Evaluating the Implementation of the EU Code of Practice on Disinformation in Romania

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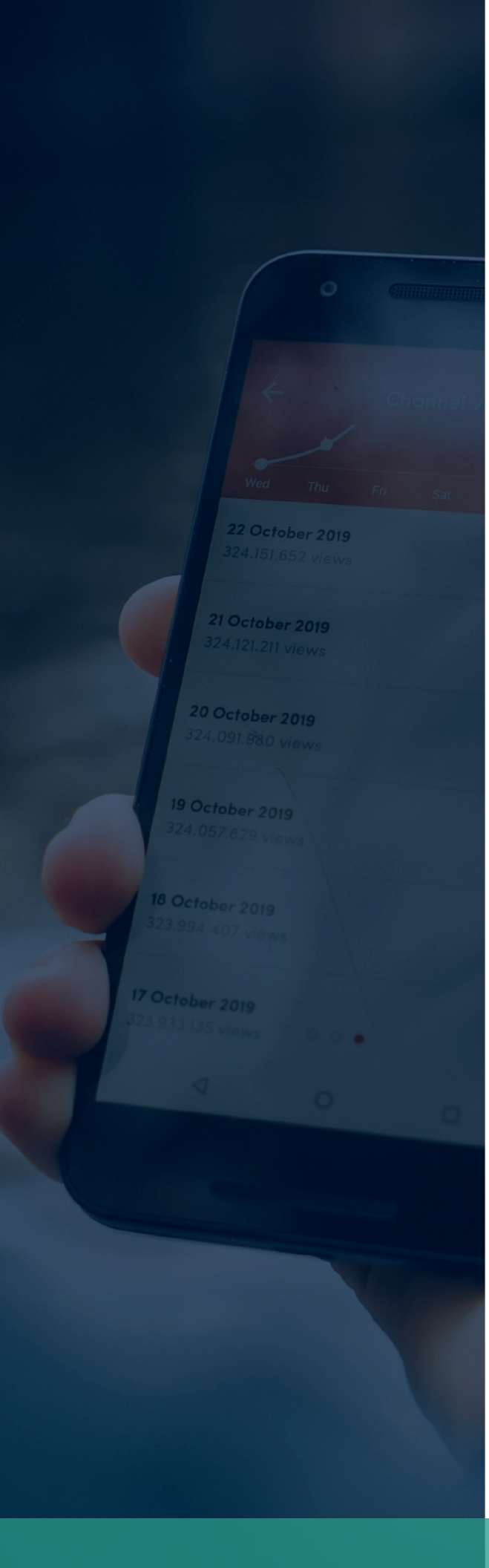

SUMMARY

The Digital Services Act (DSA) and the Code of Practice on Disinformation (CoPD) are EU initiatives aimed at improving the digital environment. The DSA is a comprehensive regulatory framework for digital service providers, which introduces legal obligations, requirements, and potential sanctions for digital service providers, seeking to create a harmonized set of rules across the EU member states. The CoPD is not a legally binding instruments and has a voluntary self-regulation approach. The Code of Practice specifically targets the issue of disinformation, encouraging online platforms to voluntarily adopt measures to address disinformation and outlines best practices and expectations. The code primarily deals with reducing the visibility of false information, improving fact-checking, and providing users with clear information about the sources of content. The implementation of the Code of Practice on Disinformation in Romania is overseen by the National Authority for Management and Regulation in Communications (ANCOM), in line with the European Union's approach to addressing disinformation.

SUMMARY

This analysis is focused on the implementation of the Code of Practice on Disinformation in Romania by four very large online platforms (VLOPs): Google, Meta, Microsoft, and TikTok. In this report, we primarily focus on three pillars of the Code:

1. **Advertising and political advertising**
2. **Integrity of services**
3. **Empowering users, the research community and fact-checkers.**

While we mainly evaluate the compliance reports provided by the four VLOPs for Romania, we also overview the legal framework related to the implementation of the Digital Services Act (DSA) and the Code of Practice on Disinformation in Romania and make a more fine-grained analysis - based on the input provided by our colleagues from Funky Citizens (one of the two fact-checking organisations approved by Meta to very their content in Romania) - of the VLOP's support in conducting fact-checking in Romania. We also express concerns about the recent decision by Romania's ruling coalition to support Valeriu Zgonea for the position of President of the National Authority for Management and Regulation in Communications (ANCOM), which has been appointed as the Digital Services Coordinator responsible for overseeing and ensuring compliance with the Digital Services Act in Romania. Valeriu Zgonea, a former leader of the Social Democratic Party (PSD) and the former president of the Chamber of Deputies, had previously withdrawn from all public roles in 2021 due to a three-year prison sentence for influence peddling. The backing of Valeriu Zgonea for the ANCOM presidency has prompted worries regarding political interference in regulatory appointments. We argue that supporting an individual with a controversial past exemplifies the enduring problem of intertwined politics and business interests in Romania.

The closing remarks of the report emphasize that, even if the VLOPs operating in Romania have voluntarily agreed to follow the guidelines formulated by the Code of Practice, they haven't always taken these measures seriously in their compliance reports. Furthermore, since there are no specific legal penalties for non-compliance, the VLOPs are still slow in (or sometimes even reluctant to) making the best efforts to ensure a responsible and trustworthy digital environment in Romania. We conclude by addressing the key areas where the implementation of the Code is still deficient in Romania and suggest possible remedies. Last but not least, this report is based on the collaboration with our colleagues from the Bulgarian-Romanian Observatory of Disinformation (BROD), which has involved joint researches and numerous discussions aimed at better analysing the implementation of the Code of Practice on Disinformation in Romania.

INTRODUCTION

The Digital Services Act (DSA) and the Code of Practice on Disinformation (CoPD) are two distinct regulatory initiatives introduced by the European Union (EU) to address different aspects of the digital environment, particularly in the context of online platforms and content. The Digital Services Act (DSA) primarily focuses on regulating online platforms and digital service providers. It aims to establish a comprehensive regulatory framework to ensure the accountability, transparency, and responsibility of these platforms in various aspects, including content moderation, advertising, and user safety. The Code of Practice on Disinformation, on the other hand, specifically targets disinformation (commonly referred to as "fake news") and the measures platforms and online services should take to combat the spread of false information. When it comes to its scope, the Code of Practice is more narrowly focused on the issue of disinformation. It outlines specific measures and practices for online platforms to combat the dissemination of false or misleading information. However, since the CoPD is a voluntary initiative, and there are no specific legal or regulatory penalties for non-compliance, the success of its implementation relies on the commitment of the parties involved and their efforts to follow the best practices and principles outlined in the code.

Starting on August 26, 2023, the Digital Services Act (DSA) is legally applicable to Very Large Online Platforms (VLOPs) in the EU. From this point onward, the platforms that the European Commission has designated as VLOPs had to take action and implement the DSA, including making risk assessments public. Article 34 of the DSA states: "Very large online platform providers and very large online search engine providers shall identify, analyze, and diligently assess any systemic risks within the Union arising from the design or operation of their services and associated systems, including algorithmic systems or from the use of their services." The most recent VLOPs' assessments have been published in September in the EU Code of Practice Transparency Center. It is worth noting that there were no clear models for companies to follow when conducting these assessments, which is one of the reasons why we believe VLOPS have produced assessment documents that primarily served their economic interests and not the Commission's or users' interests and, in some cases, made it seem like there were no issues to be addressed regarding disinformation.

In Romania, ANCOM (National Authority for Management and Regulation in Communications) was recently designated as the Digital Services Coordinator, responsible for overseeing and ensuring compliance with the Digital Services Act (DSA). The authority serves as the single contact point for implementing the DSA, reporting data and information to the European Commission and other Digital Services Coordinators in EU Member States. ANCOM has also become a part of the European Board for Digital Services, collaborating with other national coordinators, conducting joint investigations, issuing opinions and recommendations, and contributing to the development and implementation of guidelines and reports related to the DSA.

The recent announcement by Romania's ruling coalition, comprising the Social Democratic Party (PSD) and the National Liberal Party (PNL), to endorse Valeriu Zgonea for the position of president of ANCOM, has generated controversy. Valeriu Zgonea, a former leader of the Social Democratic Party (PSD) and the former president of the Chamber of Deputies, had been sentenced in 2021 for collusion of interest. ANCOM is a vital regulatory body responsible for ensuring fair competition and safeguarding consumers in Romania's telecommunications sector, a crucial component of the country's economy. Therefore, appointing a leader perceived as impartial, just, and devoid of potential conflicts of interest is of utmost importance. The move to support Zgonea for the ANCOM presidency has triggered concerns about political interference in regulatory appointments. In line with other critics, we argue that endorsing an individual with a contentious past exemplifies the problematic nexus between politics and business in Romania, an issue that has persisted over time. Despite Romania's significant strides in combating corruption and enhancing transparent governance in recent years, appointing a controversial figure like Valeriu Zgonea to a position of such significance could potentially reverse much of the progress made.

3. THE IMPLEMENTATION OF CoPD

The research team at SNSPA manually evaluated the compliance reports provided by four signatories: Google, Meta, Microsoft, and TikTok. The decision to focus on these 4 VLOPs was decided by a) their relevance to the Romanian market and b) the limited number of researchers available for this project and the limited time they could invest in analyzing the reports. We have evaluated the responses of these four signatories across three areas of the CoPD:

1. Advertising and Political advertising
2. Integrity of services
3. Empowering Users, the research community and Fact-Checkers.

The following sections showcase the initiatives related to the three pillars of the Code for which data concerning Romania was accessible. Each sub-section focuses on a particular pillar of the CoPD and comprises the overall evaluation of the VLOP's implementation of these specific pillars in Romania. We evaluate the measures under the assessed pillars comparatively, aiming to observe also how Romania is placed among other EU Countries.

3.1. ADVERTISING AND POLITICAL ADVERTISING

The pillar Advertising and Political Advertising encompasses areas 2 and 3 of the Strengthened Code of Practice. Aiming to bolster the transparency of political advertising online, this pillar holds a central position in the Code. This pillar prioritizes the improvement of transparency and the labeling of political advertisements by mandating comprehensive information about sponsors, expenses, and the duration of ad displays, as well as establishing searchable libraries for such ads. The pillar further advocates for rigorous strategies to avert the positioning of ads adjacent to false information and the propagation of misleading advertisements, thereby encouraging enhanced cooperation amongst participants in the advertising sector for a more effective unified response.

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3.1.1. Commitment 1 of the CoPD related to ad placements in order to reduce monetisation of Disinformation

Google

In H1 2023, Google's report for Measure 1.1.related to the selling of advertising indicates that Romania maintains a moderate standing concerning the adherence to GoogleAds policies among EU countries. A total of 244.944 AdSense pages and 26 domains from Romania were actioned due to policy violations such as unreliable and harmful claims, replicated content, manipulated media, and deceptive practices. As Figure 1 and Figure 2 indicate, Romania is in the middle – low rank at the EU level in terms of actions taken by Google against pages and domains that do not follow GoogleAds policies (unreliable and harmful claims, replicated content, manipulated media, dangerous content, deceptive practices, and shocking content).

Figure 1 indicates that the highest percentage of actioned AdSense Pages at the EU level is registered by Spain (25% out of the EU total), while the lowest percentage is registered by Slovenia (less than 1%). Romania registered around 1% out of the EU total. Moreover, in terms of domains sanctioned, Figure 2 indicates that the highest percentage was registered in France with more than 35% out of the EU total, and the lowest percentage was registered in Estonia (less than 1%). Romania also registered around 1% for the domains sanctioned for not complying with the Google policies.

Figure 1. Percentages of actioned AdSense Pages

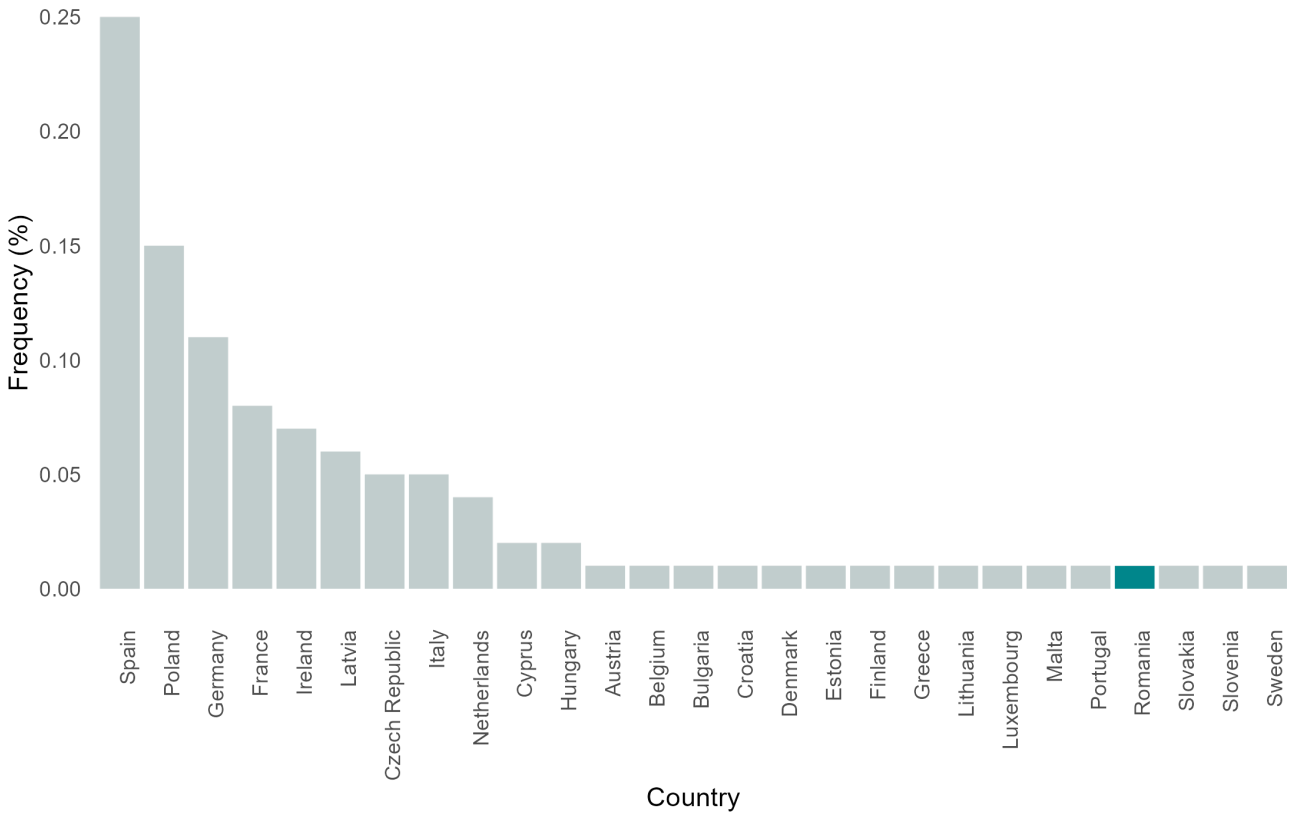
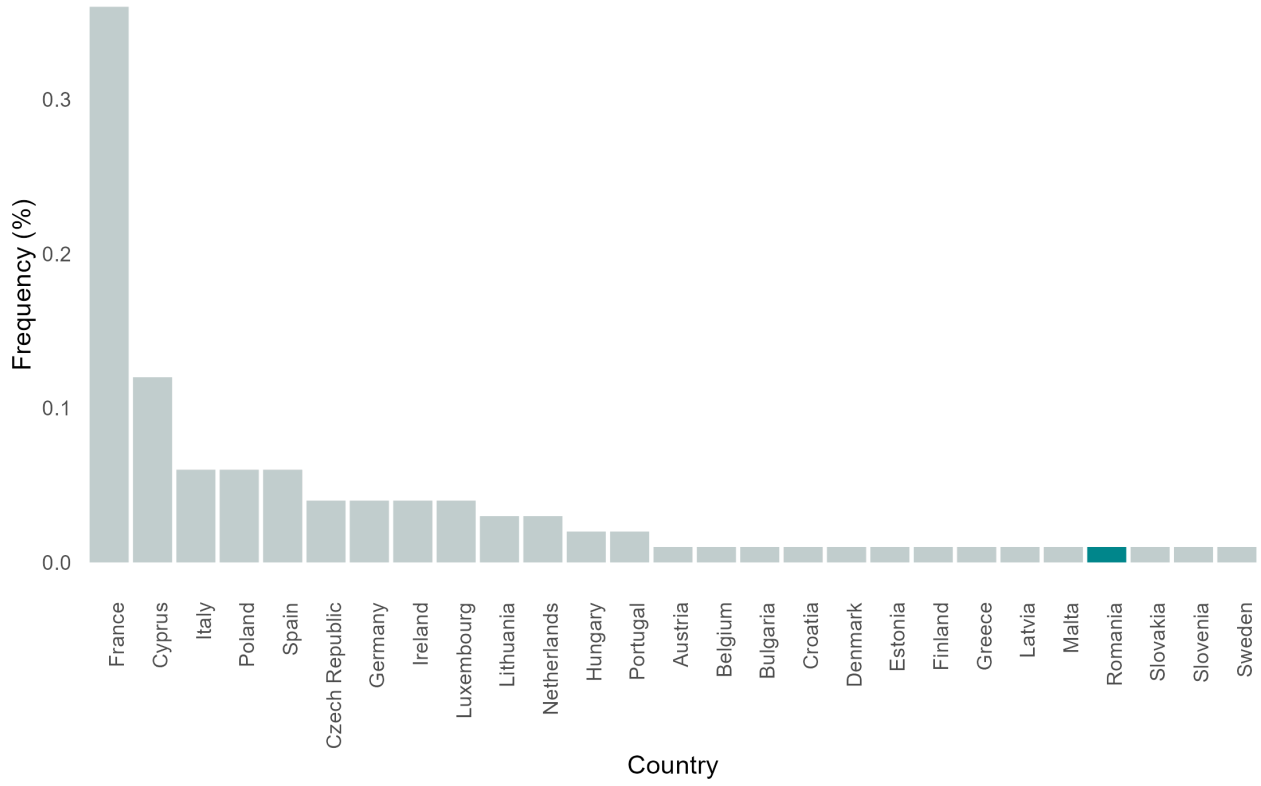
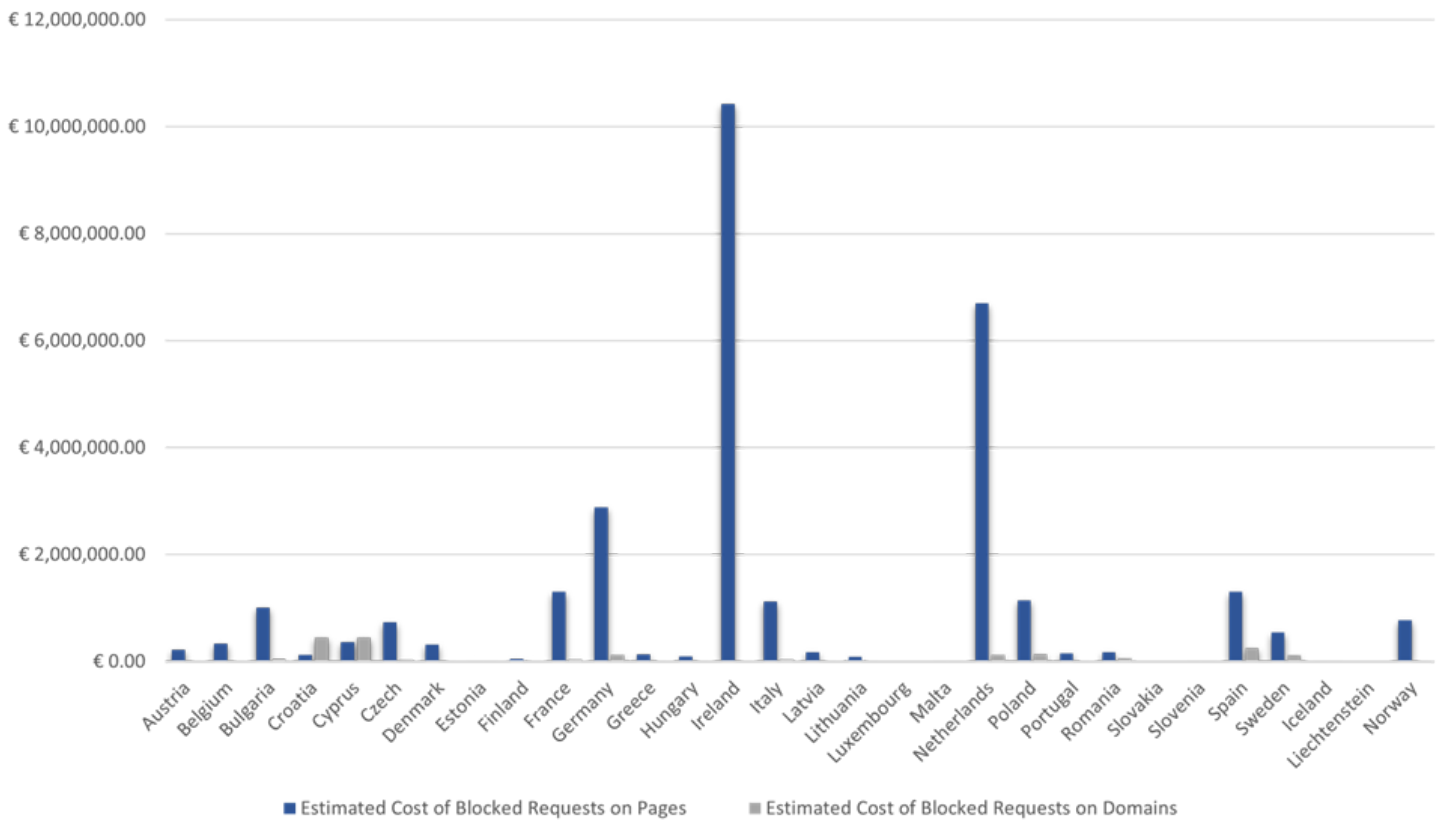


Figure 2. Percentages of Actioned AdSense Domains



To calculate the financial worth for each EU Member State, Google leveraged internal data concerning the quantity of pertinent AdSense bids that were prevented. It is important to note that the mentioned value presented in Figure 3 represents a monetary estimate for demonetising potentially harmful advertisement in the form of blocked ads for the period spanning H1 2023.

Figure 3. Monetary estimations for blocked ads



Based on the information from the compliance report, the overall implementation of Measure 1 by Google in Romania is assessed as partially implemented. The information about actions taken by the signatory to remove, block, or restrict advertising on pages and/or domains that disseminate harmful disinformation is given in an aggregate manner, the user being unable to verify the validity of this aggregate numbers of removed, blocked or restricted pages. Therefore, we consider that, in order to use the provided data, the signatory should provide specific details about the removals, blocks or restricted ads.

Microsoft

Microsoft has declared for Measure 1.1. that Romania had no ads restricted on LinkedIn. This means that the platform didn't identify or act upon any ads that violated its misinformation policies in Romania during the covered period. When compared to other EEA countries, Romania is part of the majority group that witnessed no restrictions. However, countries like Denmark, Ireland, Italy, Germany, and Spain did experience some actions, with Spain having the highest at three restricted ads. Regarding Microsoft Advertising's effort to combat misinformation, Romania also had zero blocked impressions. This indicates that no ads were prevented from being displayed due to misinformation concerns in Romania.

When looking at the broader EEA region, Romania's zero blocked impressions place it alongside several other countries such as Austria, Belgium, Bulgaria, and others that experienced no blocked impressions. In contrast, nations like Germany and Italy saw a significant number of blocked impressions, with Germany having the highest at 649.684. These results place Romania in the larger group of countries with minimal to no actions related to misinformation on both LinkedIn and Microsoft Advertising.
Furthermore, Microsoft made limited efforts in the reported period to demonetize sources of disinformation. When examining the Euro value of demonetized ads across various EEA countries, Romania had no sources of disinformation demonetized. This suggests that no ads originating from or targeting Romania were identified as misinformation sources or were demonetized during this timeframe. In contrast, other countries within the EEA region had varying Euro values attributed to their demonetized ads. Countries like Austria, Belgium, Bulgaria, and several others also reported zero demonetization, aligning them with Romania's standing. On the opposite end, countries like Germany and Italy had significant Euro values linked to their demonetized ads, indicating higher levels of detected misinformation sources in their advertising. Based on the information from the report specific for Measure 1, the overall implementation of Measure 1 by Microsoft in Romania cannot effectively be assessed.

Meta

Meta has not reported any data related to Measure 1 for Romania.

TikTok

TikTok’s report covering their content in Romania indicates also a moderate stance taken regarding the removal of ads due to violations of specific content policies. When looking at the number of ad removed under the Covid-19 misinformation policy, the platform has reported zero removals in Romania. This places Romania alongside numerous other countries like Latvia, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Malta, Slovakia, and Slovenia, which also reported no ad removals for this policy. In contrast, countries like Belgium and Poland reported 10 and 1 removals, respectively.

Regarding the number of ad removed under the political content ad policy, 14 removals were reported for Romania. While this number is higher compared to other countries countries, such as Latvia, Lithuania, and Luxembourg, which had zero removals, it is limited compared to the case of other countries, such as Spain, which had a significant number of 68 removals, or Poland with 49 removals. In summary, Romania maintains a mid-tier position in terms of ad removals due to political content, while the platform has refrained from removing any ads under the Covid-19 misinformation policy.

Based on the information from the report specific for Measure 1, the overall implementation of Measure 1 by TikTok in Romania cannot effectively be assessed. More data is needed in order to assess the validity of the information offered by the signatory (e.g., particular examples of ad removals, steps taken in identifying them etc.).

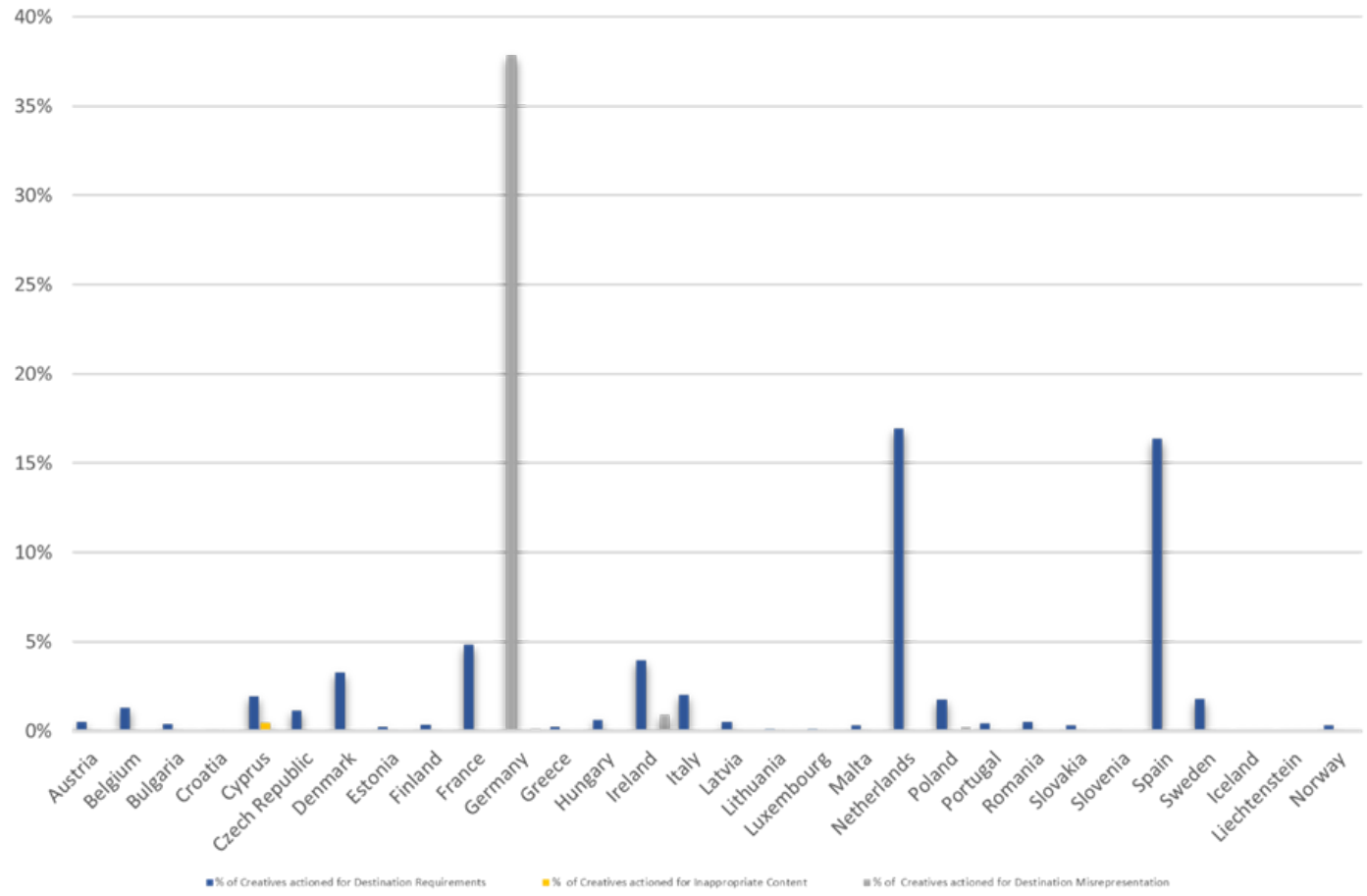
3.1.2. Commitment 2 of the CoPD related to the misuse of advertising systems to disseminate disinformation

Google

For Measure 2.1 of the Code, related to developing, deploying, and enforcing appropriate advertising policies that address the misuse of their advertising systems for propagating harmful disinformation in advertising messages and in the promotion of content, Google reports that 3,033.402 creatives were actioned in Romania for destination requirements, for inappropriate content 5.989, and 79.613 for misrepresentation. As Figure 4 indicates, the situation at the EU level is similar to Romania: out of the total number of creatives actioned, the percentage of creatives actioned for destination requirements is the highest among all the three Google's Policies (destination requirements, inappropriate content and misrepresentation).

Based on the information from the reports, the overall implementation of Measure 2.1 by Google in Romania is partially assessed. More data is needed in order to assess the validity of the information offered by the Signatory.

Figure 4. Monetary estimations for blocked ads



MICROSOFT

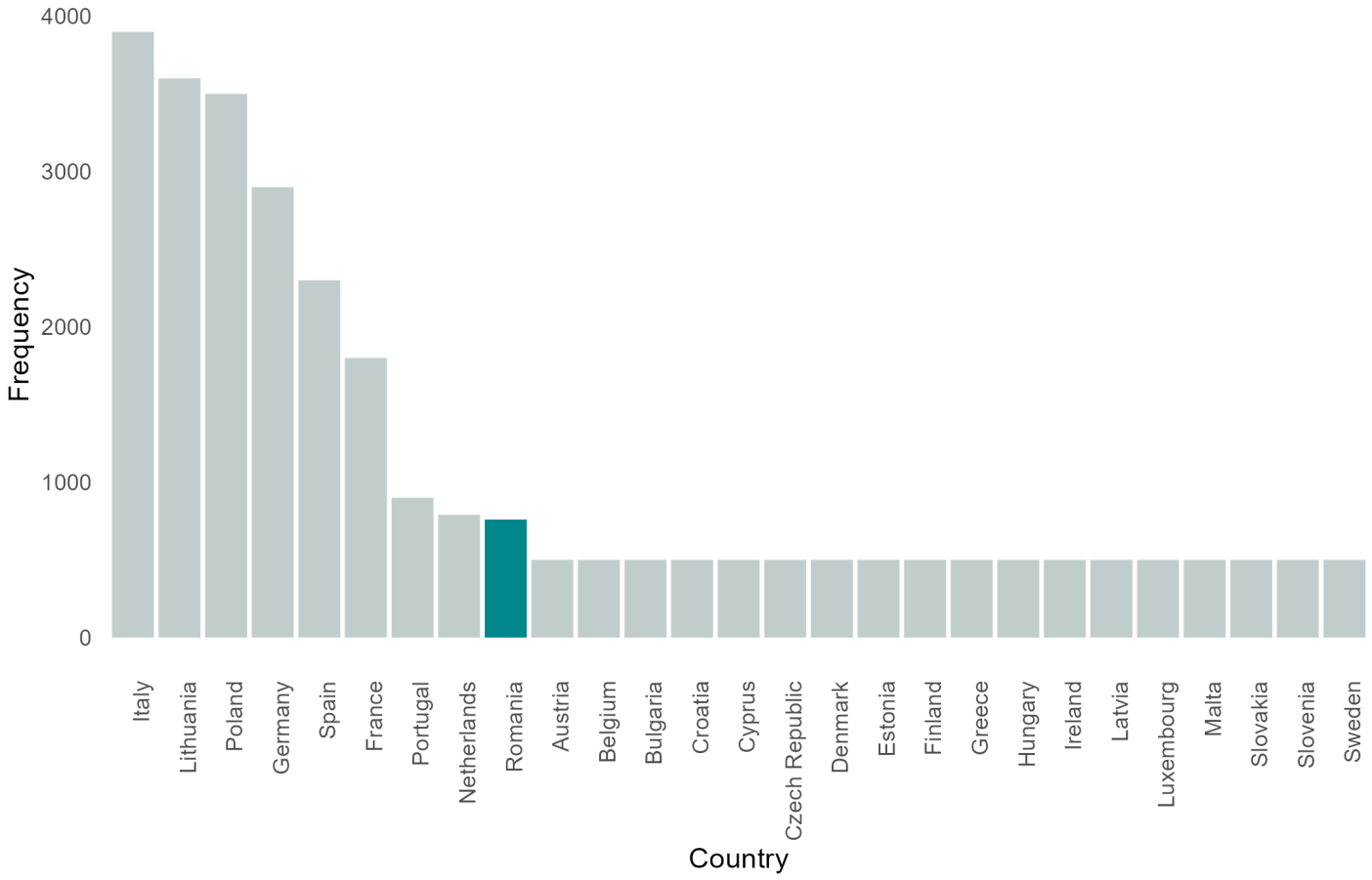
For the same measure, Microsoft has declared that Romania registered zero restricted ads on LinkedIn. When looking at the metrics for Microsoft Advertising, Romania had 84.698 blocked impressions and 481.617 unique domains associated with account suspensions. This suggests a proactive monitoring and intervention by Microsoft Advertising regarding potential misinformation targeting or originating from Romania. In comparison, Romania stands alongside many European countries with zero restrictions on LinkedIn. However, its metrics on Microsoft Advertising indicate the presence of digital campaigns that potentially breach the platform's guidelines.

Based on the information from the report specific for Measure 2.1, the overall implementation of Measure 2.1 by Microsoft in Romania is partially assessed. More data is needed in order to assess the validity of the information offered by the Signatory.

META

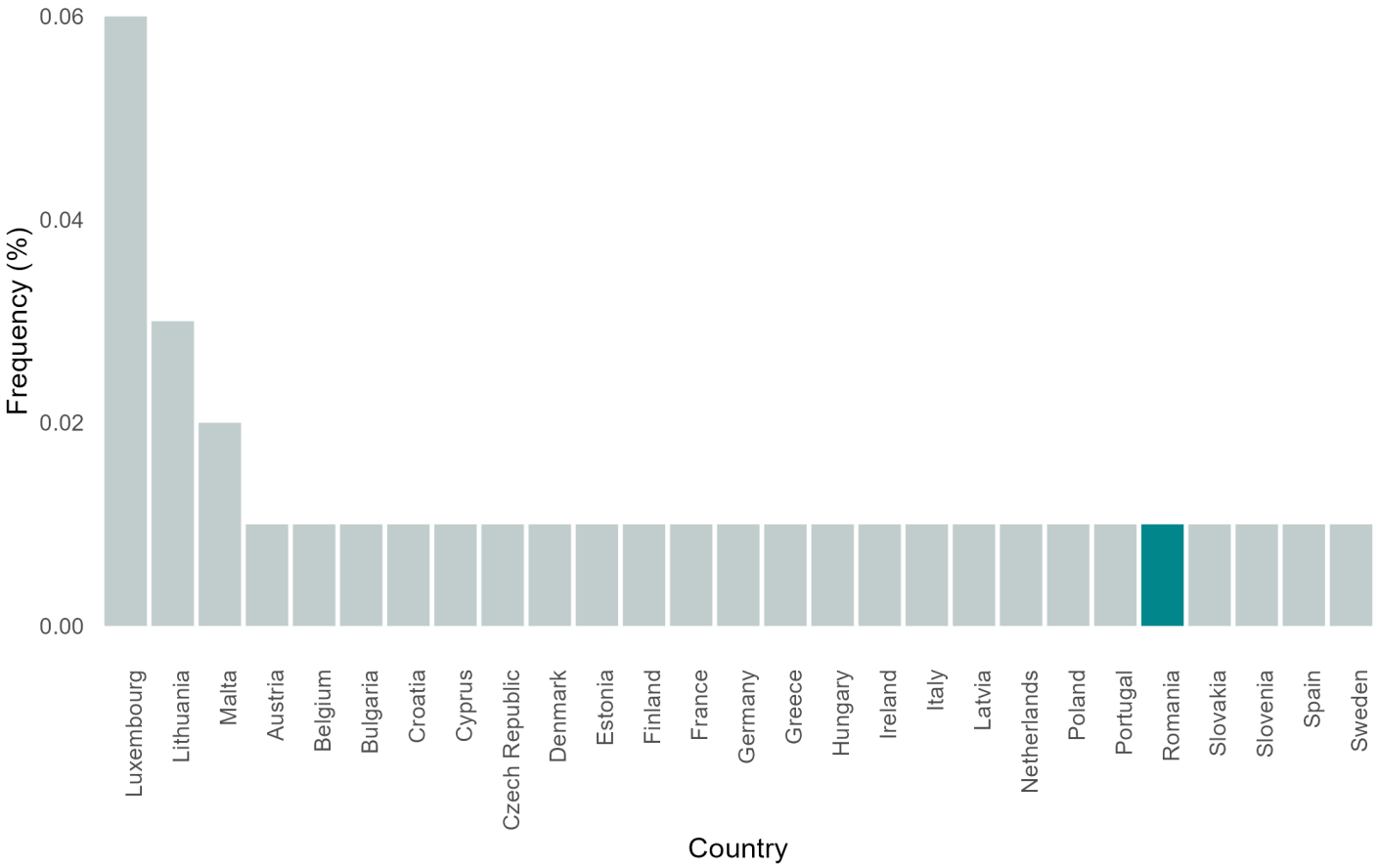
Meta has declared for measure 2.1, that for Romania it removed over 760 ads on Facebook and Instagram combined for violating the Misinformation policy in the EU. Overall, Meta removed 250.000 ads on Facebook and Instagram combined from 01/01/2023 to 30/06/2023.

Figure 5. Number of Ads removed for violating the Misinformation policy in the EU



As we can observe in Figure 5, in terms of overall number of ads removed from 01/01/2023 to 30/06/2023, Romania is the seventh country in EU with high number of ads removed. Before Romania there is Netherlands, Spain, Germany, Italy, France. The country with the highest number of ads removed is Poland. Furthermore, as we can see in Figure 6, the percentage of ads removed specifically for misinformation is not high for Romania: only 0.30% out of the total number of ads removed are due to the misinformation only. The highest percentage of ads removed specifically for misinformation is in Luxembourg (more than 6%), followed by Lithuania (around 3%). Therefore, Romania is one of the countries with the lowest rate of ads removed specifically for misinformation.

Figure 6. Percentages of ads removed specifically for misinformation



Based on the information from the report specific for Measure 2.1, the overall implementation of Measure 2.1 by Meta in Romania is partially assessed. More data is needed in order to assess the validity of the information offered by the Signatory.

TikTok

For Measure 2.1, the TikTok report states that Romania has seen zero ad removals under the Covid-19 misinformation policy. This places Romania among several European nations that have not recorded any ad removals under this specific category, such as Bulgaria, Croatia, Cyprus, Estonia, Greece, Latvia, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Malta, Slovakia, and Slovenia.

In terms of ad removals under the political content ad policy, Romania has recorded 14 removals. When compared to other countries, this number is moderate. For instance, countries like Spain (68 removals), Italy (47 removals), and the Netherlands (48 removals) have higher numbers of ad removals under the political content ad policy. However, Romania's number is higher than countries like Denmark (3 removals), Portugal (3 removals), and Sweden (5 removals). Overall, Romania neither leads nor lags significantly behind its European counterparts in these specific metrics.

Specifically, TikTok and Microsoft have declared data also for measure 2.3. Microsoft has declared that in the context of advertisements restricted due to misinformation policies on LinkedIn for the period between January 1 - June 30, 2023, Romania had zero ads restricted. Similarly, there were no impressions recorded for Romania before they might have been restricted, and no ads were removed or prohibited on the Microsoft Advertising platform during this period. Comparatively, Romania stands alongside a majority of European countries with zero restrictions on both LinkedIn and Microsoft Advertising platforms, indicating a low incidence of misinformation-related content in its digital ad campaigns during this period.

For the same measure, based on the evaluated data reported by TikTok Romania presents itself as a unique profile in comparison to other European nations concerning the removal of ads on TikTok. Specifically, under the Covid-19 misinformation ad policy, Romania has not seen any ad removals, which is similar to many other countries in the list. However, when it comes to the removal of ads under the political content ad policy, Romania has recorded 14 removals. This number is not the highest, with countries like Spain and the Netherlands exhibiting higher numbers, but it's noteworthy in the mid-range spectrum. Notably, the number of impressions for ads removed under the Covid-19 misinformation ad policy for Romania stands at 17.899, which, while not the largest, is significant and surpasses several other countries. Furthermore, when we consider the overall numbers, Romania's figures become even more intriguing. The total number of impressions for ads removed under the political content ad policy for the entire European Union is 19.518,943. Romania's contribution to this figure is 1.688,857 impressions, which is a considerable amount relative to the total. This suggests that, while Romania might not have the highest number of ads removed, the ads that were removed had garnered a significant number of views. In essence, Romania stands out not just for the number of political content ads removed but also for the extensive reach those ads had before their removal.

Regarding measure 2.4, only Google and TikTok have reported data for Romania. Based on the data provided in Google report, Romania has witnessed a total of 5.724 ads appeals in H1 2023.

Out of these, 2.166 appeals were successful, while 604 were partially successful, and 2.954 failed. When comparing Romania to the other EU countries, its total ads appeals fall in the mid-range. Several countries like France, Germany, Italy, and Spain have significantly higher numbers of appeals, while countries like Luxembourg, Malta, and Iceland have fewer. Romania's successful appeal rate, at approximately 37.8%, is also in line with the averages seen across many EU countries. Overall, Romania's data suggests a moderate level of ads appeals and a reasonable success rate in overturning them in comparison to its European Union counterparts.

For the same measure, based on the analyzed data reported by TikTok, there were some interactions with TikTok's ad appeals and content policies in Romania. Specifically, 5 appeals for ads removed under the COVID-19 policy. were recorded in Romania. This number places Romania in the mid-range among European countries. Several nations had higher numbers, such as Spain with 13 appeals, France and Germany with 8 each, and a few others, while many nations recorded no appeals or lower numbers. It's worth noting that Romania did not record any appeals for ads removed under political content policy. In terms of the overturn of appeals, Romania has seen only one overturn under the COVID-19 content policy. This means that one of the appeals was deemed valid and the ad removal was reversed. Again, this puts Romania in a similar standing with several other nations, with countries like Spain having 3 overturned appeals, and Denmark and Sweden each having one. The majority of the countries listed did not have any overturns, indicating that Romania is among the few nations where advertisers successfully challenged TikTok's initial decision on at least one occasion.

Based on the information from the report specific for Measure 2, the overall implementation of Measure 2 by TikTok in Romania is partially assessed. More data is needed in order to assess the validity of the information offered by the signatory.

3.1.3. Measure 6 of the CoPD related to common best practices and examples for marks and labels on political ads

Google

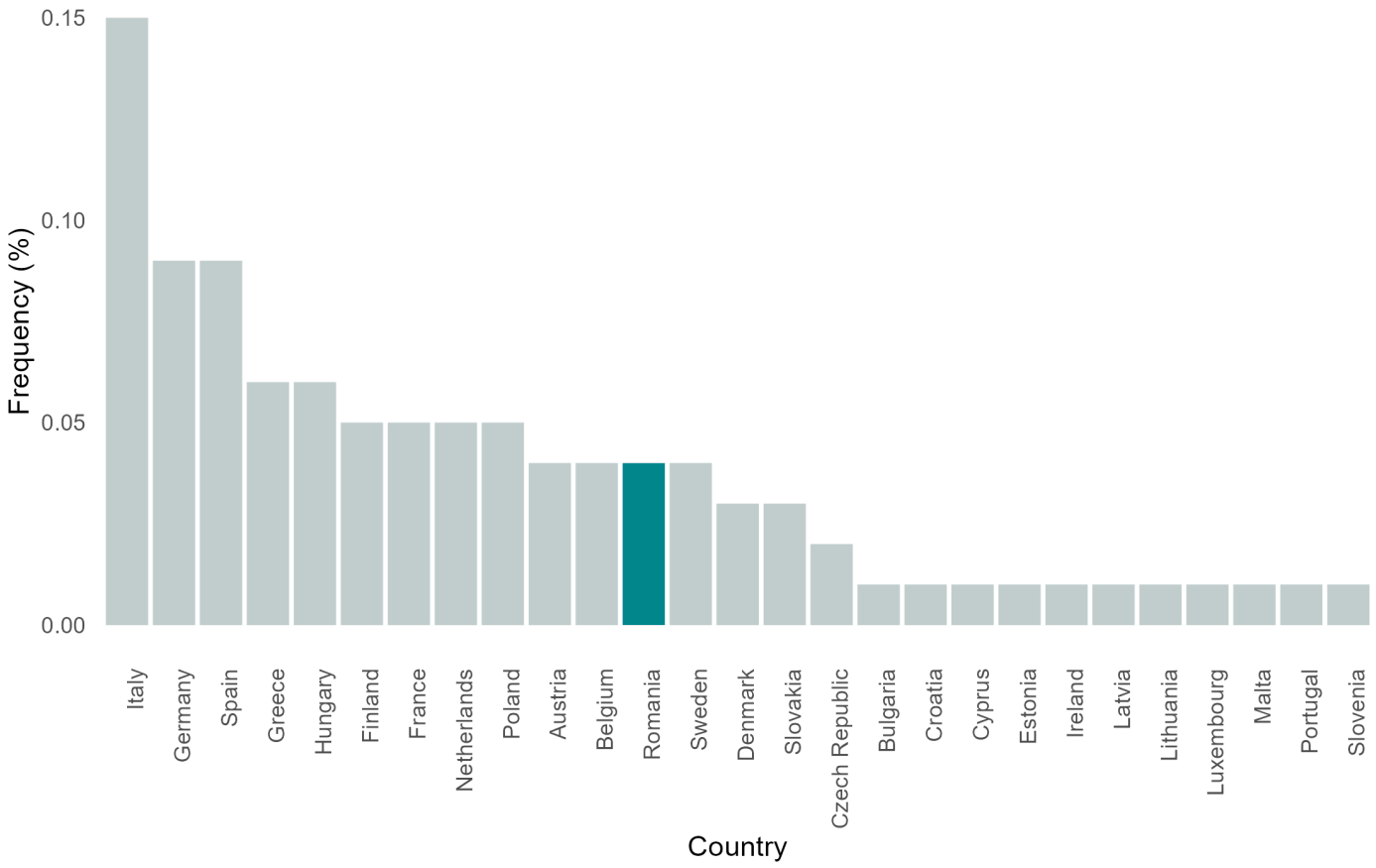
For Measure 6.2, the Google's report indicates that Romania seems to have a notable presence in terms of advertising efforts related to EU Election Ads.

Specifically, Romania saw 1.721 creatives labelled for EU Election Ads, with a total amount spent on these ads amounting to €262,910.07. This places Romania amongst the countries with significant ad expenditures for EU Election campaigns. In comparison to many other EU member states, Romania has outspent several nations but falls behind countries such as Greece, Finland, and the Netherlands in terms of ad expenditure. The data suggests that there was considerable interest and investment in online advertising for EU Election campaigns within Romania compared to several other European countries.
Based on the information from the report specific for Measure 6, the overall implementation of Measure 6 by Google in Romania is partially assessed. More data is needed in order to assess the validity of the information offered by the Signatory.

Meta

Under the same measure, Meta declared for Romania a total of 25.000 of ads accepted and labelled on Facebook and Instagram combined displaying “paid for by” disclaimers from 01/01/2023 to 30/06/2023 in EU member states. As we can observe in Figure 7, Romania ranks in the middle regarding the number of ads accepted and labelled on Facebook and Instagram. During the monitoring period only 25000 ads (around 4% out of the total sent by all the Member States) sent by Romania have been accepted on Facebook and Instagram. The highest percentage of ads accepted and labelled is registered by Italy (more than 14%) followed by Germany and Spain with around 9% out of the total).

Figure 7. Number of ads accepted & labelled on Facebook and Instagram combined



Based on the information from the report specific for Measure 6, the overall implementation of Measure 6 by Meta in Romania is partially assessed. More data is needed in order to assess the validity of the information offered by the Signatory.

3.1.4. Commitment 7 of the CoPD related to the verification of political ads

Google

In terms of Measure 7.1 the data reported by Google related to ads rejected due to unverified advertisers attempting to run EU Election Ads by EU Member State billing country in H1 2023, Romania had 1.372 creatives actioned. This indicates that there were a significant number of ads from Romania that were flagged and rejected due to not meeting verification standards. When placed in comparison to other EU member states, Romania's figure is moderate. For instance, countries like Germany had a notably high number, with 56.011 creatives actioned, while the Czech Republic had a significant 7.234. On the lower end, countries such as Portugal and Slovenia had 52 and 59 creatives actioned, respectively. Overall, the data suggests that Romania had a considerable number of ads that were flagged for verification issues, but it was neither the highest nor the lowest among its EU counterparts.

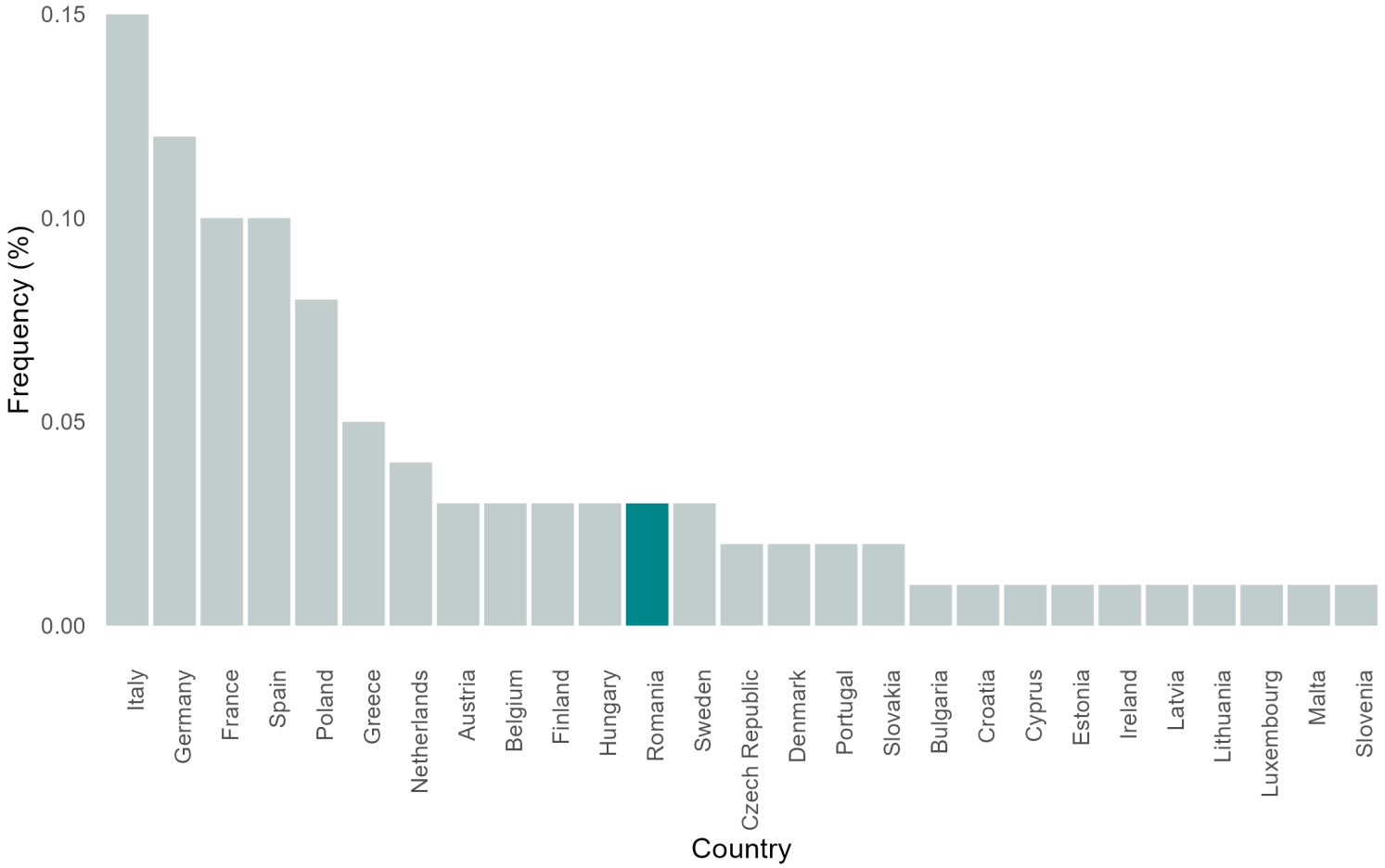
Based on the information from the report specific for Measure 7, the overall implementation of Measure 7 by Google in Romania is partially assessed. More data is needed in order to assess the validity of the information offered by the Signatory.

Meta

Regarding Measure 7.2, Meta declared that in the monitoring period the number of ads rejected in Romania for failure to fulfill the relevant verification process was around 13.000, approximatively 3% of the total of ads rejected at the EU level. Figure 5 illustrates that Romania ranks in middle to high, where the highest percentage of ads rejected was registered by Italy (around 15%), followed by Germany (12%), Spain (10%), France (10%), Poland (8%), Greece (5%) and Netherlands (4%).

Based on the information from the report specific for Measure 7, the overall implementation of Measure 7 by Meta in Romania is partially assessed. More data is needed in order to assess the validity of the information offered by the Signatory.

Figure 8. Number of ads removed on Facebook and Instagram combined



4. INTEGRITY OF SERVICES

4.1. Commitment 14 of the CoPD related to manipulative behaviours and practices

This pillar of the European Commission's Code of Practice on Disinformation emphasizes the safeguarding of service integrity. Signatories to the code acknowledge the necessity to amplify and prove the effectiveness of measures aimed at shutting down fake accounts. Additionally, they recognize the significance of setting up explicit marking systems and guidelines for bots, ensuring that their activities are distinctly separate and not mixed up with human interactions.

Google

Regarding the measure 14.2 (Google and YouTube search), Romania has identified 17 videos in relation to YouTube's community guidelines, and all of these videos were subsequently removed. When looking at the breakdown based on views, 10 of these videos had between 0 to 10 views when removed, 3 videos had between 10 to 100 views, 2 videos had between 100 to 1.000 views, and 2 videos had between 1.000 to 10.000 views. No videos were removed in the categories beyond 10.000 views. Compared to other EU countries, Romania's numbers are relatively low. For instance, Germany had identified and removed 13.074 videos, France removed 325, and Sweden had a whopping 13.190 videos removed.

Overall, Romania's figures are modest in comparison with some of the larger EU member states, suggesting a lower volume of content violations or possibly less content being uploaded from the country that breaches YouTube's guidelines. In terms of google search, Romania has 276.999 domains related to manual and algorithmic actions for Google web search policies. When comparing this number with other EU countries, Romania has a higher count than some countries like Portugal with 4.444 domains but fewer than others such as Spain with 320.426 domains. While Romania's number is significant, it is not the highest within the EU. It falls in the mid-range, indicating that Romania's web domain landscape related to Google search policies is quite active but is not leading the pack among the EU countries listed.

Based on the information from the report specific for Measure 14, the overall implementation of Measure 14 by Google in Romania is partially assessed. More data is needed in order to assess the validity of the information offered by the Signatory.

Microsoft

For the same measure, based on the evaluation of reported data by Microsoft, Romania is one of the European countries affected by the issue of fake accounts on LinkedIn. Specifically, for Romania there has been reported a total number of 909.634 fake accounts that were identified by LinkedIn during this period. This number represents the count of fake accounts that were either prevented from being created or were restricted. In comparison to other European countries, Romania's figure of 909.634 fake accounts places it among the higher tiers. Several countries, like Bulgaria, Portugal, and Poland, report higher numbers, with Poland having a notably high count of 535.408 accounts. On the other hand, nations such as Latvia, Luxembourg, and Slovenia report significantly lower numbers than Romania. The total for the entire European Economic Area (EEA) stands at 6.821,792, and Romania's contribution to this total is substantial. The data underscores the necessity for vigilance and countermeasures against misinformation and fake account creation across the European digital landscape, with Romania being a notable focus point.

Based on the information from the report specific for Measure 14, the overall implementation of Measure 14 by Microsoft in Romania is partially assessed. More data is needed in order to assess the validity of the information offered by the signatory.

TikTok

Similarly, the data reported by TikTok revealed that Romania is one of the European countries dealing with the issue of inauthentic accounts or "botnets". Romania has seen a total of 25.349 fake accounts removed, which places it roughly in the middle when compared to the data from other countries. For context, countries such as Germany and Spain have had over a million fake accounts removed, showcasing a significantly higher number, while countries like Malta and Luxembourg have seen fewer than 10.000 such accounts removed, indicating a lesser impact in those regions.

Additionally, when observing the number of followers of these fake accounts identified at the time of removal, there were a total of 3.126,296 followers in Romania. This is a substantial figure but still less than larger countries like Germany and Spain, which have numbers surpassing 5 million. On the other hand, it is considerably more than smaller countries or those less affected like Iceland or Liechtenstein. This suggests that while Romania faces challenges with inauthentic accounts, the scale of the problem is not as pronounced as in some of the larger European nations but is still significant when compared to many other countries in the region.

Based on the information from the report specific for Measure 14, the overall implementation of Measure 14 by TikTok in Romania is partially assessed. More data is needed in order to assess the validity of the information offered by the signatory.

5. EMPOWERING USERS EMPOWERING CONSUMERS EMPOWERING FACT-CHECKERS

This pillar of the Code of Practice on Disinformation is dedicated to enabling users, researchers, and fact-checkers. Those who have signed the Code have pledged to enhance and expand tools that allow users to identify and report inaccurate or deceptive content. Additionally, by signing the Code, the signatories are devoted to amplifying the reach of fact-checking across various EU nations and languages, and to granting researchers more extensive access to data.

5.1. Commitment 17 of the CoPD related to initiatives in the area of media literacy

Google

For measure 17.1 Google's report indicates that Romania demonstrates notable online activity concerning various web features. Specifically, the "About This Result" panel seems to have garnered significant attention among users in Romania. The country registered an impression rate for potentially unreliable results of 0.0000217%, which, when compared with the average impression rate for the entire EU at 0.0000411%, indicates that Romania is below the EU average.

Furthermore, Romania recorded 213.490 impressions for the "About This Page" feature, 5,905.846 for "Your Search and this result," and 5,164.352 for the "Personalization" section of the 'About This Result' panel. The total number of impressions for information panels in Romania stands at 73,492.851. Comparatively, while Romania's metrics fall within the median range among EU countries, countries like France and Germany have substantially higher values, possibly due to their larger populations and more widespread internet usage. On the whole, Romania presents a robust online engagement, but there remains room for growth when juxtaposed against some of the more digitally prolific EU member states.

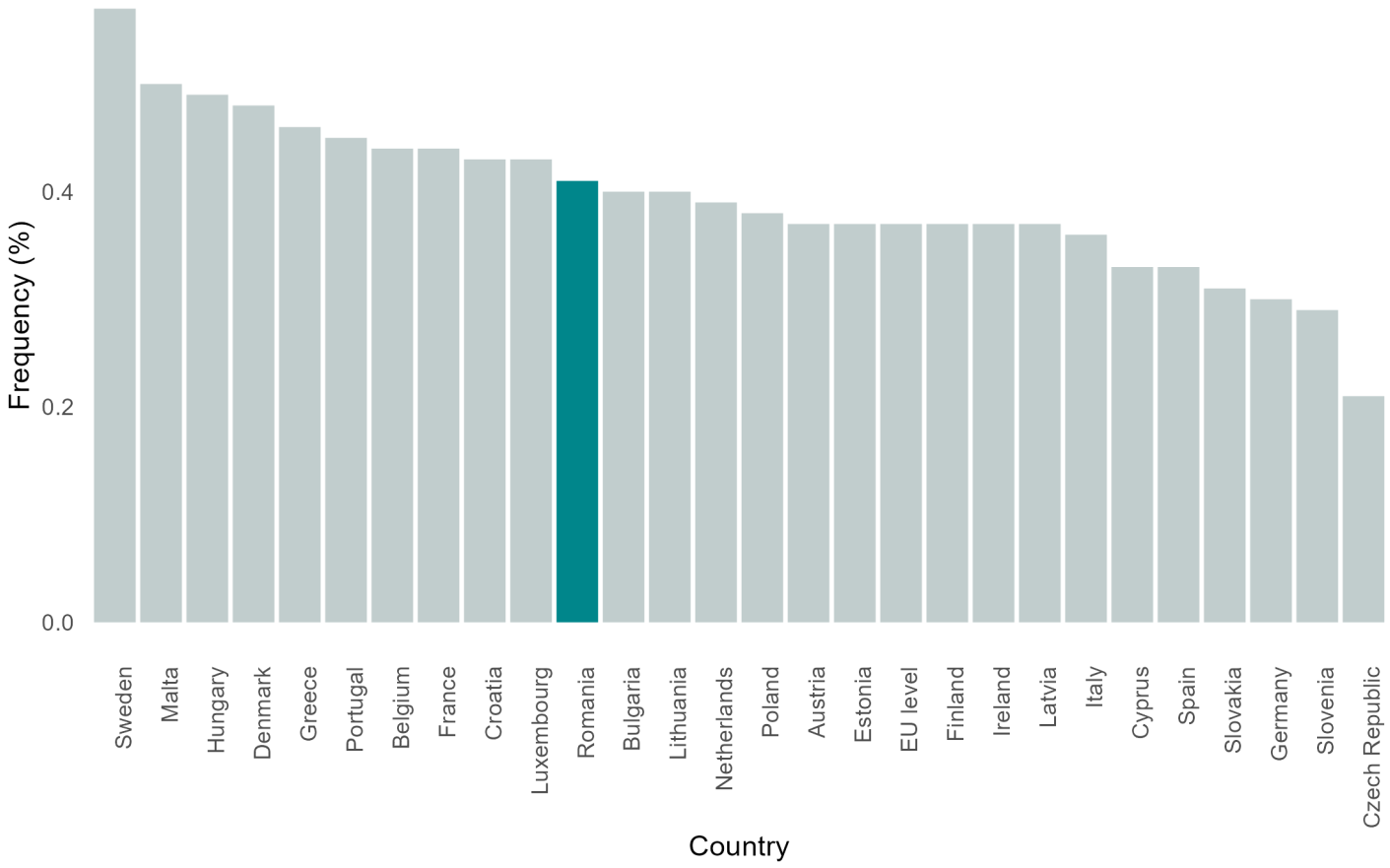
Based on the information from the report specific for Measure 17, the overall implementation of Measure 17 by Google in Romania is partially assessed. More data is needed in order to assess the validity of the information offered by the signatory.

Meta

Meta reported that when a fact-checking warning screen is displayed on a post, 95% of people scrolling through their Feeds do not click to view it. This behavior describes individuals casually browsing through their content, but it's possible that some of them never intended to view the fact-checked content. As for the impact of fact-checking labels, Meta focuses specifically on those individuals who have already shown an intention to share the fact-checked content. On average, 37% of people on Facebook do not follow through with this action after receiving a warning. In Romania's case, the percentage of reshares attempted that were not completed on treated content on Facebook between 05/01/2023 to 30/06/2023 was around 41%, higher than the EU level (Figure 9).

Based on the information from the report specific for Measure 17, the overall implementation of Measure 17 by Meta in Romania is partially assessed. More data is needed in order to assess the validity of the information offered by the signatory.

Figure 9. Reshares attempted that were not completed on treated content on Facebook between 05/01/2023 to 30/06/2023



5.2. Commitment 18 of the CoPD aimed at minimising the risks of viral propagation of Disinformation by adopting safe design practices

Google

The data reported for monitoring measure 18.2 indicates that Romania has seen a total of 534 videos removed by YouTube for policy violations. When breaking down these numbers by the number of views each video had before removal, 39 videos had 0 views, 221 had between 1-10 views, 118 videos garnered between 11-100 views, 77 videos were viewed between 101-1,000 times, 59 videos accumulated between 1.001-10.000 views, and 20 videos surpassed 10.000 views before removal. In comparison to other EU countries, Romania's total removals are moderate. For instance, Germany had a notably higher number with 2,708 videos removed, while countries like Cyprus had significantly fewer removals, tallying only 57. Overall, Romania's figures show that YouTube's policies have been actively enforced in the country, similar to the enforcement seen throughout many other EU member states.

Based on the information from the report specific for Measure 18, the overall implementation of Measure 18 by Google in Romania is partially assessed. More data is needed in order to assess the validity of the information offered by the signatory.

Microsoft

For the implementation of measure 18.2 in Romania, Microsoft reported a moderated level of activity in the context of LinkedIn's response to policy violations concerning misinformation. With a total of 300 pieces of content removed from the platform due to misinformation between January and June 2023, Romania ranks neither among the countries with the highest number of removals, such as Germany with a staggering 25,516 removals, or France with 9,012 removals, nor among those with the least, like Estonia or Iceland with only 27 and 4 removals respectively. When looking at the appeals related to these content removals, Romania saw no content author appeals against the removals, and subsequently, there were no granted appeals. This might suggest a level of agreement or compliance among Romanian users with LinkedIn's content removal decisions. In comparison, countries like Germany and France, which had a higher number of content removals, also experienced a greater number of appeals, with 71 and 27 appeals respectively. The absence of appeals in Romania could be attributed to various factors, ranging from users' awareness about misinformation, trust in the platform's decision-making, or lesser controversial content removals.

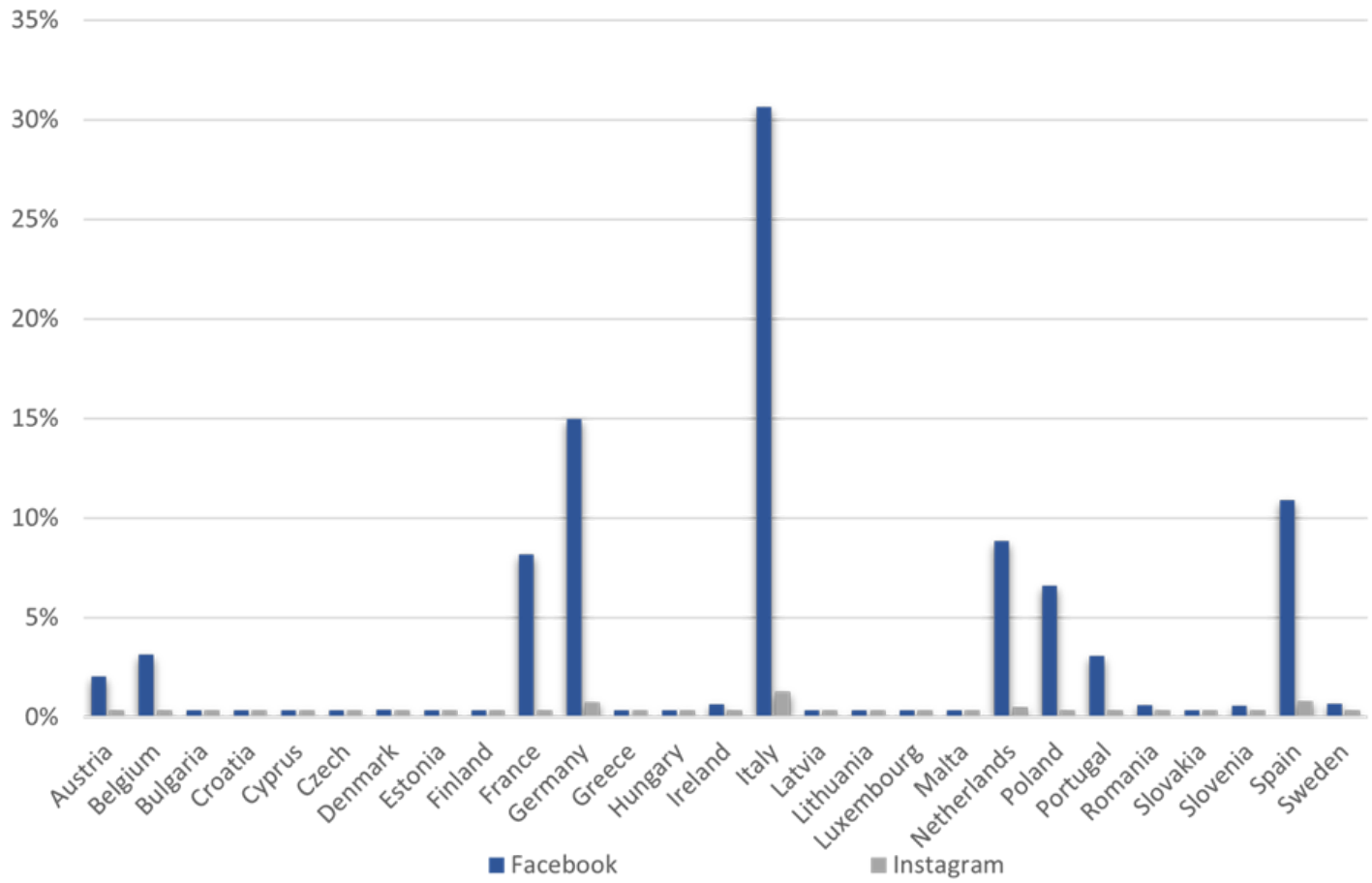
Based on the information from the report specific for Measure 18, the overall implementation of Measure 18 by Microsoft in Romania is partially assessed. More data is needed in order to assess the validity of the information offered by the signatory.

Meta

For measure 18.2, Meta has declared a number of 910 for Facebook and 500 for Instagram in Romania as unique contents that were removed from Facebook and Instagram for violating health policies or harmful health misinformation or voter interference policies in EU member states from 01/01/2023 to 30/06/2023. The number of unique contents that were removed from Facebook compared to Instagram is higher both for Romania and EU level, as Figure 7 indicates. However, Romania ranks low at the EU level in terms of unique contents removed from Facebook and Instagram for violating misinformation policies.

Based on the information from the report specific for Measure 18, the overall implementation of Measure 18 by Google in Romania is partially assessed. More data is needed in order to assess the validity of the information offered by the signatory.

Figure 10. Number of unique contents that were removed from Facebook and Instagram for violating health policies or voter non-interference policies in EU member states



5.3. Commitment 19 of the CoPD related to main criteria and parameters used for de-prioritising Disinformation

Google

For measure 19.2 the data indicates that Romania, as an EEA member state, had 50.974 impressions on the personal results control for logged-in users during H1 2023. When it comes to the percentage of daily active users that are signed into platforms like YouTube, Romania boasts a percentage of 72%. Comparatively, this percentage places Romania slightly above the EEA average of 69% for signed-in daily active users. It has a higher rate than countries like Germany (65%), France (69%), and the Netherlands (65%), but it's slightly below nations like Italy (74%) and Portugal (75%). In terms of the number of impressions, Romania's figure is moderate, with countries like France and Germany having significantly higher impressions at 288.295 and 411.264, respectively, while smaller nations like Malta and Liechtenstein show numbers as low as 1.347 and 91 respectively.

Based on the information from the report specific for Measure 19, the overall implementation of Measure 19 by Google in Romania is partially assessed. More data is needed in order to assess the validity of the information offered by the signatory.

5.4. Commitment 21 of the CoPD related to better equipping users to identify disinformation

Google

Regarding measure 21, data for Romania indicates that there was a total of 1,273,445 impressions on Fact Check Rich Snippets in Google Search. This figure situates Romania in the mid-range when compared to other European Union (EU) member states. For instance, countries like Germany and France have much higher impressions, with 20,255,232 and 17,898,747 respectively, indicating a more frequent utilization of the Fact Check feature in their Google Searches. Conversely, nations like Estonia and Latvia have fewer impressions, with 126,094 and 164,429 respectively, suggesting a lesser engagement with this feature. In terms of articles available in the Google Search Fact Check Explorer by language, Romanian had 232 articles at the beginning of H1 2023 and 26 by its end, which again places it in the moderate range when comparing to languages like English or German, which have significantly higher numbers.

Based on the information from the report specific for Measure 21, the overall implementation of Measure 21 by Google in Romania is partially assessed. More data is needed in order to assess the validity of the information offered by the Signatory.

Microsoft

For Measure 21, Romania's position regarding the metrics presented in the context of fact-checking and information reliability is noteworthy. When we look at the total impressions of fact-checks, the ratio of impressions to original impressions of fact-checked content, and the reach of labels/fact-checkers to other authoritative sources, Romania does not seem to have any recorded data. This contrasts with many other Member States which have varying levels of data in these metrics. For instance, countries like Germany and France have substantial numbers in the thousands for the total impressions of fact-checks. In comparison to other Member States, Romania's absence of data could suggest multiple interpretations. It could mean that fact-checking initiatives or the need for such checks aren't as prominent or prevalent in Romania as they are in other countries. Alternatively, it might suggest that the systems capturing these metrics haven't been as effective or active in Romania. Without more context or information, it's hard to pinpoint the exact reason. Nevertheless, it is clear that in the context of this dataset, Romania stands out due to its absence of metrics related to fact-check impressions and their reach.

Based on the information from the report specific for Measure 21, the overall implementation of Measure 21 by Microsoft in Romania could not be assessed. More data is needed in order to assess the validity of the information offered by the signatory.

5.5. Commitment 31 of the CoPD related to support offered to fact-checkers

Microsoft

The data collected for Measure 31 from Microsoft, reveals that Romania has a moderate level of activity in relation to fact-checking measures, specifically in the context of Bing Search results. The number of fact-checked articles published for Romania stands at 1,279. This places Romania in the mid-range when compared to other countries, with nations like France and Germany having notably higher figures, such as 10,306 and 2,085 respectively. Meanwhile, several countries, like Greece, Slovakia, and Slovenia, have no recorded fact-checked articles, indicating that Romania is more active in this domain than some other European nations. Furthermore, Romania's reach of fact-checked articles, denoted as "FC", is at 335. This metric gauges how often these fact-checked articles appeared on the first page of Bing search results for users located in the respective country.

In comparison, countries like the Netherlands and Poland have similar numbers with 436 and 232 respectively. However, countries such as France and Germany, again, dwarf Romania's number with reaches of 672 and 402 respectively. This suggests that while Romania does have a considerable amount of fact-checked content, its visibility or prominence in search results is not as pronounced as some of the larger European countries.

Based on the information from the report specific for Measure 31, the overall implementation of Measure 31 by Microsoft in Romania is partially assessed. More data is needed in order to assess the validity of the information offered by the signatory.

5.5.1. Overview of fact-checking initiatives in Romania

Fact-checking coverage is a crucial component of the CoPD initiative, as it forms the foundation for the entire process. Without establishing agreements with fact-checking organizations that permit the utilization of their work, the signatories are unable to integrate their content into their services or provide them with the necessary data for effective fact-checking coverage within a member state. In Romania only two fact-checking organizations, (AFP and Funky Citizens) have agreements with Meta, which allows for comprehensive fact-checking coverage of content in Romanian. In contrast, none of these organisations has similar agreements with either TikTok, YouTube or any of the Microsoft services. Similarly, there are no agreements with Google for fact-checking coverage of Romania, although our colleagues from Funky Citizens mentioned prospective media literacy-oriented agreements with the company. Moreover, it was mentioned that several fact-checking organizations attempted to engage with Google but faced challenges, such as unresponsiveness, stalled discussions, or conversations about media literacy programs and invitations to participate in a voluntary trusted flaggers initiative. Agreements themselves are relatively scarce across platforms, and even when they do exist, they tend to be short-term.

Additionally, there is a concern among fact-checkers regarding the prevalence of non-disclosure clauses in existing agreements. Such clauses could create an impression of obscurity and lack of transparency in the eyes of the public. To improve public trust, it is important to limit the use of non-disclosure agreements, enabling fact-checkers to provide clearer explanations of their activities, including as part of Code of Practice reporting. Additionally, platforms with third-party fact-checking programs need to enhance transparency regarding their operation and communicate clearly to users how the outputs of fact-checking are employed. Regarding the commitment of signatories to provide fair financial support to fact-checkers for their disinformation combat efforts on these platforms, there is limited support for Romanian fact-checkers, mainly offered by Meta.

In line with the recent report published by the European Fact-Checking Standards Network (you can read the report here), we believe that the most effective fact-checking coverage for a country is achieved by organizations deeply rooted in that country. This involves not only operating in the local language but also having a profound understanding of the culture, history, beliefs, and traditions that are essential for effective communication with various communities and subgroups. Funky Citizens (member of EFCSN) aligns with this principle, and demonstrates a substantial understanding of the misinformation and disinformation produced in or targeting Romania.

When it comes to the adequacy of the VLOPS' financial contributions to fact-checkers in Romania, the provided contributions are quasi-inexistent. Our colleagues from Funky Citizens argue that a grant-based approach is unsustainable and does not support comprehensive action or the enhancement of core fact-checking work. Moreover, the funding is not primarily directed toward fact-checking activities. YouTube, Google, TikTok and Microsoft do not provide financial contributions, while Meta provides modest financial contributions, nonetheless insufficient given the scale of the problem. Furthermore, Meta imposes specific requirements for fact-checkers in their program, such as verification limits per month, without offering fact-checkers full editorial control. Initiatives form other countries were mentioned, but they also have serious limitations, for instance TikTok determines which videos are queued for verification, while Google offers fixed financial contributions (due to their grant-based nature) for specific project activities that are not necessarily fact-checking but are related to it. In contrast, most Meta agreements depend on the number of published ratings and articles.

6. CONCLUSIONS & RECOMMENDATIONS

To wrap-up, the Code of Practice on Disinformation is a voluntary initiative, and the implementation of its principles relies primarily on the commitment of the very large online platforms. The success of these measures in combating disinformation in Romania depends on the willingness of the platforms to adopt and adhere to these best practices. Additionally, the collaboration between platforms, fact-checkers, and relevant authorities is crucial in effectively assessing how online platforms comply with the commitments of the Code.

The analysis of the implementation of the Code of Practice on Disinformation by the four main very large online platforms in Romania during H1 2023 illustrates the multifaceted reality of the fight against misinformation and the challenges faced when complying with the CoPD's policies and recommendations. In short, Google's data place Romania on a modest position in the ranking of the actioned AdSense pages, domains, and other metrics, reflecting an overall fair compliance of Google's content in Romania with policy enforcement, mainly related to EU election ads and YouTube content removal. Microsoft's efforts in reducing disinformation in Romania have been modest and have mainly focused on enhancing transparency, which was reflected in metrics related to advertising and user interaction. In its report, Microsoft has stated a general focus on defensive search interventions and fact-checking mechanisms, without offering, however, information on concrete measure taken in this direction. TikTok's report on Romania is also characterized by a moderate commitment to promoting authenticity and fighting misinformation, particularly related to political content and political ad removals. Finally, Meta's report indicate a more sustained effort in countering disinformation in Romania, with numerous ads removed or labeled for transparency, and a significant percentage of reshare attempts aborted due to fact-check warnings.

Collectively, these insights portray Romania's digital landscape vaguely enough, as neither a strict adherent nor a violator of platform policies, with a moderate level of disinformation displayed in the larger European digital ecosystem. Despite the varied focus and methodology of each platform, the signatories' overall engagement towards fighting disinformation in Romania appears modest, showcasing a general intention towards a more secure, transparent, and reliable digital environment, but without listing concrete steps taken by platforms in order to attain this goal. Even if the reports do not reveal strategic efforts and areas of improvement in Romania's battle against digital misinformation and policy violations, this exercise of reporting the VLOPs' efforts in combating disinformation should obviously continue and, ideally, be intensified via more rigorous reporting and setting clear and strict rules for the implementation of the measures stated in the Code.

One of the particular concerns we raise related to the implementation of the CoPD in Romania refers to ANCOM, the National Authority for Management and Regulation in Communications, which has recently been appointed as the responsible national authority for overseeing and ensuring compliance with the Digital Services Act (DSA). ANCOM now becomes a part of the European Board for Digital Services, collaborating with other national coordinators for joint investigations, issuing opinions and recommendations, and contributing to the implementation of guidelines and overviewing reports related to the DSA.

Due to the crucial role ANCOM plays as regulatory body, various journalists and members of the civil society have expressed worries regarding the appointment of Valeriu Zgonea, a politician formerly sentenced for alleged collusion, favoritism and insider trading, as President of ANCOM. The appointment of a leader perceived as impartial and free from potential conflicts of interest would have been of utmost importance for the credibility of the institution. Unfortunately, the backing of Zgonea for the ANCOM presidency triggers suspicions about ANCOM's commitments to transparency, good governance, and fair implementation of the DSA and the monitoring of the CoPD by online platforms in Romania.

Another concern is that the Code of Practice is not a legally binding instrument, therefore it has quasi-inexistent consequences for non-compliance. It encourages online platforms to voluntarily adopt measures to address disinformation without imposing legal obligations. We believe that since the Code is voluntary and does not include enforcement mechanisms or penalties for non-compliance, the compliance of Very Large Online Platforms (VLOPs) with the Code, as assessed by analysing their reports covering Romania, was symbolic. Based on the compliance reports we have analysed, the largest VLOPs active in Romania have provided very limited information about their actions to counter disinformation, including data on political and issue-based advertising, efforts to disrupt advertising-based incentives for disinformation, and efforts to provide users with tools to identify and report disinformation.

Moreover, there was very little transparency regarding political and issue-based advertising, including details about advertisers and the amounts spent. While there were some modest measures taken (compared to the scale of the phenomenon) to remove fake accounts and automated bots that spread disinformation by Google, Meta and TikTok, these platforms have not done enough to disrupt the financial incentives of those who spread disinformation in Romania through advertising and other means.

Furthermore, the compliance reports of VLOPS for Romania don't offer any information on enhanced algorithms and how the platforms adjust them to reduce the visibility of disinformation and prioritize authoritative (credible) sources. Some progress was, however, made in fostering cooperation with fact-checkers by one of the platforms: Meta. Meta is the only platform that cooperate with Romanian fact-checkers to identify and address false information, which includes providing them with access to data and tools to monitor disinformation effectively. We cannot report the same progress when it comes to user empowerment; Romanian users are not sufficiently provided by neither Meta, not the other platform with tools to identify and report disinformation effectively.

Notwithstanding such limitations, we conclude by reemphasising that platforms should continue to monitor and report on their efforts to combat disinformation regularly. It's essential to review the specific actions and measures taken by each VLOP in Romania to determine their compliance with the Code of Practice on Disinformation. Building on analysed data and insights obtained via collaborations with fellow scholars and fact-checkers, we formulate several recommendations that could help future researchers and policy makers in assessing the right implementation of the Code:

1. **Standardized reporting templates in CSV and JSON formats.** These templates should ideally be crafted in collaboration with EDMO and Hub researchers to promote automated processing and enable comprehensive cross-platform analysis.
2. **More specific information and data is needed for each measure of the Code.** To better assess the effectiveness of implementation of each measure, the Signatories must provide additional information and specific examples of their actions (examples of fake accounts, on pages removed, blocked or restricted accounts and pages etc.).
3. **Fill in the information at Member State level. VLOPs that have incomplete reports lacking member-level data and specific figures.** Responses to how commitments are implemented that are ambiguous, containing wide ranges and generalized information, should be regarded as non-compliant.
4. **The utilization of labels and warning systems by VLOPs should be more clear and consistent.** One example pertains to TikTok, where users may encounter "unverified" labels on videos but lack access to the rationale and sources behind these labels, thus limiting their ability to make informed decisions. The effectiveness of the measure of the Code related to correct labelling is brought into question due to the small number of videos labeled as "unverified." Another significant recommendation concerns investing in fact-checking labels for Google Search and YouTube services, as Claim-review may not offer long-term consistency and sustainability. Additionally, enhancing editorial control over the selection of videos and label placement would be very beneficial, as well as allowing for "false information" labels.
5. **VLOPs should share data for compliance that includes extensive and representative examples of moderated, demonetized, and removed content.** It's essential for enabling researchers to validate whether platforms are implementing their policies accurately, ensuring that authentic content and accounts are not unjustly suppressed due to biases or mistakes in algorithmic or human moderation. This becomes crucial during global crises like the COVID-19 pandemic, Ukraine war or the more recent Israeli-Palestinian conflict in Gaza, as well as significant EU-wide occurrences such as the European elections, which generate a massive volume of daily posts on major platforms like Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, and TikTok.
6. **Evaluations by relevant authorities,** such as ANCOM in Romania, are crucial, however independent assessments done by researchers, scholars and NGOs are also highly needed in order to provide insights into how well these platforms are complying with the Code. Additionally, such collaborations might help in reducing political interference in the process of assessing the implementation of the DSA and the CoPD, which is quintessential for ensuring transparent governance in Romania and for contributing to the creation of a safer digital ecosystem.

We conclude by hoping that compliance with the CoPD will evolve over time as platforms adapt to new challenges and regulations. Very large online platforms are expected to identify, analyze, and diligently assess any systemic risks associated with disinformation within Eu member states, arising from the design or operation of their services and associated systems. We do, however, express concerns related to how the implementation of the Code will be further assessed and monitored in Romania. Since reporting is a voluntary, legally non-binding process, and since the Romanian authority (ANCOM) designated to oversee the implementation of the Code is already perceived as either weak or corrupted (or both), the platforms might be inclined to generate evaluation documents that align with their financial interests, giving the impression that there are no disinformation related matters in Romania requiring public attention.


3:04
Search
Distel
Baremetrics APP 6:12 AM
Daily Report from Saturday, April 28 to Sunday, April 29
Monthly Recurring Revenue
Yesterday: $204,306.50
2 days ago: $203,606.33
Change: 0.34%
Average Revenue Per User
Yesterday: $63.85
2 days ago: $63.73
Change: 0.19%
Active Customers
Jot something down