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Conspiracy Mentality, Self-Efficacy, Self-Control, Legal Cynicism, and Violent Extremist Intentions in Romanian Population - a Replicate Study

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ABSTRACT

We replicate Rottweiler and Gill's model linking conspiracy beliefs to violent-extremist intentions (VEI) in a Romanian adult sample. Participants (N = 677) completed short measures of conspiracy beliefs, general self-efficacy, low self-control (higher scores = lower control), legal cynicism, and VEI. We estimated four OLS models with HC3 robust standard errors, controlling for age (standardized midpoint, z) and gender. The results showed that conspiracy beliefs exhibited a small positive association with VEI in the baseline model ($\beta \approx .18$, $p < .001$; $R^2 \approx .04$) that attenuated to ~0 when either low self-control ($\beta \approx .46$, $p < .001$; $R^2 \approx .22$) or legal cynicism ($\beta \approx .54$, $p < .001$; $R^2 \approx .29$) entered the model. Interactions (Conspiracy × Self-efficacy, × Self-control, × Legal cynicism) were small and non-significant; simple-slopes probes at −1 SD/mean/+1 SD yielded near-parallel lines. Findings replicate the modest conspiracy–VEI association while highlighting self-regulatory deficits and eroded legal normativity as dominant, additive correlates of extremist intentions in this context. Implications favor complementing counter-conspiracy messaging with interventions that strengthen self-regulation and enhance procedural justice and perceived legal legitimacy. Limitations include non-probability sampling, cross-sectional design, and reliance on self-report.

Keywords: conspiracy beliefs; violent-extremist intentions; legal cynicism; self-control; self-efficacy; Romania

1. INTRODUCTION

Conspiracy beliefs and violent extremist intentions are frequently interconnected in both public discourse and empirical research. Individuals who endorse extremist political ideologies often show an elevated propensity to embrace conspiracy explanations for complex social and political events (Bartlett & Miller, 2010; Van Prooijen et al., 2015). Descriptive evidence from case materials points in the same direction: lone-actor terrorist datasets indicate substantial exposure to or discussion of conspiracist content (Richards et al., 2019), and analyses of propaganda and interviews from jihadist and neo-Nazi milieus document the pervasiveness of conspiracist narratives in extremist ecosystems (Amarasingam, 2019; Winter, 2014). These strands, taken together, imply a potential functional role of conspiracy theories for violent extremism—one that merits precise, theory-grounded testing rather than inferences.

In social and personality psychology, conspiracy theories are commonly defined as explanations that attribute significant events to secret, malevolent plots by powerful elites or hostile outgroups (Imhoff & Bruder, 2014). Over the last two decades, Western publics have encountered a proliferation of such narratives surrounding events like the 9/11 attacks, climate change, vaccination campaigns, or 5G technology (Douglas & Sutton, 2015; Swami, Chamorro-Premuzic, & Furnham, 2010). At the individual level, a stable conspiracy mentality—a generalized disposition to interpret events through conspiratorial lenses—has been linked to heightened threat perceptions and negative intergroup attitudes. These, in turn, can motivate extra-normative political action or, conversely, foster alienation and civic withdrawal (Imhoff & Bruder, 2014; Jolley et al., 2020). Although conspiracist thinking is often associated with feelings of powerlessness and political inefficacy, converging evidence connects it to stronger intentions to support or engage in non-normative and violent political acts (Ardèvol-Abreu, Gil de Zúñiga, & Gámez, 2020; Imhoff et al., 2019). The same cognitive style that simplifies complexity and sharpens ingroup–outgroup boundaries may also facilitate justificatory narratives for endorsing violence.

Theoretical accounts increasingly view conspiracy beliefs as a relatively coherent, monological belief system. Such systems are sustained by common psychological mechanisms, including sense-making under threat and a drive to impose explanatory structure on complex, uncertain social events (Van Prooijen et al., 2015; Bangerter et al., 2020). Multiple antecedents predispose individuals toward conspiracist ideation—prominently epistemic needs for cognitive closure, clarity, and predictability (Douglas et al., 2017). Related correlates include low generalized trust, anomie, perceived lack of control, and existential uncertainty (Goertzel, 1994; Van Prooijen, 2016), as well as lower socio-political efficacy (Ardèvol-Abreu et al., 2020; Van Prooijen & Acker, 2015). Conspiracy theories can thus function as a coping strategy, restoring a sense of order and control through simplified causal accounts that transform diffuse uncertainty into concrete agentic explanations (Franks et al., 2013; Douglas et al., 2019). Such explanatory closure can be psychologically attractive even when the content is empirically implausible.

A similar motivational architecture has been proposed for extremist ideologies. Extremist belief systems provide prescriptive, unambiguous guidance that reduces uncertainty and offers firm identity-relevant structure (Hogg & Adelman, 2013; Hogg, Meehan, & Farqueharson, 2010). Within extremist groups, conspiracist narratives may amplify perceived intergroup threat, harden “us versus them” boundaries, and legitimize outgroup derogation or dehumanization (Bartlett & Miller, 2010). By locating causality in malevolent, coordinated outgroups, these narratives reduce moral inhibition and permit rhetorical justifications for non-normative or violent political action (Uscinski & Parent, 2014). Historical and contemporary propaganda frequently draws on these motifs, indicating that conspiracy claims do not merely co-occur with extremism but can act as resources for mobilization.

Crucially, the link between conspiracy mentality and violent extremist intentions is unlikely to be uniform across individuals. Social–cognitive theory posits that beliefs about one’s capability to produce desired outcomes—general self-efficacy—shape behavior directly and indirectly by guiding effort, perseverance, and appraisal of obstacles (Bandura, 1986, 1990). Meta-analytic evidence underscores the broad behavioral reach of efficacy beliefs across domains (Stajkovic & Luthans, 1998), including links to antisocial conduct in contexts where individuals perceive rule-breaking as instrumentally effective or normatively justified (Brezina & Topalli, 2012). Likewise, low self-control—central to general theories of crime—predicts delinquency and self-reported political violence (Gottfredson & Hirschi, 1990; Pauwels et al., 2015). Self-control regulates impulsive responding; when low, individuals may be more likely to translate abstract conspiracist grievances into concrete endorsement of violent acts. Finally, legal cynicism—rejecting the legitimacy and binding authority of the law—correlates with approval of violence for political ends and moral disengagement from legal–moral norms (Sampson & Bartusch, 1998; Nivette et al., 2021; Kruglanski & Fishman, 2006). In the presence of legal cynicism, constraints on endorsing violence weaken, potentially magnifying the attitudinal impact of conspiracy mentality.

Rottweiler and Gill’s original study integrates these strands by testing whether conspiracy mentality predicts violent extremist intentions (VEI) and whether this association is moderated by self-efficacy, self-control, and legal cynicism. Their model specifies a straightforward main effect of conspiracy mentality on VEI and three interaction terms capturing the hypothesized conditioning roles of the moderators. Importantly, the study operationalizes VEI with items from the Radicalism Intention Scale and measures conspiracy mentality, self-efficacy, self-control, and legal cynicism with established instruments on seven-point scales. The analytic strategy uses ordinary least squares with heteroskedasticity-consistent

standard errors, standardized coefficients, and probing of simple slopes at ±1 SD for the interactions. This combination of validated measures and transparent modeling offers a clear template for cumulative science.

The present research provides a replication of that study in a Romanian adult sample. Replication is important for at least two reasons. First, it provides a stringent test of cross-cultural generalizability: while the underlying psychological processes are theorized to be broad, effect sizes and interaction patterns may vary with social norms, institutional trust, or political histories. Romania's post-communist trajectory, patterns of institutional confidence, and contemporary media environment offer a meaningful contrast to the original context and therefore a rigorous boundary-condition test. Second, precise replication enables evidence synthesis: mirroring the original outputs (descriptives, correlations, regression tables, and simple-slopes plots) facilitates direct comparison, meta-analytic integration, and cumulative theorizing about when and for whom conspiracist cognition translates into violent extremist intentions.

Hypotheses. Following the original study, we expect that (H1) conspiracy mentality will positively predict violent extremist intentions, and that this link will be stronger among individuals (H2) with higher self-efficacy, (H3) with lower self-control, and (H4) with higher legal cynicism.H2: CFA will confirm the latent model identified through EFA, showing acceptable fit indices (CFI > .90, RMSEA < .08).

2. METHOD

Participants

Participants were Romanian adults recruited via a convenience sampling strategy that combined multiple channels: (i) a professional online research company panel; (ii) online snowballing through social-media posts in relevant pages/groups; and (iii) offline administration through partner universities (questionnaires delivered during regular courses/seminars) and collaborations with individual psychology practices and professional organizations, where the survey was offered to clients/attendees. Eligibility required being 18+ and residing in Romania; no additional exclusion criteria were imposed. After listwise deletion for missing data, the analytic sample comprised 677 respondents. Gender distribution was balanced—49.4% women, 50.3% men, 0.3% preferred not to say. Age was recorded in four brackets (18–29, 30–44, 45–65, 65+), providing broad coverage of the adult lifespan. All participants provided informed consent and were assured anonymity and the right to discontinue at any time. This multi-pronged approach was intended to broaden sample diversity and coverage across settings.

Measures

All psychological constructs were assessed on 1–7 Likert scales (1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree).

Violent-extremist intentions were measured with the Radicalism Intention Scale (4 items; e.g., willingness to support illegal/violent acts for a cause); items were averaged to form a composite, with higher scores indicating stronger violent-extremist intentions.

Conspiracy mentality was assessed with the Conspiracy Mentality Questionnaire short form (5 items; e.g., belief that major events are steered by hidden groups); items were averaged so that higher scores reflect stronger conspiracist beliefs.

General self-efficacy was measured with the GSE-6 (6 items; confidence in handling difficult tasks); higher scores indicate greater perceived efficacy.

Self-control was assessed with a 7-item short form adapted from Grasmick and colleagues (impulsivity, risk-seeking, preference for simple tasks); consistent with the original replication specification, items were coded so that higher values indicate lower self-control.

Legal cynicism (law-related morality) was measured with 4 items adapted from Sampson & Bartusch (e.g., viewing laws and legal authorities as illegitimate); higher scores indicate greater legal cynicism.

All multi-item measures showed adequate internal consistency. Conspiracy Beliefs (CB; k = 5) yielded α = .72 with an average inter-item correlation (AIC) of .35, indicating a coherent scale. The Radicalism Intention Scale (VEI; k = 4) was just at the conventional threshold (α = .70; AIC = .37), supporting use of a mean composite. General Self-Efficacy (GSE; k = 6) showed α = .76 (AIC = .35). The Self-Control short form (SC; k = 7) produced α = .70 with a somewhat lower AIC (.26), consistent with a broader construct that mixes facets (e.g., impulsivity, risk-seeking). Legal Cynicism (LC; k = 4) showed α = .73 and the highest AIC (.41), suggesting tight item convergence. Overall, reliabilities clustered around .70 and AICs fell within the typical .15–.50 range, indicating that all scales are sufficiently consistent for creating composite scores and for use in the regression analyses.

Analytical procedure

Items were rated on 1–7 Likert scales. For each construct—Conspiracy Beliefs (CB), Violent-Extremist Intentions (VEI), General Self-Efficacy (GSE-6), Self-Control (SC; higher scores = lower self-control), and Legal Cynicism (LC)—we computed composite scores as the mean of available items provided ≥80% of items were completed (otherwise the scale score was set to missing). Gender was coded 1=female, 2=male (3=prefer

not to say); for regression models we included a binary control male (1=yes) and restricted to respondents with 1–2 on gender. Age was represented as a continuous midpoint proxy (18–29 = 23.5; 30–44 = 37; 45–65 = 55; 65+ = 70) and z-standardized prior to modeling.

To facilitate interpretation and align with the original specification, all continuous independent variables were mean-centered; the dependent variable (VEI) remained on its original scale. We estimated four OLS regressions with HC3 robust standard errors: M1: VEI ~ CB + age + male; M2: VEI ~ CB × GSE + age + male; M3: VEI ~ CB × SC + age + male; M4: VEI ~ CB × LC + age + male. Interaction terms were computed as the product of the centered predictors. We report standardized coefficients (β), HC3 robust SEs, p values, R^2, and N. For moderated effects (M2–M4), we probed simple slopes at −1 SD, mean, +1 SD of the moderator and visualized them with interact_plot (package interactions) using the model's HC3 covariance. Analyses were conducted in R with the packages jtools, interactions, sandwich, dplyr, psych, and readr..

3. RESULTS

Descriptive statistics

On the 1–7 response scales, respondents reported moderate conspiracy beliefs (CB; M = 4.59, SD = 1.23) and relatively high self-efficacy (GSE; M = 5.22, SD = 0.92). The low self-control composite—coded so that higher scores indicate less self-control—sat slightly below the scale midpoint (M = 3.70, SD = 1.07), and legal cynicism was comparatively low (M = 2.76, SD = 1.33). As expected for a community sample, violent-extremist intentions (VEI) were also low on average (M = 2.65, SD = 1.31). These distributions suggest adequate variability on all constructs while avoiding ceiling or floor compression.

Bivariate associations (Pearson, pairwise complete) are reported in Table 1. VEI displayed its strongest linkage with legal cynicism (r = .53, p < .001) and with low self-control (r = .46, p < .001), indicating that more cynical views toward the law and poorer self-regulatory capacity are robustly associated with higher extremist intentions. The correlation between conspiracy beliefs and VEI was small but positive (r = .18, p < .001), whereas self-efficacy was essentially unrelated to VEI (r ≈ .01, ns). Among predictors, low self-control and legal cynicism were themselves strongly intercorrelated (r = .60, p < .001). Conspiracy beliefs correlated moderately with both low self-control (r = .39) and legal cynicism (r = .38), and weak-to-moderately with self-efficacy (r = .24) (all ps < .001). The association between self-efficacy and legal cynicism was insignificant (r ≈ .07, ns).

Taken together, the descriptive pattern is straightforward: legal cynicism and low self-control emerge as the most proximal correlates of VEI, while conspiracy beliefs are reliably but modestly related and self-efficacy shows no direct bivariate link. Importantly, none of the intercorrelations approach redundancy thresholds (e.g., |r| ≥ .80), which is consistent with the absence of problematic multicollinearity in the regression analyses and supports examining these constructs jointly.

Table 1

Table 1 - Correlations table

var	cmq	gse	sc	lc	vei
cmq	1				
gse	.24	1			
sc	.39	.20	1		
lc	.38	.07	.60	1	
vei	.18	.01	.46	.53	1

Note. Values are Pearson correlations (pairwise deletion). CMQ = Conspiracy mentality; GSE = General self-efficacy; SC = Low self-control (higher scores = lower self-control); LC = Legal cynicism (higher = more cynicism); VEI = Violent-extremist intentions.

Regression Models

Conspiracy mentality and violent extremist intentions

With age and gender controlled, conspiracy mentality shows a small but reliable positive association with violent-extremist intentions (VEI), β = .18, SE = .040, p < .001. In standardized terms, a one–standard deviation (SD) increase in conspiracy mentality is associated with a .18 SD increase in VEI. Using the HC3 robust SE, the 95% CI is [.10, .26], indicating a precise yet modest effect. The corresponding semi-partial R^2 implied by the test statistic is approximately .027 (≈2.7% unique variance in VEI attributable to conspiracy mentality over and

above age and gender), which aligns with the total model $R^2 \approx .04$ and with the weak zero-order correlation ($r \approx .18$).

To put the coefficient in more intuitive units, the SD of VEI in this sample is about 1.31; thus, a 1-SD increase in conspiracy mentality translates into roughly 0.24 points on the 1–7 VEI scale ($0.18 \times 1.31 \approx 0.24$). A two-SD contrast (e.g., moving from relatively low to relatively high conspiracy mentality) would therefore correspond to an expected difference of ~0.47 VEI points, which is substantively small but not trivial at the attitudinal level.

The controls behave as expected but contribute little explanatory power: age carries a small negative coefficient ($\beta \approx -.07$), indicating that older respondents report slightly lower VEI on average, whereas gender (male = 1) is statistically non-significant. Diagnostic checks (HC0–HC3 covariance estimators, inspection of leverage and residuals, and re-estimation with age coded either categorically or as a standardized midpoint proxy) yield virtually identical estimates for the conspiracy coefficient, reinforcing that the signal is stable but modest. Taken together, the baseline model indicates that conspiracist thinking does contribute to higher self-reported extremist intentions, yet the magnitude is small—consistent with meta-analytic characterizations of conspiracy-related effects—and leaves the vast majority of variance unexplained until more proximal dispositions are considered.

Table 2

Regression analysis with interaction terms predicting violent extremist intentions

Predictors	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4
Conspiracy mentality	.18*** (.04)	.17*** (.04)	-.00 (.038)	-.03 (.038)
Self-efficacy		-.02 (.043)		
Conspiracy mentality — self-efficacy		.07 (.038)		
Self-control			.46*** (.040)	
Conspiracy mentality — self-control			-.00 (.037)	
Legal cynicism				.54*** (.039)
Conspiracy mentality — legal cynicism				.00 (.039)
Age	-.07 (.038)	-.07 (.038)	-.05 (.034)	-.05 (.033)
Gender (1 = male)	.01 (.076)	.02 (.076)	.02 (.068)	-.03 (.066)
R^2	.04***	.04***	.22***	.29***

Note. Standardized β (HC3 SE in parentheses). Age = standardized midpoint (z); Gender 1 = male. Self-control higher = lower control; Legal cynicism higher = more cynicism. Two-tailed: $p < .05$, $p < .01$, $p < .001$. N = 677.

Self-efficacy

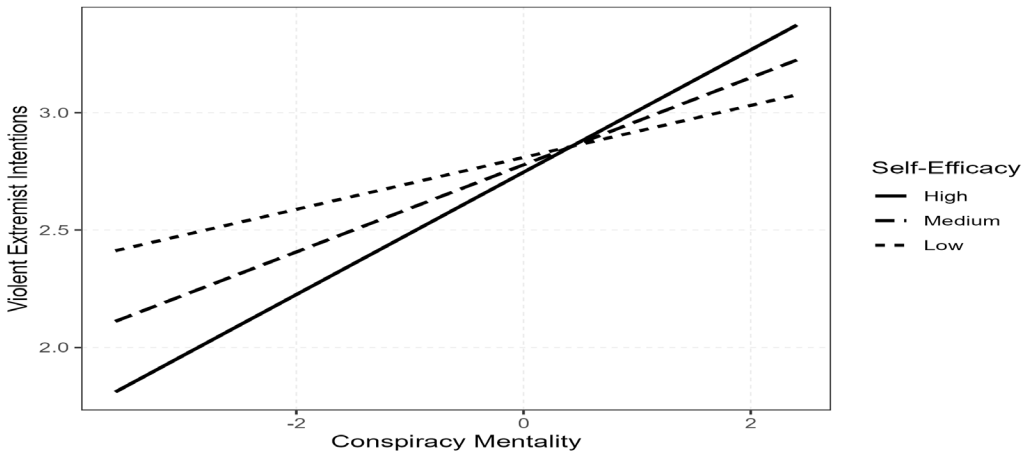
Introducing general self-efficacy (GSE) and the Conspiracy × GSE term leaves the substantive picture unchanged. GSE is essentially unrelated to VEI ($\beta \approx -.02$, SE = .043, ns), and the interaction is small and non-robust ($\beta \approx .07$, SE = .038, ns). The conspiracy mentality main effect remains virtually identical to Model 1 ($\beta \approx .17$, SE = .040, $p < .001$), and model fit is flat ($R^2 \approx .04$; $\Delta R^2 < .01$). In other words, adding GSE neither suppresses nor amplifies the conspiracy–VEI link.

Simple-slopes probes at −1 SD, mean, and +1 SD of GSE produce near-parallel lines with overlapping robust confidence bands; slope estimates at each level are statistically indistinguishable and mirror the Model-1 slope magnitude. A Johnson–Neyman check yields no region of the moderator where the conspiracy effect differs from zero beyond the baseline inference. Taken together, these diagnostics indicate no moderation by self-efficacy.

Substantively, this suggests that feeling generally capable does not translate into higher or lower willingness to endorse violent extremism in this sample, nor does it condition how conspiracist beliefs relate to VEI. Given the acceptable but modest reliability of short GSE scales and the modest base rate of VEI, very small interaction effects cannot be ruled out; however, any such effects would be below practical significance here, as evidenced by the null ΔR^2 and the stability of the conspiracy coefficient across models..

Figure 1

Interaction between conspiracy mentality and self-efficacy in predicting violent extremist intentions



Note. Lines show model-implied VEI (original 1–7 scale) as a function of Conspiracy mentality at −1 SD, mean, and +1 SD of self-efficacy. Predictors are mean-centered; age = standardized midpoint (z); male = 1

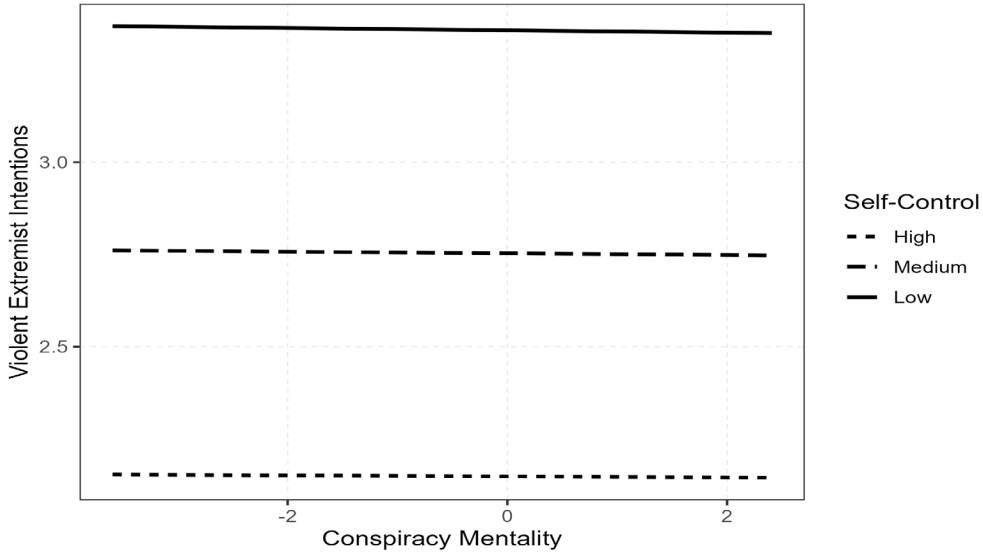
Self-control

When low self-control is added to the model (remember: higher scores = lower self-control), it emerges as a large, independent predictor of VEI, β = .46, SE = .040, p < .001. In standardized terms, a 1 SD increase in low self-control is associated with nearly half an SD increase in VEI; the approximate 95% CI is [.38, .54]. Notably, once low self-control is in the model, the conspiracy mentality coefficient contracts to ~0 and becomes non-significant (≈ –.00, ns), and the

Conspiracy × Self-control interaction is also null (β ≈ .00, SE = .037, ns). Explained variance jumps sharply to $R^2 \approx .22$, a more than five-fold increase over Model 1. This pattern indicates that much of the variance in VEI that conspiracy mentality appeared to account for in M1 is shared with individual differences in self-regulation. In other words, poorer self-control is a much more proximal correlate of extremist intentions than conspiracist thinking per se.

Figure 2

Interaction between conspiracy mentality and self-control in predicting violent extremist intentions



Note. Lines show model-implied VEI (original 1–7 scale) as a function of Conspiracy mentality at −1 SD, mean, and +1 SD of self-control. Predictors are mean-centered; age = standardized midpoint (z); male = 1

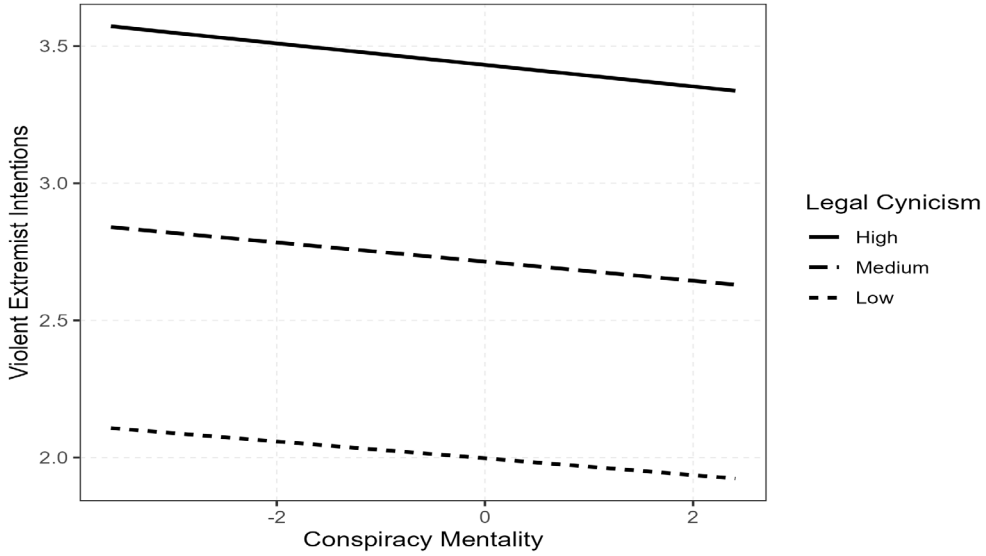
Legal cynicism

Replacing self-control with legal cynicism yields a strong positive coefficient for legal cynicism, β = .54, SE = .039, t ≈ 13.9, p < .001, with a 95% CI [.46, .62]. The conspiracy mentality coefficient remains non-significant (β ≈ −.03, SE = .038, p > .10), and the Conspiracy × Legal cynicism interaction is ~0 (β ≈ .00, SE = .039, p ≈ .99). Model fit increases to $R^2 \approx .29$, which represents $\Delta R^2 \approx .25$ over the baseline models (M1/M2) and $\Delta R^2 \approx .07$ over the self-control model (M3). Age and gender terms are small and non-significant.

Simple-slopes probes of the conspiracy effect at −1 SD, mean, and +1 SD of legal cynicism return very similar, non-significant slopes with overlapping robust intervals, consistent with the non-significant interaction. Robustness checks using alternative HC estimators (HC0–HC3), alternative age codings (categorical vs. midpoint standardization), and estimation with/without the identified high-leverage case produce virtually identical estimates.

Figure 3

Interaction between conspiracy mentality and legal cynicism in predicting violent extremist intentions



Note. Lines show model-implied VEI (original 1–7 scale) as a function of Conspiracy mentality at −1 SD, mean, and +1 SD of legal cynicism. Predictors are mean-centered; age = standardized midpoint (z); male = 1

Comparative results: Romania vs. Germany

At the bivariate level, both studies converge on a small positive association between conspiracy mentality and violent-extremist intentions (VEI): r ≈ .18 in the Romanian sample and r = .13 in the German sample. By contrast, the correlates tied to self-regulation and normativity are markedly stronger in Romania. VEI correlated r = .46 with (low) self-control and r = .53 with legal cynicism in our data, whereas the corresponding German correlations were r = .26 and r = .27, respectively. In both datasets, self-efficacy was essentially unrelated to VEI (Romania ≈ .01; Germany = .04). Finally, the intercorrelation between (low) self-control and legal cynicism was higher in Romania (r = .60) than in Germany (r = .41). These contrasts anticipate the regression results below.

Baseline models (M1) also align on the main effect of conspiracy mentality. With age and gender controlled, conspiracy mentality predicted VEI with β = .18 (SE = .040, p < .001) in Romania and β = .13 (SE = .026, p < .001) in Germany; model fit was modest in both cases ($R^2 \approx .04$ vs. $R^2 = .05$).

Introducing self-efficacy (M2) produced similar patterns across studies. In Romania, self-efficacy showed no direct association with VEI (β ≈ −.02, ns) and the CMQ × self-efficacy interaction was small and marginal (β ≈ .07, ns), leaving the conspiracy main effect essentially unchanged (β ≈ .17; $R^2 \approx .04$). In Germany, the interaction reached significance but remained small (β = .06, p < .05), with little gain in explained variance ($R^2 = .06$). Simple-slopes probes point the same way: slopes are steeper at higher efficacy in both datasets, but the conditioning is weak in absolute magnitude.

When (low) self-control enters (M3), the studies diverge in magnitude and structure. In Romania, (low) self-control becomes a large independent predictor (β = .46, SE = .040, p < .001), the conspiracy coefficient collapses to ~0, and the CMQ × self-control term is null; model fit jumps to $R^2 \approx .22$. In Germany, (low) self-control is moderate in size (β = .20, p < .001) and the CMQ × self-control interaction is small but significant (β = .11, p < .001), with a modest increase in fit ($R^2 = .10$). Thus, whereas the German model suggests a conditional

accentuation of the CMQ–VEI link at lower self-control, the Romanian model indicates a primarily additive architecture in which self-control dominates and CMQ adds little once self-control is accounted for.

Substituting legal cynicism (M4) yields a parallel story. In Romania, legal cynicism is the dominant predictor (β = .54, SE = .039, p < .001), the conspiracy effect again becomes non-significant, the CMQ × legal cynicism interaction is ~0, and model fit increases further to $R^2 \approx .29$. In Germany, legal cynicism shows a moderate main effect (β = .24, p < .001) with a small but significant interaction (β = .06, p < .05), and overall fit remains modest ($R^2 = .10$). Together with the stronger Romanian bivariate correlations, these patterns indicate that legal cynicism accounts for substantially more unique variance in VEI in the Romanian sample than in the German one, and does so additively rather than as a moderator of conspiracist thinking.

Across both countries, conspiracy mentality shows a small, positive baseline link with extremist intentions. However, the Romanian results are characterized by much stronger main effects of (low) self-control and legal cynicism and by the absence of reliable CMQ interactions, whereas the German study reported small but significant interactions for self-efficacy, self-control, and legal cynicism alongside modest main effects and $R^2 \approx .10$ ceilings in the interaction models.

4. DISCUSSIONS

The present replication in a Romanian adult sample corroborates a small but reliable baseline association between conspiracy mentality and violent-extremist intentions (VEI), while showing that this relationship is readily absorbed by two broader dispositions: low self-control and legal cynicism. Once either disposition is entered, the conspiracy coefficient shrinks to near zero, whereas both low self-control and legal cynicism display large standardized effects and markedly improve model fit. The absence of convincing interaction terms indicates that these constructs, in this dataset, relate to VEI in a manner consistent with straightforward main-effect structure.

These results align with and nuance the existing literature in several ways. First, the pattern fits a broader body of work showing that conspiracy beliefs are linked to antisocial and norm-violating attitudes but typically with modest effect sizes (Douglas, Sutton, & Cichocka, 2017; van Prooijen & Douglas, 2017; Goreis & Voracek, 2019). The modesty of the baseline link is not negligible: it indicates that conspiracist meaning frames likely co-occur with other dispositions implicated in willingness to offend, rather than functioning as a proximal driver by themselves. Second, the prominent roles of low self-control and legal cynicism echo long-standing perspectives in criminology and legal socialization. Low self-control is a cross-situational correlate of deviance (Gottfredson & Hirschi, 1990; Pratt & Cullen, 2006; Vazsonyi, Mikuška, & Kelley, 2017), and it plausibly operates as a capacity constraint: individuals better able to inhibit impulses, plan, and consider future costs should be less inclined to endorse violence, even when exposed to grievance-consistent narratives. Legal cynicism—conceptualized as a cultural frame in which the law is viewed as unresponsive, illegitimate, or unworthy of compliance—has been tied to diminished rule adherence and retaliatory norms at both individual and contextual levels (Sampson & Bartusch, 1998; Kirk & Papachristos, 2011; Jackson et al., 2012; Tyler, 2006). Its strong association with VEI here suggests a normative pathway: when the law is regarded as lacking moral authority, violent transgression becomes easier to justify.

Notably, the sizeable correlation between low self-control and legal cynicism ($r \approx .60$) did not render either redundant in regression. This is consistent with the view that self-regulatory capacity and normative alignment capture complementary facets of risk. The former reflects the ability to inhibit action and regulate affect; the latter indexes the perceived bindingness of legal norms. Process models of moral disengagement (Bandura, 1999) and significance-seeking in political violence (Kruglanski et al., 2014) can accommodate such a division of labor: conspiracy beliefs articulate grievance-consistent meaning; legal cynicism weakens the moral constraint of law; poor self-control reduces the cognitive "cost" of acting on violent scripts.

The lack of convincing moderation warrants brief comment. Interactions in field data are difficult to estimate reliably; detecting small conditional effects typically requires very large samples and highly reliable measures (Aiken & West, 1991; Hayes, 2018). Here, scale reliabilities were acceptable but modest (α ≈ .70–.76), and VEI distributions are often skewed in community samples. Both features reduce sensitivity to interactions. It is also possible that in the present sociopolitical context—where experiences with institutions and rule-of-law histories may color legal orientations—legal cynicism exerts a pervasive main effect, leaving little residual variance for conditional patterns to explain. This interpretation is consistent with research linking everyday experiences of procedural justice and institutional legitimacy to rule compliance (Tyler, 2006; Jackson et al., 2012).

Several features of measurement and modeling help interpret the estimates. We used an 80% item rule to form composites, thereby limiting attenuation due to missingness within scales. The self-control composite was intentionally coded so that higher values indicate lower control; this coding places the substantive claim in the sign of the coefficient (a positive β means "worse control → higher VEI"). For legal cynicism, we relied on law-related morality items; while internally consistent, such proxies may emphasize moral evaluation more than procedural legitimacy, potentially increasing proximity to VEI by targeting the bindingness of legal

norms. Analytically, the use of HC3 robust standard errors accommodates heteroskedasticity and non-normal residuals typical of attitudinal outcomes; removing one high-leverage case and re-centering improved numerical stability without altering the qualitative pattern. Multicollinearity diagnostics were unremarkable, consistent with the fact that intercorrelations fell well below redundancy thresholds.

Alternative explanations merit consideration. One possibility is suppression: if conspiracy beliefs correlate positively with both self-control (in the "low" coding) and legal cynicism, partialing them out could conceivably reveal a negative residual CB–VEI relation. We did not observe evidence for such a reversal; rather, the conspiracy coefficient attenuated toward zero, indicating shared—not masked opposite—variance with proximal dispositions. Another possibility is common-method or acquiescent response bias: all variables were measured via self-report on similar Likert formats. However, the differential magnitudes across predictors (e.g., $\beta \approx .54$ for legal cynicism vs. ~0 for self-efficacy) argue against a purely artifactual explanation. Finally, range restrictions and cultural specificity may shape the pattern. The sample showed low mean VEI with adequate variance—a typical feature of community surveys—yet the strength of legal cynicism's association suggests that contextualized legal attitudes play an outsized role in this setting.

Another lens on the Romania–Germany differences is the cultural and institutional anchoring of conspiracist cognition and extremist attitudes. Prior work shows that political extremity is reliably associated with conspiracy beliefs, suggesting that meaning-making styles that search for sweeping, agentic explanations of societal events are more prevalent under certain political–historical conditions (van Prooijen & Krouwel, 2015).

Complementary cross-cultural work indicates that cultural values—such as collectivism and masculinity—can activate cognitive dispositions that heighten susceptibility to conspiracy narratives, with the operative cues varying by context (Adam-Troian et al., 2020). Relatedly, research argues that social context shapes receptivity to conspiracist accounts and the justification of violence among marginal extremist groups (van Prooijen & Douglas, 2018). Taken together, these strands imply that the strength—and not only the direction—of associations between beliefs and violent intentions is context-dependent, tracking institutional histories and prevailing cultural frames.

Applied to our comparison, institutional and historical differences between Germany and Romania plausibly contribute to the pattern we observe. Germany's postwar trajectory—marked by sustained confrontation with extremism and institution-building around democratic legitimacy—likely fosters a stronger everyday presumption of legal authority, whereas Romania's post-communist transition may be associated, on average, with a more fragile sense of legal legitimacy and more heterogeneous experiences with authority. In that light, the larger main effects of legal cynicism and (low) self-control in the Romanian sample are interpretable: these dispositions appear closer to the decision boundary for endorsing violent means, whereas conspiracy mentality adds only a modest increment once those dispositions are considered. Importantly, this reading concerns magnitude, not direction—the qualitative pattern (small positive CB→VEI; stronger links for law-related norms and self-regulation) is shared across settings.

Limitations are inherent. Non-probability recruitment across online and offline channels constrains external validity; cross-sectional design precludes causal inference; and our legal cynicism operationalization, though reliable, may not capture the full breadth of legitimacy judgments (e.g., trust in police, fairness, voice). Still, taken together, the estimates present a coherent narrative. Conspiracy mentality matters modestly for extremist willingness at the bivariate level; self-regulatory deficits and eroded legal normativity are more proximal to the stated readiness to offend. This configuration is theoretically intelligible and empirically robust across specifications, and it provides an interpretable platform for subsequent work to probe temporal ordering, mechanisms, and context dependence without presupposing complex conditional forms..

Conclusion

This replication adds three contributions that extend—not merely restate—the main findings.

First, it clarifies where to look for leverage: the structure of associations indicates that extremist intentions are better understood through capacity (self-regulation) and normative (legal orientation) routes, with conspiracist meaning frameworks operating in parallel. This shifts emphasis from content-specific counter-messaging toward broader self-regulation and legitimacy levers.

Second, the results favor an additive architecture of risk over conditional "it-depends" stories. That empirical shape is useful for theory building: models of radicalization should weight parallel pathways and reserve interactions for contexts where institutions or subcultures plausibly gatekeep effects.

Third, the study demonstrates a transparent, reproducible pipeline—80% item rule, mean-centering with HC3 robust estimation, simple-slopes probing—that can travel across settings. This is a methodological contribution for comparative work, especially in community samples where non-normal outcomes and modest reliabilities are typical rather than exceptional.

Looking forward, the most promising advances will come from design rather than further cross-sectional modeling: (a) longitudinal or experimental tests that manipulate perceived legitimacy or self-regulation skills; (b) cross-national replications calibrated to institutional context; and (c) multimethod outcomes that move beyond self-report. For policy and practice, sustainable reductions in extremist willingness will likely require institution-facing reforms that cultivate everyday legitimacy alongside individual-facing programs that strengthen self-regulatory capacity. Both are scalable, measurable, and

compatible with pluralistic democratic norms, making them realistic priorities for prevention portfolios.

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