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## FROM THE PANDEMIC TO THE WAR IN UKRAINE: ONE YEAR AND A HALF OF COUNTERING DISINFORMATION

Special edition brief - EDMO fact-checking network

# A STRONG AND GROWING NETWORK

The EDMO fact-checking network aims to foster a stronger cooperation between **European fact-checking organizations**, to allow quick and effective communication between them and to produce, thanks to joint efforts, a variety of fact-checking outputs.
One of its main outputs has been a **monthly brief on disinformation at the EU level**.

When the first brief was published, in July 2021, the EDMO network consisted of 13 fact-checking organizations, covering 18 EU Member States. In the following months it became even stronger: when the 18th brief was published, in December 2022, the network had grown to count 37 fact-checking organizations, covering 25 EU Member States* and Norway.



Composition of the EDMO fact-checking network, July 2021



Composition of the EDMO fact-checking network, December 2022

Members of the network are requested monthly to provide information about their fact-checking work at the national level, in order to identify trends and narratives in disinformation at the EU level.
The number of respondents to the monthly questionnaire grew from an average of 11 for the first three monthly briefs (July-August-September 2021) to an average of 27 in the last three monthly briefs (October-November-December 2022).

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# DISINFORMATION IN THE EU: MAIN TOPICS

Since its first publication, EDMO monthly briefs have measured the share of the detected **disinformation about COVID-19** on the total, i.e. the total amount of items fact-checked by members of the network in a given month. Since February 2022 detected **disinformation about the war in Ukraine** has also been measured, and since July 2022 **climate change-related disinformation** as well.



Legend:
- **% of COVID-19-related disinformation on total**
- **% of Ukraine-related disinformation on total**
- **% of climate change-related disinformation on total**

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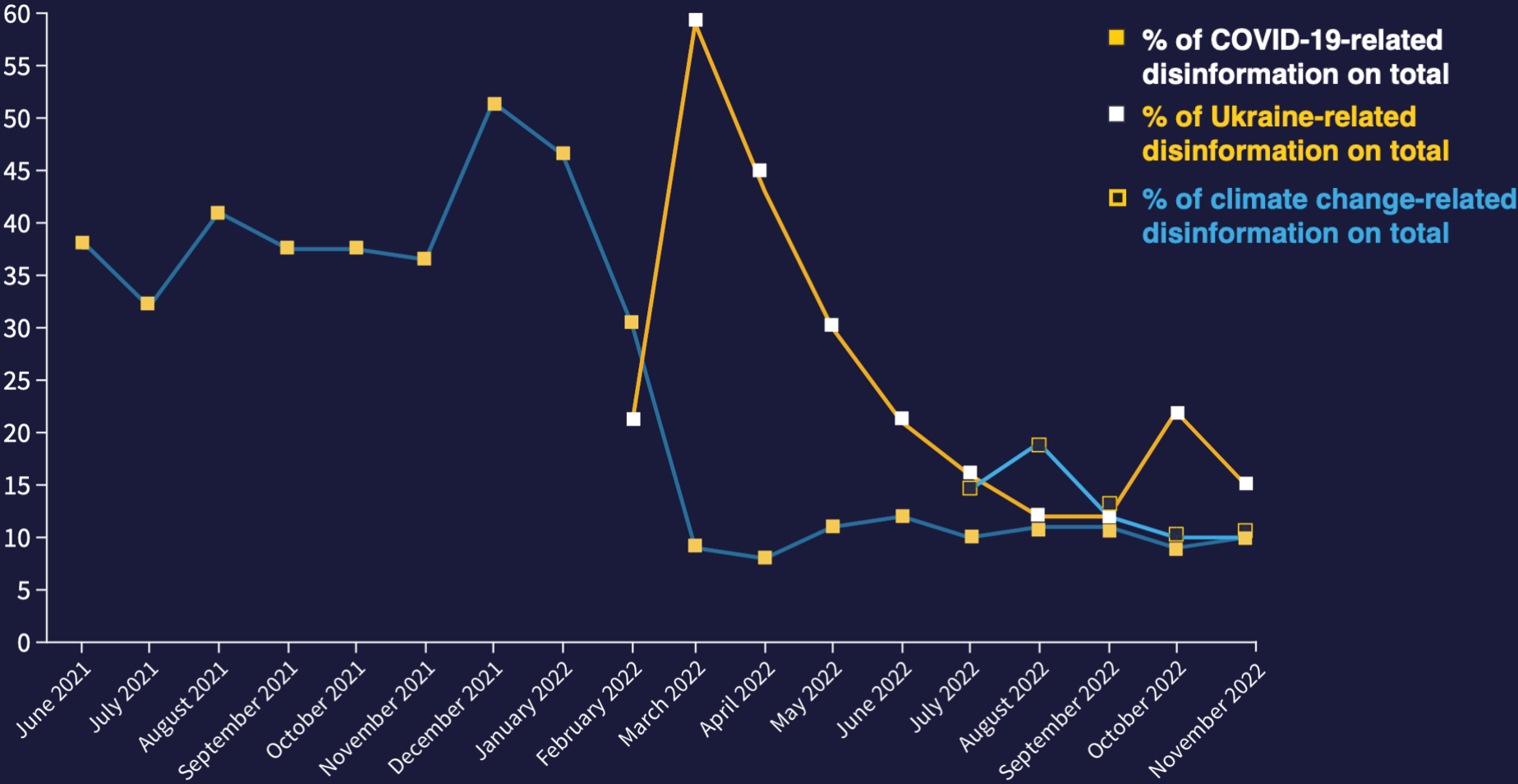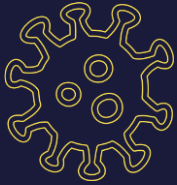
**COVID-19 related disinformation**, since EDMO monitoring started, registered the highest percentages in December 2021 (51.5% of the total detected disinformation) and January 2022 (46.5%), in correspondence of the 2022/2023 winter wave of cases recorded in the EU.

Disinformation seems to be very often ancillary to information, since it appears to follow trends in mainstream media closely. So in a period of dramatic surge of the number of COVID-19 cases, information covered extensively the pandemic, and disinformation focused on the topic too.
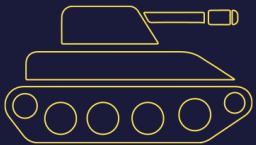
**Ukraine-related disinformation** was almost nonexistent until the beginning of the war, even if news reports about the concentrations of Russian troops were already present in mainstream media in January-February 2022. Since the 24th of February, the number of false news about Ukraine skyrocketed, and in March the percentage of detected disinformation about the war hit a new record in the EDMO briefs series for a single topic: 59% of the total detected disinformation.

Since then the percentage constantly decreased until the end of the summer, reaching its lowest point in September 2022. In October and November 2022, the percentage started rising again, even if it is far from the levels recorded in the first months of the war.

**Disinformation related to climate change** never reached the peaks detected about disinformation related to Ukraine and COVID-19, according to the EDMO briefs. Since EDMO briefs started measuring it (July 2022), it never went higher than 20% of the total detected disinformation. It peaked in August 2022, probably in relation to the heat waves that hit Europe during the summer, and then basically halved as a percentage of the total. But it is worth noting that there has been a constant topic of disinformation in the EU.

# DISINFORMATION IN THE EU: MAIN NARRATIVES

A common aspect of the disinformation detected about the pandemic, the war in Ukraine and climate change, is that the main narratives tend to persist in time, finding new ways to emerge. For example, in November 2022 the World Cup in Qatar rekindled the old disinformation narrative about Ukrainians being pro-Nazi.

The large majority of disinformation narratives detected in the EDMO monthly briefs when the monitoring started are still active as for November 2022 (the 18th and last EDMO monthly brief here considered).

## War in Ukraine

| Disinformation narrative | First detection | Still detected |
|---|---|---|
| Russian invasion of Ukraine is justified (e.g. there was a genocide of Russian-speaking civilians in Donbass) | February 2022 | ✔ |
| Pro-Ukraine war propaganda (e.g. "Ghost of Kiev") | February 2022 | ✔ |
| Pro-Russia war propaganda (e.g. exaggerating Russian military achievements) | February 2022 | ✔ |
| Ukrainian president Volodymyr Zelensky is a Nazi, a satanist, a drug addict, a coward etc. | February 2022 | ✔ |
| Western traditional media (e.g. BBC or CNN) spread false news/false images about the war | February 2022 | ✔ |
| War's worst massacres are staged (e.g. Mariupol's hospital, Bucha, Izyum, Kupiansk) / Ukrainians victims are "crisis actors" | March 2022 | ✔ |
| Ukrainians and Ukrainian forces are largely pro-Nazi | March 2022 | ✔ |

## War in Ukraine
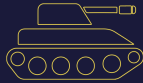
| Disinformation narrative | First detection | Still detected |
|---|---|---|
| Ukrainian refugees are <u>violent</u>, <u>nazi</u>, <u>thieves</u>, <u>parasites</u> etc. | March 2022 | ✔ |
| Militar, economical and humanitarian aids to Ukraine are useless/dangerous, because of Ukraine's <u>corruption</u> and unreliability (e.g. western weapons <u>sold to the black market</u>) | March 2022 | ✔ |
| Exaggerated <u>russophobic</u> sentiment in European countries (in the <u>Baltics States</u> in particular) | March 2022 | ✔ |
| Exaggerated negative economical, <u>social</u>, <u>political</u> consequences of the war in Russia | March 2022 | ✔ |
| Exaggerated negative economical consequences of the war and of the <u>sanctions</u> in Europe | March 2022 | ✔ |
| Ukraine's allies are pro-Nazi / exploit Ukraine (e.g. Poland <u>wants to conquer</u> Western Ukraine; U.S. is <u>buying</u> Ukraine's lands cheaply etc.) | March 2022 | ✔ |

## COVID-19
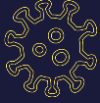
| Disinformation narrative | First detection | Still detected |
|---|---|---|
| The pandemic is a hoax | June 2021 | ✓ |
| Sars-Cov-2 is not really that much dangerous | June 2021 | ✓ |
| Conspiracy theories about depopulating the world/experimenting on people/inserting chips ("plandemic") | June 2021 | ✓ |
| COVID-19 Vaccines are very dangerous/lethal | June 2021 | ✓ |
| Vaccinated people are prevented to do a series of activities (e.g. driving) | June 2021 | ✓ |
| Pcr tests, face-masks and other means to prevent COVID-19 are useless | June 2021 | ✓ |
| Miraculous remedies/drugs against COVID-19 | June 2021 | ✓ |
| Clear evidence that the Sars-Cov-2 virus has been engineered in a Chinese lab | June 2021 | ✗ |
| Protests against COVID-19-related containment measures are bigger than what the traditional media shows | July 2021 | ✗ |
| Brutal repression of protests/extreme punishments for non-vaccinated people | July 2021 | ✓ |
| Protests were successful in many countries, forcing authorities to call off the vaccination campaigns | September 2021 | ✓ |

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# Climate change

| Disinformation narrative | First detection | Still detected |
|---|---|---|
| Climate change is not real and/or is not related to human activities | July 2022 | ✓ |
| Traditional media spread panic through false news and/or manipulated images | July 2022 | ✓ |
| Climate movements are hypocritical and/or foolish | July 2022 | ✓ |
| Renewables, recycling, and electric vehicles are useless or dangerous | July 2022 | ✓ |
| Fossil fuels do not have a strong negative impact on climate change | August 2022 | ✓ |

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# OTHER RELEVANT TOPICS OF DISINFORMATION

## Migrants, EU institutions, LGBTQ+ communities

Through the months covered by the EDMO monthly briefs, other significant topics of disinformation were detected, even if not quantitatively measured.

Migrants, foreigners – in particular muslims – and ethnic minorities are a recurring target of disinformation, like LGBTQ+ communities and EU politicians and institutions.

## Main events in the news

Disinformation also routinely focuses on the main news of the moment. For example, when **Queen Elizabeth II** died in September 2022, many false news stories were detected about the royal funerals, the circumstances of the death and so on. The same happened with the **Qatar World Cup** in November 2022.

False news related to trending topics in the news can usually be of two kinds.

- The first one is **click-baiting without a specific underlying narrative**, thus less dangerous and potentially harmful than the disinformation that aims to convey specific messages.

- The second kind exploits the current event to rekindle **attacks against traditional targets of disinformation**, i.e. it includes it in a pre-existing narrative.

For example, the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan and the following chaos in the country in August 2021 was exploited to spread false news about **Afghani migrants being only young men, "cowards" fleeing the country** and leaving behind women and children. Before the winter holidays in 2021/2022, the false news was spread that the **EU had an action plan to abolish Christmas.** The **monkeypox** outbreak in May 2022 was **used to attack LGBTQ+ communities** with false news, and the same happened after the **Uvalde massacre** in Texas. In July 2022 many false news used the **protests by Dutch farmers'** – triggered by the government's decision to incentivize the reduction of the number of livestock, with the aim to halve nitrogen oxide and ammonia pollution in the country by 2030 – to spread **climate change denialism.** In September 2022 Queen Elizabeth's death was the pretext to spread disinformation about COVID-19 vaccines, and the **gas/price crisis was used to attack national and EU politicians**. In November 2022 the Qatar World Cup was the occasion to spread false news about **Ukrainians being pro-Nazi**.

## National elections in EU Member States

Especially after the 2020 U.S. presidential elections, false news about **elections being rigged, electoral scandals and frauds** appeared in many EU countries before and after national elections. Examples include:

Disinformation about **alleged fraud during the Bundestag elections** in Germany was detected in September 2021 (e.g. fake mail-in ballots, unsealed ballot boxes).

Something similar happened in France, during the presidential election in April 2022, when false news about 2 millions **votes disappearing,** about the **election being rigged** and about **electoral frauds** were detected in many EU countries.

This kind of disinformation circulated also in smaller countries. For example in October 2021 many false news claiming that the **elections were "stolen"** were detected in Latvia.

# THE MOST VIRAL FALSE NEWS DETECTED IN THE EDMO BRIEFS

Each EDMO monthly brief highlighted the stories with the widest circulation in the EU in the considered month, based on the fact-checkers' reports. The **10 stories that circulated the most**, during the 18 months analyzed, are:

| False News | Topic | Month of detection | Countries of detection (Nr.) |
|---|---|---|---|
| Ukraine hosts secret US bio-labs (e.g.) | | March 2022 | 22 |
| Mariupol's hospital was not bombed by Russia and the attack was staged by the Ukrainians forces (e.g.) | | March 2022 | 20 |
| Western media spread false news about the war in Ukraine (e.g.) | | March 2022 | 20 |
| The horrific scenes recorded in Bucha were staged by Ukrainian forces (e.g.) | | April 2022 | 20 |
| Videos/images/news that demonstrate use of cocaine by Zelensky (e.g.) | | April 2022 | 20 |
| *Died suddenly*, a "documentary" about Covid-19 vaccines spreading conspiracy theories and false news/misleading information about the vaccination (e.g.) | | November 2022 | 20 |
| Misleading claims about a Pfizer executive admitting that the company did not properly test its COVID-19 vaccines (e.g.) | | October 2022 | 19 |
| Video showing Russians in a 35 km queue at Finland border after Putin's announcement of a partial mobilization (e.g.) | | September 2022 | 16 |
| Out-of-context videos and pictures associated with the protests of anti-government farmers in the Netherlands (e.g.) | | July 2022 | 16 |
| Weather maps are being manipulated to exaggerate climate change (e.g.) | | July 2022 | 15 |

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It emerges clearly from the list that the **war in Ukraine**, especially in its first months, was the subject of the **most viral false news detected**. In many cases these false news echoed Russian propaganda (for example about Mariupol's hospital bombing, Bucha's massacre and secret U.S. biolabs).

**Pro-Russian disinformation** is undoubtedly the **major disinformation phenomenon** linked to the war, but the EDMO monthly briefs detected **also some anti-Russian and/or pro-Ukraine disinformation** (for example, exaggerating the existing phenomenon of young Russians fleeing the country to avoid being drafted).

COVID-19-related disinformation produced some viral false news that were detected by the EDMO monthly briefs. It is probable that the most relevant examples circulated at the beginning of the pandemic in 2020, when the EDMO monthly briefs were not published yet.

## METHODOLOGY

The information contained in this brief was collected analyzing the 18 EDMO monthly briefs published by the end of 2022 (*https://edmo.eu/fact-checking-briefs/*). Reference period: June 2021-November 2022. Main editor: Tommaso Canetta, Pagella Politica/Facta.news.
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