



European Digital Media Observatory

# **MACRON'S WORDS AND CROCUS' TERRORIST ATTACK BOOST DISINFORMATION ABOUT UKRAINE**

Monthly brief no. 34 – EDMO fact-checking network

Published on 17 April 2024

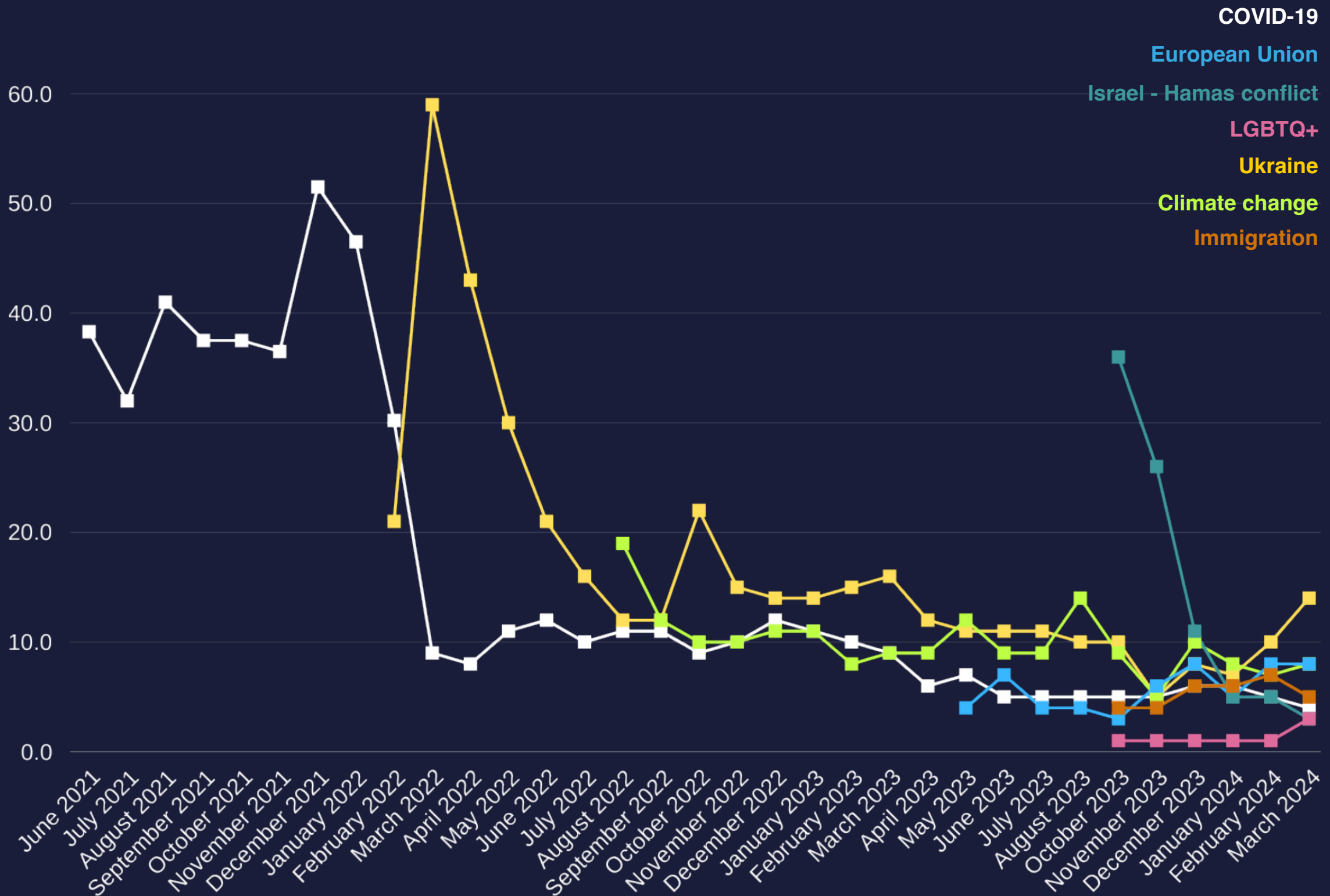
## **DISINFORMATION ABOUT UKRAINE CONTINUES TO GROW SIGNIFICANTLY, FALSE CONTENT ABOUT THE CLIMATE AND LGBTQ ISSUES INCREASES SLIGHTLY**

The 36 organizations\* part of the EDMO fact-checking network that contributed to this brief published a total of 1.729 fact-checking articles in March 2024. Out of these articles, 240 (14%) focused on Ukraine-related disinformation; 136 (8%) on climate change-related disinformation; 135 (8%) on disinformation related to the EU; 56 (3%) focused on the conflict between Israel and Hamas; 75 (4%) on COVID-19-related disinformation; 92 (5%) on disinformation related to immigration; and 45 (3%) on disinformation about LGBTQ+ and gender issues.

The increase of disinformation about the war in Ukraine has been observed since November 2023, and its percentage doubled in the last two months, going from 7% in January to 14% in March. False stories about climate change increased moderately, as did false stories targeting the LGBTQ+ community. Disinformation about the EU remained stable, while disinformation about migration issues decreased slightly overall. The percentages of disinformation about Covid-19 and the war between Israel and Hamas are the lowest recorded for these two topics since EDMO monitoring began.

*\* Organizations that contributed to this brief: 15min, AFP, APA, Correctiv, Delfi, Demagog.cz, Demagog.pl, Demagog.sk, DPA, DW, Eesti Päevaleht, EFE Verifica, Ellinika Hoaxes, Eurocomunicare, Fact Check Cyprus, Factcheck Vlaanderen, FactReview, Faktisk, FranceTV, Funky, Greece Fact Check, InfoVeritas, Lakmusz, Logically Facts, Maldita, Medizin transparent, Newtral, Oštro, PagellaPolitica/Facta, Polígrafo, Pravda, Re:Baltica, The Journal Fact-Check, TjekDet, Verifica RTVE, Verificat*

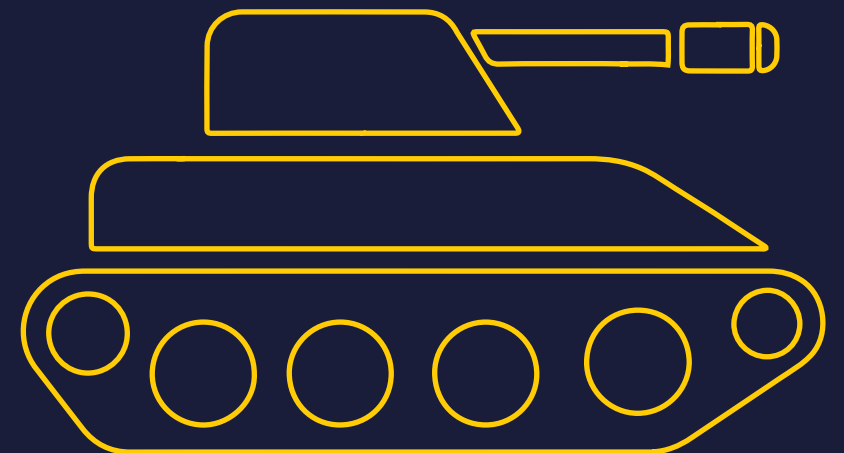
**% of related disinformation on total detected disinformation, by topic**



## MACRON'S STATEMENTS ABOUT THE POSSIBILITY OF SENDING EUROPEAN TROOPS IN UKRAINE PROMPTED WAVES OF DISINFORMATION AGAINST HIM AND ABOUT ESCALATION

After the French President Emmanuel Macron openly discussed the possibility of sending European troops to Ukraine to help Kyiv win the war against Russia, first at the end of February and then again in mid-March, disinformation intensified two already existing narratives\* targeting respectively the topic of a possible escalation - this narrative has been pushed by Russian officials as well - and Macron himself.

**Escalation** - In France a link circulated to a website, allegedly from the French Ministry of the Armed Forces, calling on 200,000 people to “sign up” for Ukraine; in Poland false news were circulated that the country is going to war against Russia and it is ready to send troops in Ukraine, and that Poland has given competences to the European Union to decide on military conscription; in Hungary it was falsely claimed that a German general said they should expect war with Russia within 5 years; in Estonia it has been claimed that French troops are already moving toward Ukraine; in Spain and Portugal false news circulated about Portugal summoning reservists, under penalty of a fine of 500 euros if they do not go to fight in the war in Ukraine, and so on.



**Emmanuel Macron** - The French president was also subject of two main lines of disinformation not directly linked to the war in Ukraine, even if widespread in the EU: in connection with the farmers' protest (a topic widely exploited by Russian disinformation, as recently reported in a EDMO brief), and in the context of a transphobic disinformation narrative that targets his wife Brigitte. Russian propaganda used a similar narrative in the past against the Ukrainian president Volodymyr Zelensky.

*\*We remind here of our definition of “disinformation narrative”: a clear message emerging from a consistent set of content that can be demonstrated as false with the fact-checking methodology.*



## **DISINFORMATION ABOUT THE ATTACK AT THE CROCUS CITY HALL AND OTHER ANTI UKRAINIAN NARRATIVES**

The terrorist attack at the Crocus City Hall, a concert hall near Moscow, on March 22, triggered disinformation across Europe. A dedicated EDMO investigation showed how false stories followed the Kremlin's efforts to blame Ukraine for the massacre claimed by ISIS. From the data collected for this brief, it emerges that some of those stories were among the most viral detected falsehoods in the EU in March.

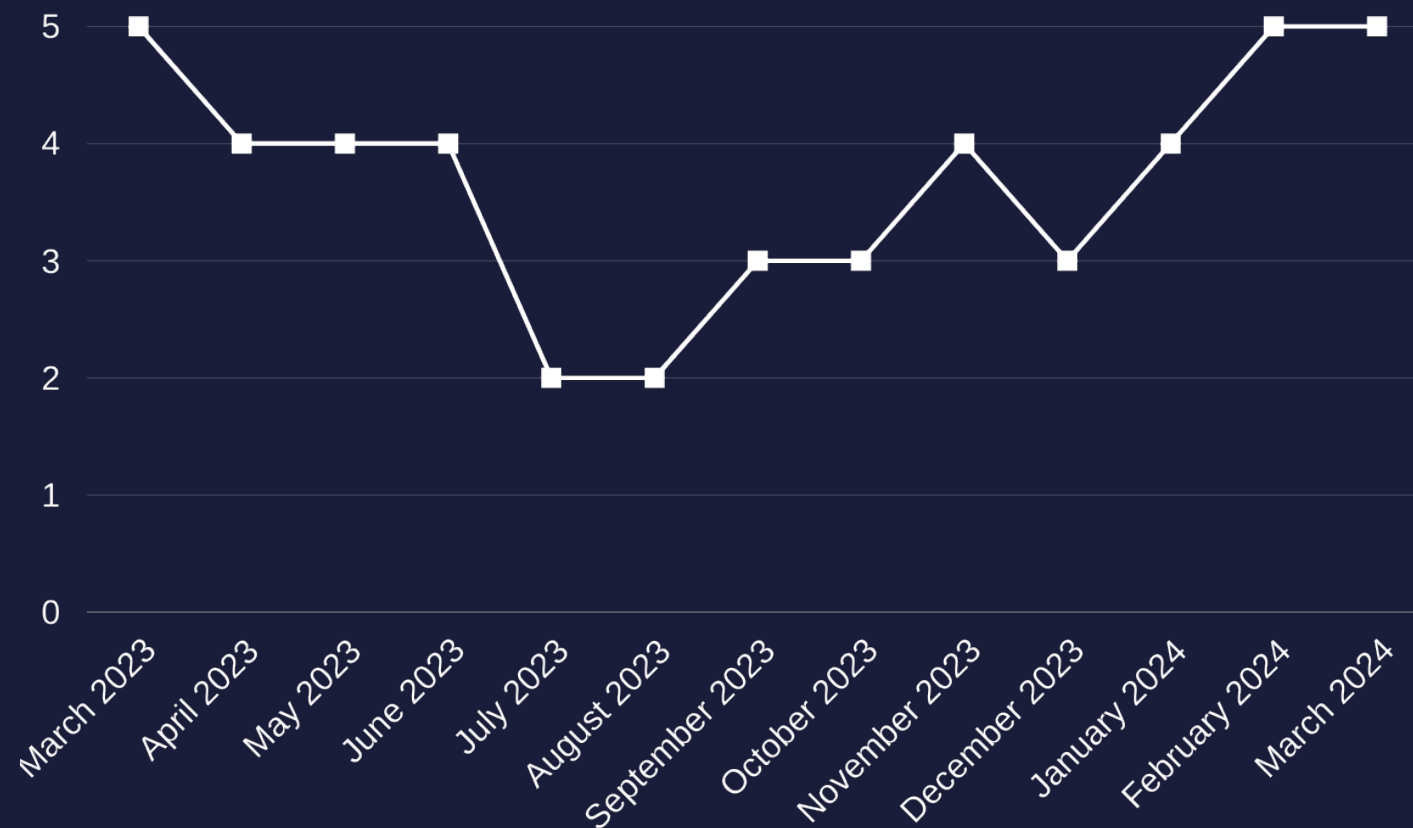
Amid made-up content that alleged connections of the assaulters with Ukraine, very significant was an artificially generated deepfake – aired a few hours after the assault by Russian television channel NTV and then circulated on social media – of Oleksiy Danilov, the secretary of Ukraine's National Security and Defense Council, praising the mass shooting.

Other relevant false stories targeting Ukraine in March alleged that Ukrainian ammunition, refugees and goods exports endanger EU citizens, that men subject to military service are fleeing the invaded country, that the war is staged, and even that the Ukrainians welcome Russian soldiers when they arrive.

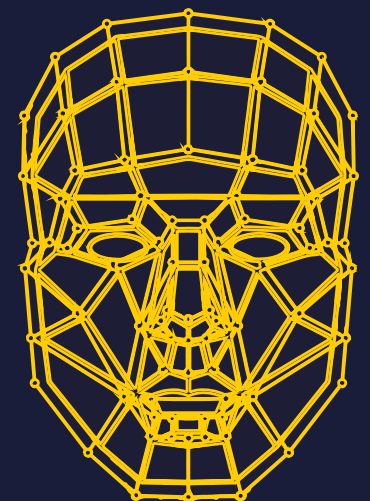


## AI-GENERATED DISINFORMATION

The percentage of disinformation stories using AI-generated content remained stable in March. Out of 1.729 fact-checking articles, 87 used this disinformation technique. This corresponds to 5% of the total, the same as in February.



In addition to the aforementioned deep fake of the Ukrainian commander praising the attack on Crocus City Hall, other significant AI-generated disinformation stories included images of the burning pyramid of the Louvre Museum in Paris (spread with the claim that immigrants caused the fire), alleged farmer protests in Poland, and a pregnant male doll that is allegedly being marketed.



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



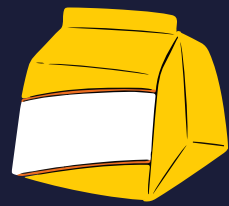
- EU Commission President Ursula von der Leyen is related to a Nazi official (this narrative is old but in March came up again)
- The European Commission is considering a ban on repairing vehicles over 15 years old
- ▲ Ukrainian official admitting its own country's responsibilities in Moscow terror attack (it is actually a deep fake)
- ◆ One of the terrorists arrested for the Moscow attack is a Chechen commander who fought against Russia in Ukraine



## THE MOST SIGNIFICANT VERIFIED DISINFORMATION STORIES AT THE NATIONAL LEVEL:



The ex-president of Ukraine, Petro Poroshenko, is calling for peace with Russia



Basque schools have prohibited children from bringing food to recess because they are in Ramadan



A study had shown that electric vehicles pollute 1,850 times more than fuel-powered vehicles



A study has shown that 86% of pedophiles are gay or bisexual



## 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.

Reference period: 1-31 March 2024. Number of respondents: 36.  
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EDMO has received funding  
from the European Union  
under Contract number: “LC-01935415”