is less visible, especially when it comes to the monarchy itself stating them. Still, one finds media comments published in outlets that are close to the monarchy, meaning that the comments are at least not in contrast to what the monarchy thinks. One of them makes the strong case that conspiracy theories are widely distributed among the Jordanian elite and public, but this is so for good reasons, as they all have a true core. In the view of the commentator, conspiracy theories – especially those about Israel and Jewish political actors – describe what is going on rather than being fictitious (Majdoubeh 2014). Hence, it seems plausible to state that conspiracy theories are part of the political communication by political and societal elites but maybe not as dominant as in the case of Poland.

These examples also provide additional information for Expectation 2. In our experiment, as we outline below in more detail, we vary the conspiratorial actor between experimental groups, the actor being the secret service from either Russia, Israel or the USA. We do not expect differences in the credibility of the specific CT along the variance of the three actors in Germany, as neither public stereotypes nor political communication would indicate a clear ranking of negative stereotypes associated with the three actors.

For Poland, the socialization argument would expect significant differences following the pattern: Russia > Israel > USA, with the latter seemingly being the actor least mentioned in circulating conspiracy theories (again, Davies 2016). The communication argument would expect significant differences following the same pattern, but only among citizens that trust the government who prominently spreads conspiracy theories including Russian and sometimes also Jewish actors.

For Jordan, the socialization argument would expect significant differences following the pattern Israel >= USA > Russia, with Russia seemingly being the actor least prominently represented in the conspiracy theories outlined in the source above and other prominent CTs in the region (Butter and Reinkowski 2014). Again, the communication argument would probably follow the same pattern, but with a greater difference between credibility of a CT including an Israeli actor and CTs including US or Russian actors, as the USA are over recent years seen as an ally by the monarchy. However, as this should be true for supporters of the monarchy only, we cannot test this expectation, as no survey institute in Jordan would ask questions for citizens’ degree of monarchy support – and even if so, we surely would have a strongly biased variable. We sum up our expected observational patterns in the following Table 1.
Sampling, data collection and variables

For each of our three countries, we aimed to sample 1,300 participants. The actual number of participants added up to 1,451 in Poland, 1,358 in Germany and 1,304 in Jordan.\(^5\)

The mean age of participants was 40.8 (in Poland, SD: 12.7), 46.9 (in Germany, SD 13.4) and 40.3 (in Jordan, SD: 14.9), respectively. The percentage of female participants in the country samples amounted to 53.3\% (in Poland), 52.7\% (in Germany), and 49.8\% (in Jordan). The average number of education years was 16.4 (in Poland, SD: 3.2) and 14.6 (in Germany, SD: 3.5), including times of university studies or apprenticeship. In Jordan, participants were asked for their highest school or university degree. About two-thirds of our participants in Jordan (67.9\%) had some sort of a higher degree that provides them access to university or higher education. Full details on the survey experiment including the questionnaire as well as other features of the project framework within which the survey has been implemented can be found on OSF (https://osf.io/rk2av/).

Conspiracy mentality. As a measure for generic conspiracy beliefs relevant for Expectation 1, we decided to use the Conspiracy Mentality Questionnaire (CMQ) as proposed by Bruder et al. (2013). The questionnaire consists of four statements on general conspiratorial items.\(^6\) For each of the statements, participants were asked to rate their likelihood of being true, ranging from 0\% to 100\% (with options changing in steps of 10\%).

Belief in specific conspiracy theory. We measured the degree of belief in a specific CT by providing participants with a statement (= conspiracy theory) and asking them to indicate to what extent they agree with that statement (with answer options ranging from 1 = ‘do not agree at all’ to 6 = ‘fully agree’). The statement indicated that a source A told the audience of platform B that actor C causes refugee crises in other countries to gain or sustain the power of C’s country. For being able to test Expectation 2, we varied the malevolent C by randomly attributing participants the US intelligence agency, the Russian intelligence agency or the Israeli intelligence agency as being actor C. To then analyse Expectation 2, we compare the mean levels of participants’ agreement with that statement dependent on the interaction between the type of C and the participant’s country.

Government support. In order to analyse the implications of the communicative mechanism potentially underlying Expectation 2, we calculated a sub-group of citizens in Germany and Poland who can be considered to support the government. We measure government support by whether citizens indicate that they would vote for any of the parties forming the country’s government at the time of the survey. For Germany, these are citizens indicating to vote for the Christian Democratic Union (Christlich

Table 1. Observable implications of expectations.

| Expectation 1 (Mean level of CT beliefs: Direct country effects) | All citizens | Citizens trusting government |
|---------------------------------------------------------------|--------------|-----------------------------|
| Socialization (Religiosity)                                  | Jordan > Poland > Germany |                            |
| Socialization (Actual Experience)                            | Jordan > Poland = Germany |                            |
| Communication                                                | Poland > Jordan > Germany |                            |
| Expectation 2 (Likelihood of CT belief dependent on conspiratorial actor: Moderating country effects) |                       | Poland: Russia > Israel > USA |
| Socialization                                                | Poland: No effect | Jordan: No effect |
| Communication                                                | Poland: No effect | Germany: No effect |
|                                                              | Jordan: Israel > USA >= Russia |
Demokratische Union, CDU) or the Social Democratic Party of Germany (Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands, SPD). For Poland, these are citizens indicating to vote for the party Law and Justice (Prawo i Sprawiedliwość, PiS).  

**Empirical findings**

**Direct effects of country context**

To test our Expectation 1, we first conducted a one-way ANOVA to test for differences in the mean generic conspiracy beliefs in Germany, Poland, and Jordan. Results showed a significant effect of the country context on generic conspiracy beliefs, $F(2, 3613) = 247.7$, $p < .001$, with the mean values of generic conspiracy beliefs being 7.4 (in Germany, SD: 2.1), 7.6 (in Poland, SD: 2.0) and 9.0 (in Jordan, SD: 1.7) on a range from 1 to 11. Post hoc $t$-tests revealed similar effects, which can be found in Supplement A. Hence, our findings provide first evidence for the plausibility of the socialization effect via experiences with actual conspiracies in a given country (see Figure 1). To further lend credence to our findings, ensuring the psychometric equivalence of the CMQ across countries and to test Expectation 1 in an additional way, we employed several robustness checks, which can be found in Supplement A (A1, A2 and A3). Finally, the analyses with specific beliefs to which we turn below also fully replicate our findings of direct context effects.

**Moderating effects of country context**

Exploring Expectation 2, we first applied ordinary least square (OLS) regression models for each country separately with participants’ belief in the specific conspiracy theory being the dependent variable and the different malevolent actors in the conspiracy theory

![Figure 1.](image)
being the independent variables. For each CT actor, we coded a separate dummy variable and included the dummies for the Israeli and the Russia intelligence agencies as dummies, with the US intelligence agency being the baseline condition. In addition, we calculated models separately for citizens indicating that they support their government in Germany and Poland.

As Table 2 demonstrates, there is no systematic effect of different malevolent actors on the mean credibility of the specific conspiracy theory among all citizens in any of the three countries (columns 1–3 of Table 2). This does not change if ordered logit models are used instead of OLS models (see Supplement A4). Hence, we do not find evidence for the socialization argument underlying Expectation 2. In contrast, the test of the communication-based argument provides confirmative results in the last two columns of Table 2. Among government supporters in Germany, changing the conspiratorial actor has no effect on the credibility of a conspiracy theory. However, for supporters of the Polish government we find that Russian- and Israeli-led conspiracies are significantly and substantively more credible than an US-led conspiracy. This is in line with the expectations we had for Poland based on the communication argument. Figures 2 and 3 demonstrate these findings graphically. Again, we could not run such analyses for an authoritarian country like Jordan due to the sensitivity of questions about the monarchy both for the polling agencies and respondents.

In addition, we tested Expectation 2 by including interaction effects of country and malevolent actors on belief in the specific CT in a set of moderated multiple regression analyses (see Supplement B). The country-specific effect of malevolent actor did not differ as a function of the country when tested for all citizens. Hence, we found no evidence for the socialization argument underlying Expectation 2. Yet, when running the moderated regression models for German and Polish citizens trusting their respective government, we once again observe the patterns plotted in Table 2. Therefore, these robustness checks corroborate the findings presented above and lend more credence to the communication argument underlying Expectation 2.

**Discussion and conclusion**

In this research note, we have taken up the puzzle of recent research indicating that the level of beliefs in conspiracy theories may be more volatile and more dependent, (a) on the country context and (b) on specific characteristics of the conspiracy theory than assumed by previous research. To analyse whether this is the case, we propose to integrate arguments from cultural studies and communication studies into research explaining CT beliefs. To do so, we first systematized the arguments made by cultural and communication scholars into models of direct socialization and communication effects regarding individual generic conspiracy beliefs. In essence, we expect differences in the

**Table 2. Explaining belief in specific conspiracy theory by type of malevolent actor.**

| Malevolent Actor | All citizens (Germany) | All citizens (Poland) | All citizens (Jordan) | Government Supporters (Germany) | Government Supporters (Poland) |
|------------------|------------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|--------------------------------|--------------------------------|
| Israel           | -.21 (.12)             | .09 (.11)             | .08 (.13)             | -.11 (.16)                     | .50 (.23)*                     |
| Russia           | -.10 (.12)             | .19 (.12)             | .05 (.13)             | -.01 (.21)                     | .65 (.24)**                    |
| Constant         | 3.06 (.08)***          | 3.48 (.08)***         | 4.02 (.09)***         | 2.95 (.16)***                  | 3.69 (.15)***                  |
| NoC / Adj. R²    | 914 / 0.1%             | 920 / 0.0%            | 1170 / 0.0%           | 259 / 0.0%                     | 203 / 3.3%                     |
mean level of (generic) CT beliefs across countries that differ in socialization contexts such as levels of religiosity, actual conspiracy experiences or governmental communication including conspiracy theories.

Second, we developed an explanatory model on how context-level socialization and communication mechanisms might interact with characteristics of specific conspiracy
theories in a way that makes them more or less credible for individuals living within that context. To shed a first light on these claims based on our second argument, we focused on whether the effect of a conspiratorial actor on the credibility of a specific conspiracy theory in a given society is moderated by the respective actor’s standing within society.

In line with the format of a research note, we neither wanted nor were able to already test our explorative expectations in a fully comprehensive way. Rather, we focused on providing first evidence for the applicability and validity of our innovative theoretical arguments. To do this, we provided more qualitative insights regarding the context level factors in each of the three countries under analysis here. Based on these insights, we developed more fine-grained assumptions for how the quantitative findings should look like to lend preliminary support to our arguments.

In order to gain these quantitative findings, we conducted a survey experiment in Jordan, Poland and Germany. We found the context level to have a direct effect on generic conspiracy beliefs, with mean levels of generic conspiracy beliefs being higher especially in countries in which actual conspiracies have happened in the past but also, though less substantially, in more religious countries. More concretely, for generic as well as specific conspiracy theory beliefs, we found such beliefs to be more strongly distributed among Jordanian respondents compared to Polish and German respondents. Regarding the latter two, Polish respondents also consider CTs to be more believable compared to German respondents. Summarizing these findings, we consider them to be first evidence for socialization effects being of influence in explaining CT beliefs.

Furthermore, we observed no empirical evidence for a moderating influence of country context on the believability of CTs with different CT actors among all citizens. However, and in line with arguments derived from communication studies research, we found significant and substantive differences in the credibility of specific CTs among Polish supporters of the government. Hence, this indicates that communication mechanisms might have an additional impact on the credibility of specific CTs. This is important to acknowledge as it provides evidence for the idea that spreading CTs in political communication may actually result in varying levels of CT beliefs among the public.

Still, despite the theoretical and empirical plausibility of our expectations, future research aiming to test our arguments more comprehensively has to overcome several limitations of our first empirical exploration that we could not deal with in the framework of this research note.

First, the direct effect of the context level that we found here might at least partly be the effect of differences in aggregated individual factors as well. That is, the significant and substantial difference in mean levels of conspiracy mentality between Jordan and Poland / Germany might be due to a similar variation in mean levels of predictor variables on the individual level that have been found to explain generic conspiracy beliefs, such as narcissism or emotional states as fear and anxiety. While we do not have strong reasons to assume this to be the case, future research will have to empirically tackle this possibility.

Second, the presented findings might be influenced by (a) the conceptualization of our experiment and (b) rather short-term political events. In regard to (a), we used intelligence agencies as the conspiratorial actors and not the countries themselves. While this is fully in line with the conceptualization of conspiracies being implemented not by official actors but by secret actors in the background, it may have had moderating effects on our analysis of Expectation 2. Individuals may very well be in favour of a given actor but still distrust
its intelligence agency, making the effect of one’s attitude to the former on individual beliefs in a CT with the latter being the malevolent actor disappear.

In regard to (b), we might have been taken on the wrong foot by recent political events in the respective country that may have led to the lack of significant differences between Jordanian, Polish and German respondents when it comes to the credibility of specific CTs. To formulate our expectations regarding the differences in credibility of a CT involving certain actors based on the context level, we used PEW data from 2013 that is the most recent one allowing comparison over countries for all three actors (US, Russia, Israel). In the meantime, for example, Russian involvement in the Syria civil war has decreased public favorability toward Russia in Jordan to a minimum of 5% (2017). When fielding our survey experiment in 2018, the presidency of Donald Trump may have also already decreased public sympathy for the US even in those countries that have previously been considered strong allies of the US. Hence, favorability toward all three actors might have been similarly low in all three country contexts which would explain the lack of differences in mean levels of individual beliefs for conspiracy theories varying these three actors as conspiratorial actors. As an effect, favorability toward all three actors might have been similarly low in all three country contexts which would explain the lack of differences in mean levels of individual beliefs for conspiracy theories varying these three actors as conspiratorial actors. Future research hence needs to find empirical strategies that are able to test socialization vs. communication vs. individual-level effects in a more reliable way.

Third, in this article we have focused on the malevolent actor as one of the central characteristics of a conspiracy theory. Yet, there might be other characteristics of a conspiracy theory that might be equally important when it comes to potential variation on the country level. For example, we consider the source of a conspiracy theory – involving the person stating the conspiracy theory and the platform on which the conspiracy theory is posted – to be of importance for its credibility. The impact different sources have on the credibility of conspiracy theories may vary between country contexts – think about whether persons close to or distant from the government should make a conspiracy theory equally (un)believable in democratic and autocratic contexts (Huang 2017). Again, from our point of view, exploring potential context effects like this seems to be a promising avenue for future research.

In this research note, we have hence shed some first light on potential effects of context level factors on individual generic and specific beliefs in conspiracy theories. While there certainly are a number of limitations that need to be tackled in future research, the initial empirical findings presented here were based on a high-powered cross-national investigation and should be regarded as comparatively robust. As such, they provide first evidence for socialization and communication factors shaping the mean levels of generic conspiracy beliefs and variance in levels of beliefs in specific conspiracy theories that future research should build upon.

Notes

1. Generic conspiracy beliefs are conceptualized as a long-term personality predisposition that has been shown to make citizens believe in specific conspiracies even if they contradict each other. Still, the exact content or dimensions of such a generic conspiracy belief are still debated (for divergent concepts see Brotherton, French, and Pickering 2013; Bruder et al.
In contrast, the belief in specific conspiracy theories is considered to be a more volatile concept. Hence, the belief in a given specific conspiracy theory might be influenced by both long-term personality and also more short-term factors, such as an individual's emotional state or an individual's belonging to or attitude towards a group that is either the source or the target of a given conspiracy. In this research note, we consider both generic and specific CT beliefs.

2. Note that there might be an interaction effect between the socialization and the political communication perspective as well. The communication of political and societal elites might of course be influenced by their long-term socialization in a respective country context. In reverse, however, emphasizing specific characteristics of CTs in political communication might again lead to the persistence of conspiratorial socialization in the respective country.

3. Originally, we planned to also include Lebanon as a fourth country, but this proved to be unfeasible due to political circumstances. While our survey agency – Kantar TNS, one of the most reliable agencies we are aware of – promised to be able to field the same questionnaire in all of the four countries, they were unable to do so in Jordan and Lebanon. Most importantly, the local partners of the survey agency argued that due to the contestation of the topic of migration in Jordan and Lebanon during the time frame of our fielding and due to the limited number of respondents in their online panels, no sufficient number of respondents with valid answers could have been reached via representative online sampling – the sampling method that we used for respondents in Germany and Poland. Hence, as using online samples in Jordan turned out to be impossible, we fielded a representative face to face survey in Jordan using the agency NAMA, located in Amman (Jordan).

4. In fact, the topic turned out to be so salient that it precluded us from actually fielding our survey in the total sample, see FN 3 for more details.

5. The choice of $N = 1,300$ participants per country was based on careful considerations of the number of needed experimental conditions (see below), the effect sizes that can be expected, the number of participants that can be expected to participate in each country, and the amount of available money to finance the survey. In absence of relevant robust and replicated findings and as is common in personality and social psychology, we expected small-to-medium effect sizes (i.e. Cohen’s $d$ between 0.1 and 0.3; e.g. Richard, Bond, and Stokes-Zoota 2003). The expected power was, thus, close to 1 for all main effects including analyses within countries and it was still excellent for the described two-way interactions. As the survey institutes that collected the data already had a built-in data-quality control, we did not need to oversample.

6. Note that the original CMQ has five statements, but one of them does not seem to work very well across cultures: “government agencies closely monitor all citizens.” In addition, this statement does not necessarily measure a conspiracy belief, especially not in an authoritarian setting such as Jordan in our case. Hence, based on these arguments we decided to only ask participants for the remaining four statements.

7. Note that the Polish government at the time of the survey also consisted of two small parties: Porozumienie and Solidarna Polska. We did not provide these parties as answer options in our survey, as they seemed too marginal in terms of vote shares. In addition, Solidarna Polska is an offspring of PiS that again cooperates closely with PiS.

8. For further explanatory analyses on country*actor interactions, see also Supplement B.

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