EDMO

European Digital Media Observatory

# MARCH 2023 MARKS THE DAWN OF A.I. GENERATED MASS DISINFORMATION

Monthly brief no. 22 – EDMO fact-checking network

Published on 18 April 2023

IN THE EU, MAIN TRENDS AND NARRATIVES OF DISINFORMATION REMAIN STABLE IN MARCH

The 23 organizations* part of the EDMO fact-checking network that contributed to this brief published a total of 1.006 fact-checking articles in March 2023.
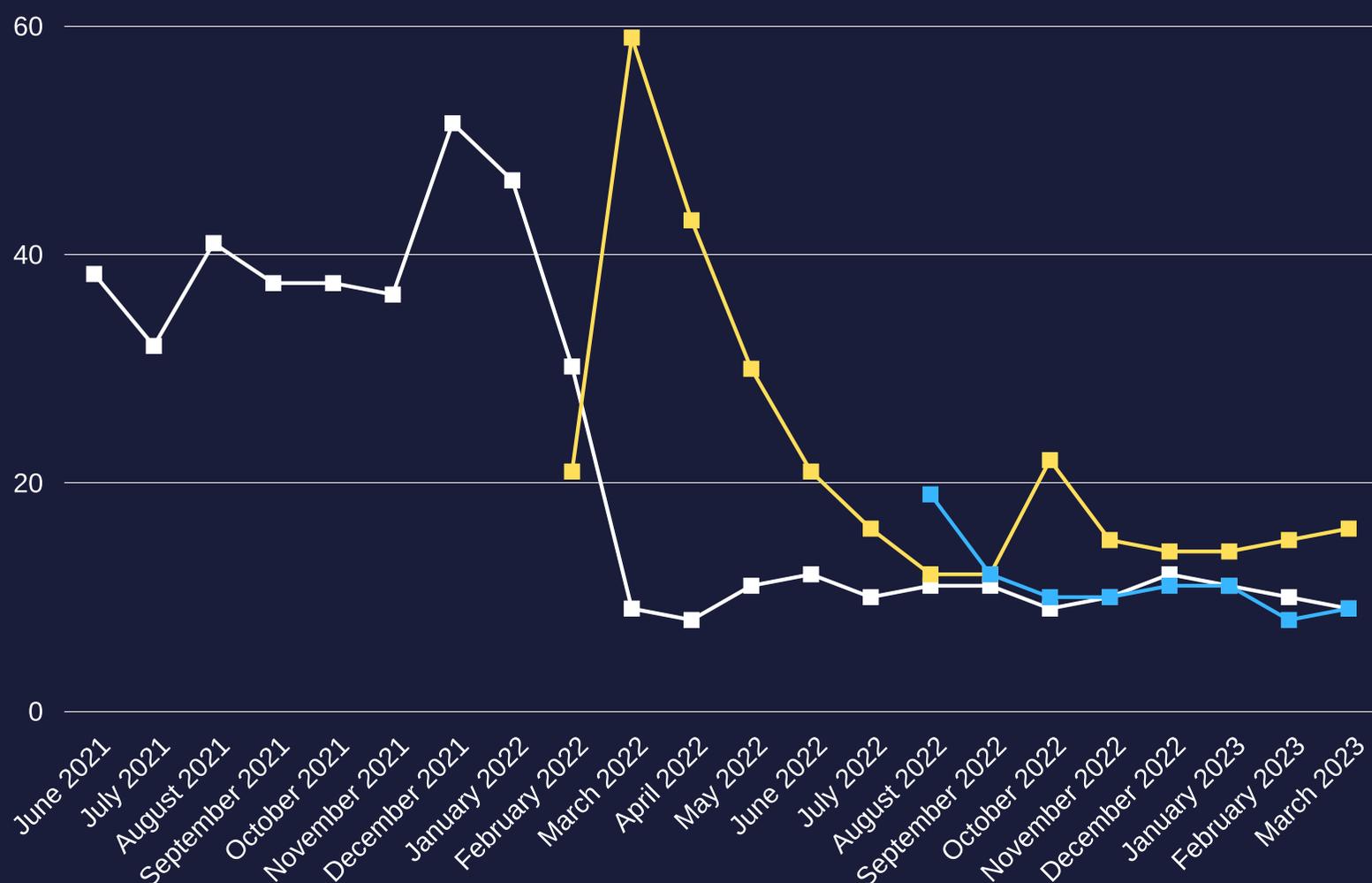
Out of these articles, 163 (16%) focused on Ukraine-related disinformation; 90 (9%) focused on COVID-19-related disinformation; and 94 (9%) focused on climate-change-related disinformation. These percentages are similar to the ones recorded in the past month.

% of Ukraine-related disinformation on total detected disinformation

% of COVID-19-related disinformation on total detected disinformation

% of climate change-related disinformation on total detected disinformation

* Organizations that contributed to this brief: 15min, AFP, Correctiv, Delfi, Demagog.cz, Demagog.pl, Eesti Päevaleht, EFE Verifica, Ellinika Hoaxes, Eurocomunicare, Faktabaari, Freedom House Romania, Greece Fact Checking, Knack, Lakmusz, Maldita, Nieuwscheckers, PagellaPolitica/Facta, Pravda, The Journal Fact-Check, TjekDet, Verificat, VRTNWS

MAIN DISINFORMATION NARRATIVES DETECTED:

The main disinformation narratives about the pandemic, Ukraine and climate change are consistent with the ones detected in the recent past.
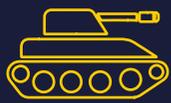
About Ukraine, false news slandering Zelensky, regarding military equipment such as tanks provided by the West and fear-mongering about an escalation (in particular involving Moldova and Romania) are the most common.
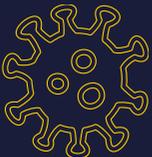
About the pandemic, the focus is still on vaccines being dangerous or ineffective.

About climate change, the conspiracy theories about "climate lockdowns", based on the misunderstanding of the urbanistic concept of the "15 minute city", are still well spread in the EU.

News such as the ones about "climate lockdowns" apparently aim to build on overlaps between different disinformation communities (in this case, corona-sceptics and climate change denialists). Similar cases have been detected in many countries, for example about pro-Russia communities and anti-vaxxers.

DISINFORMATION GENERATED BY AI IS LOW, FOR NOW, BUT SPREAD ACROSS THE EU

As written in an EDMO analysis recently published, generative AI marks the beginning of a new era for disinformation. With this monthly brief, EDMO starts its monitoring of disinformation generated by AI.

In March 2023, out of the 1.006 articles published by the 23 organizations part of the EDMO fact-checking network that contributed to this brief, 47 were about AI-generated disinformation (5%).

95%
Other

5%
AI-generated disinformation
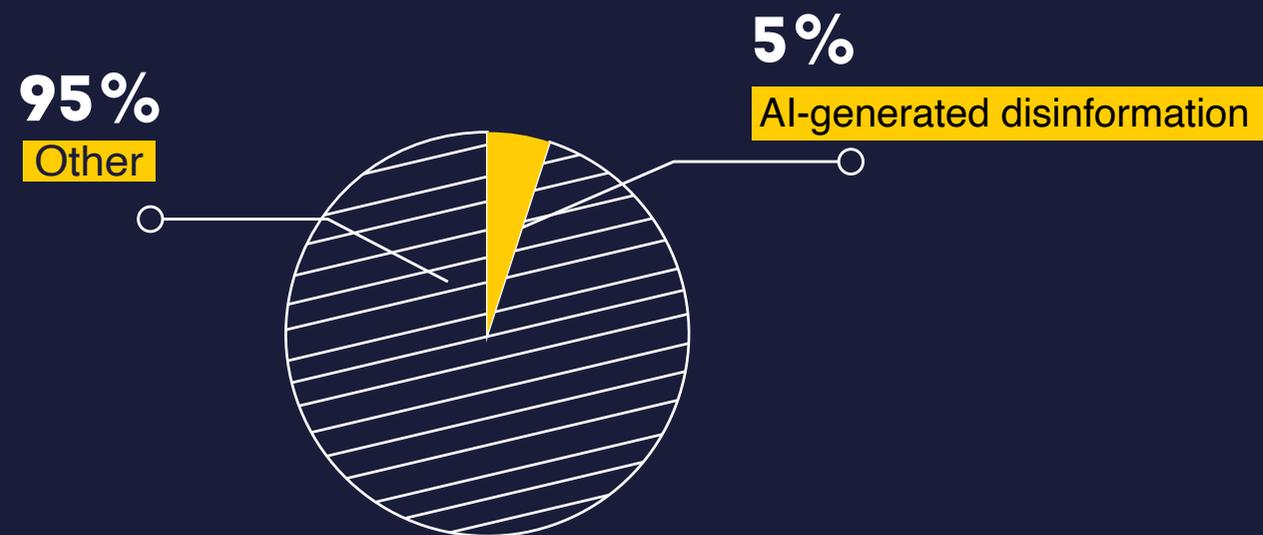
The percentage is quite low, but the few false contents produced with AI circulated widely across the EU (see slide n. 7).

AI GENERATED DISINFORMATION - NOW AND IN THE FUTURE

In the vast majority of cases, the AI-generated false content was about public figures, like Donald Trump, the Pope and Vladimir Putin.

But an AI-generated image was used also in connection with the demonstrations in France against the pensions' reform, to denounce alleged police brutality against an old man protesting.

The author of the image is an artist and did not intend to fuel disinformation: his work was misused by disinformers or misunderstood by some users.
But with the spread of generative-AI technologies it is easy to foresee a future where disinformation will use false images and videos specifically created for the purpose, instead of old videos and images miscaptioned and decontextualized, as was the case until now.
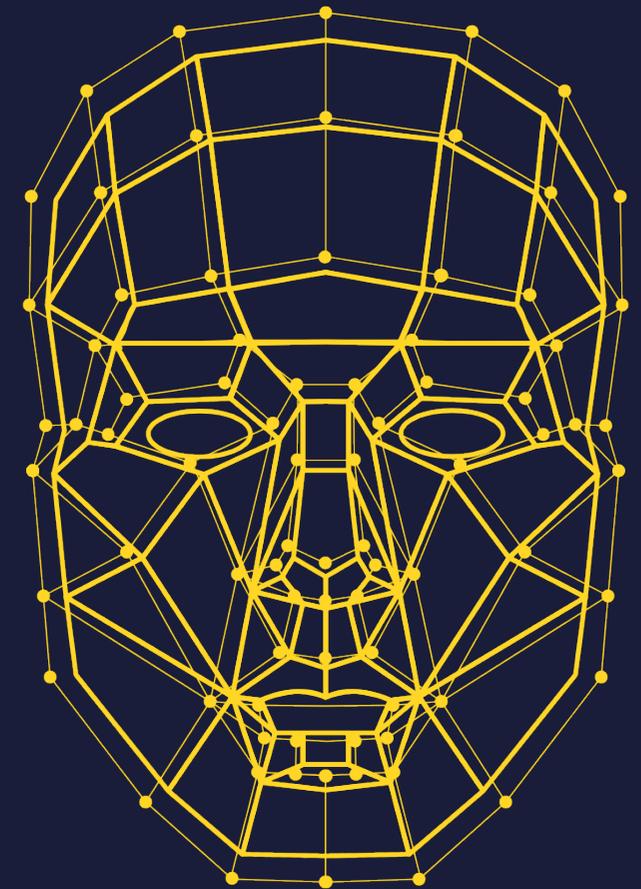
OTHER RELEVANT TOPICS OF DISINFORMATION IN MARCH:

The EU is still in the disinformation's gunsight: <u>false news about edible insects</u> are still <u>well spread</u> in many countries, and other viral false news accuse the Union of wasting money in <u>lavish or unnecessary expenses</u> and of <u>supporting Islamic fanaticism</u>, as well as its politicians to be <u>drug addicts</u>.

Protests in France against pension reform are a topic of disinformation <u>in the country</u> but also in many <u>other EU member states</u>. The vast majority of detected false news are old videos and images miscaptioned and decontextualized, to exaggerate the <u>participation in the demonstrations</u> and/or <u>police brutality</u>.

<u>Migrants</u>, <u>foreigners</u> and <u>Muslims</u> are consistently the object of false news promoting xenophobia and racism in many EU countries.

The electoral process in different countries that recently held elections (<u>Estonia</u>), or that are about to hold elections (<u>Spain</u>), was the target of disinformation campaigns, sometimes supported by political actors, claiming that elections were stolen and there were massive frauds. This phenomenon <u>has been often detected</u> in the EU in the past few years, after the 2020 U.S. presidential election.

EDMO
European Digital Media Observatory

THE FIVE FALSE STORIES WITH THE WIDEST CIRCULATION IN THE EU IN MARCH, BASED ON THE FACT-CHECKERS' REPORTS, WERE:

Legend:
- NOT EU
- EU + Norway
- EU+ Norway- No data

■ AI-generated images about Trump getting arrested.

● AI-generated images about Pope Francis dressed with a puffy, bright white coat.

▲ AI-generated images about Putin on his knees kissing the hand of Chinese president Xi Jinping.

★ Media accidentally published supposed footage of Zelenskyy's body double.

◆ False videos/images/news about Leopard tanks already in Ukraine (destroyed, swamped, damaged etc.).

THE MOST SIGNIFICANT VERIFIED DISINFORMATION STORIES AT THE NATIONAL LEVEL:

The claim that the European Union was going to shut down TikTok across Europe on March 15.

A video showing Ukrainian soldiers pulling over and harassing a female driver and a child.

The claim that a mother can determine the sex of her child by following a certain diet.

Claims that children are stolen, kidnapped or otherwise unjustifiably removed by social services.

METHODOLOGY

The information contained in this brief was collected via a questionnaire sent to the fact-checking organizations that are part of the EDMO fact-checking network.