EDMO

European Digital Media Observatory

THE TRUMP EFFECT ON DISINFORMATION

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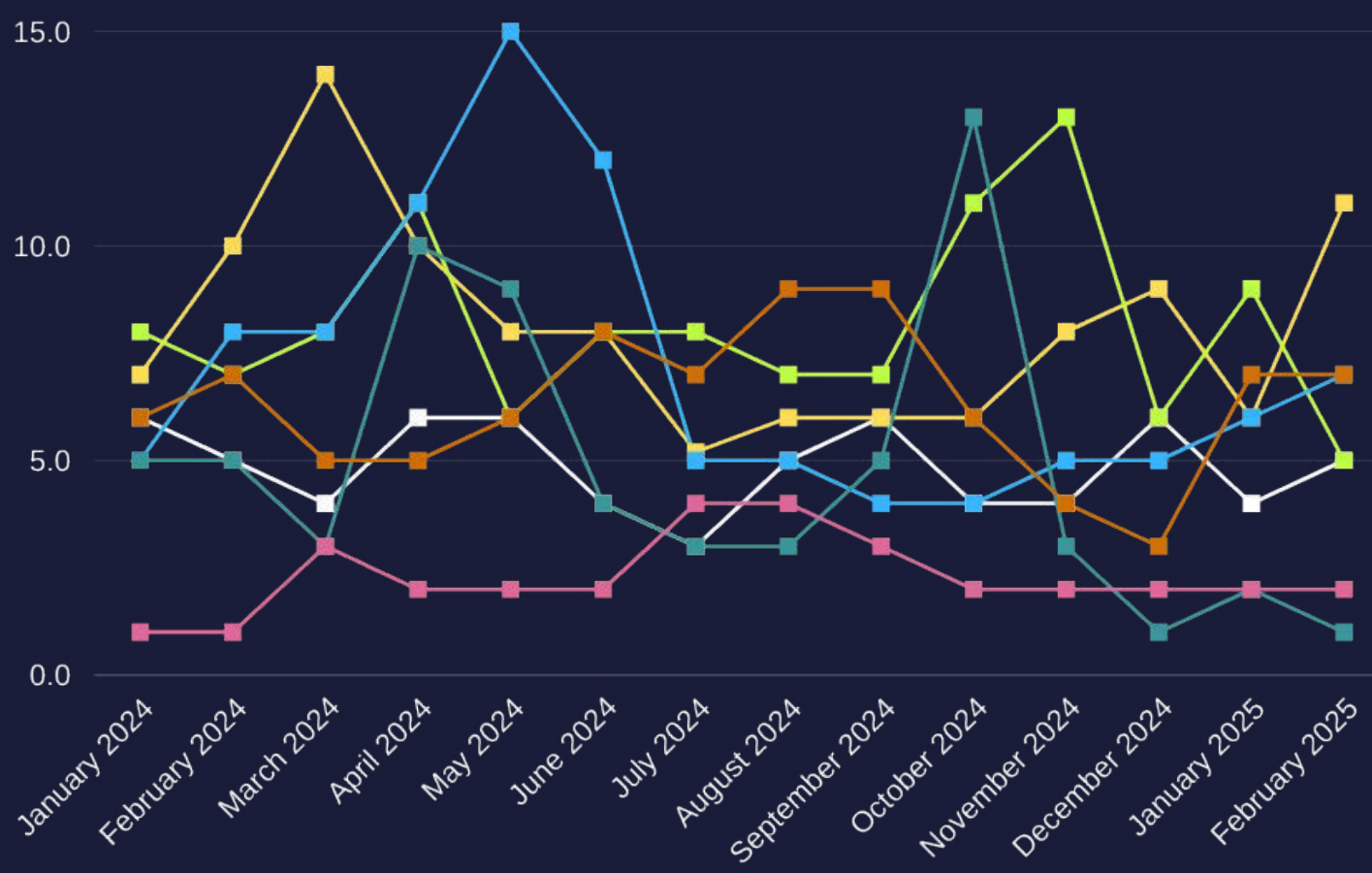# DISINFORMATION ABOUT UKRAINE FINDS A NEW ALLY - AND ALMOST DOUBLES

The 33 organizations* part of the EDMO fact-checking network that contributed to this brief published a total of 1.376 fact-checking articles in February 2025. Out of these articles, 157 (11%) focused on Ukraine-related disinformation; 63 (5%) on climate change-related disinformation; 99 (7%) on disinformation related to the EU; 18 (1%) on the Middle Eastern regional conflict; 65 (5%) on COVID-19-related disinformation; 93 (7%) on disinformation related to immigration; and 33 (2%) on disinformation about LGBTQ+ and gender issues.

Disinformation about the war in Ukraine nearly doubled in February, jumping from 6% the previous month to 11%, the highest percentage since March 2024. The increase seems partly due to US President Donald Trump's embrace of some pro-Russia false narratives to describe the situation in Ukraine, its leader, and responsibility for the conflict. The percentages of false stories about the EU and Covid-19 have also increased, even if more slightly.

Climate change-related disinformation fell from 9% in January to 5%. The shares of false information about the other constantly monitored topics remained almost stable or showed only minor fluctuations.

*Organizations that contributed to this brief: 15min, AFP, APA, Correctiv, Demagog.cz, Demagog.pl, Demagog.sk, EFE Verifica, Ellinika Hoaxes, Factcheck Vlaanderen, FactReview, Faktabaari, Faktisk, Funky, Greece Fact Check, Källkritikbyrån, Knack, InfoVeritas, Lakmusz, Logically Facts, Maldita, Medizin transparent, Medicinski potvrđeno, Newtral, Oštro, PagellaPolitica/Facta, Polígrafo, Pravda, Re:Baltica, The Journal Fact-Check, TjekDet, VerificaRTVE, Verificat

% of related disinformation on total detected disinformation, by topic

COVID-19
European Union
Israel - Hamas conflict
LGBTQ+
Ukraine
Climate change
Immigration

THE TRUMP FACTOR - PART 1

In February, the US President Donald Trump and other members of his administration made several underline:false or misleading statements. Some of these narratives had an impact on the EU infosphere, and disinformation adapted accordingly, relaunching the claims or creating false stories that vehiculated the same messages. The echo of false news originating in the US was one of the main disinformation phenomena during the month, according to findings of the fact-checking organizations part of the EDMO network.

One of the main subjects of this kind of disinformation was the action to reduce public spending that Elon Musk – as advisor to the administration and head of the Department of Government Efficiency (DOGE) – is pursuing. Trump and Musk themselves were the primary source of false stories aimed at justifying the need for the spending cuts, and many others emerged in the EU languages. One of these stories stated, for example, that USAID (the US Agency for International Development which Elon Musk announced he would shut down) had allocated fifty million dollars to buy condoms for people in Gaza (a story relaunched by right-wing European influencers) or paid several million dollars to Hollywood stars to travel to Ukraine and boost the country's president Volodymyr Zelensky's popularity (see how widespread this one was on slide 8).

Elon Musk also falsely claimed that massive fraud had been uncovered in the US Social Security system, with millions of people over "the age of 120" receiving benefits, and this narrative was shared by Bulgarian social media users, who drew comparisons to their own country's pension system. Another misleading claim originally made by Musk suggested that 79% of refugees in Sweden take holidays in their home countries (implying that they are not fleeing a difficult situation) and was subsequently shared in various EU countries.

THE TRUMP FACTOR - PART 2

Trump's shift in the US position on Ukraine has been accompanied by an intensification of attacks on Ukraine and especially its president Volodymyr Zelensky. The rhetoric adopted by Trump matched some of the long-running false messages promoted by the Russian state propaganda. In particular, one of the claims states that Zelensky is a dictator who refuses to hold elections and has an extremely low approval rating. Misleading claims by Trump also misrepresented the aid provided to the invaded nation by the US.

Such a shift, with the president of the main military ally of Ukraine adopting the enemy's propaganda, is likely behind the increase of anti-Ukraine disinformation. Aside from the circulation of the same claims Trump himself made, other false stories on the topic were tracked in EU countries. For example, the false stories that Zelensky rejects peace talks, that he said he wanted to invade Donbass in 2019, that he stole money the West sent to his country and asks for more to accept negotiating the peace. About the support provided to Ukraine, it has been falsely claimed also that US weapons sent to the country have ended up in the hands of drug cartels. False stories also continued to suggest that French troops are already fighting on the battlefield, while EU politicians leading the response to the changed geopolitical scenario are depicted as incapable.

ALLEGATION OF UNFAIRNESS OF ELECTIONS ESCALATES

After suggesting the intention by institutions to avoid the win of the extremist party AfD in the German federal elections, disinformation claimed the outcomes were deliberately being manipulated during the vote. In particular, that ballot papers did not give the possibility to choose AfD or that postal ballot papers marked in favour of AfD were being destroyed. Slightly before the election day posts on social media misrepresented the programmes of all the competing parties but AfD.

The false story that the former EU commissioner Thierry Breton admitted that EU institutions were behind the annulment of the Romanian elections and that similar actions would be taken in Germany if the far-right party AfD won the German election further continued to circulate in various countries. In line with this falsehood, in February it has been falsely claimed in many countries (see slide 8) that the creation of a European Democracy Shield will allow the EU "annul elections in its member states if the results do not adjust to its interests", users on social media say.
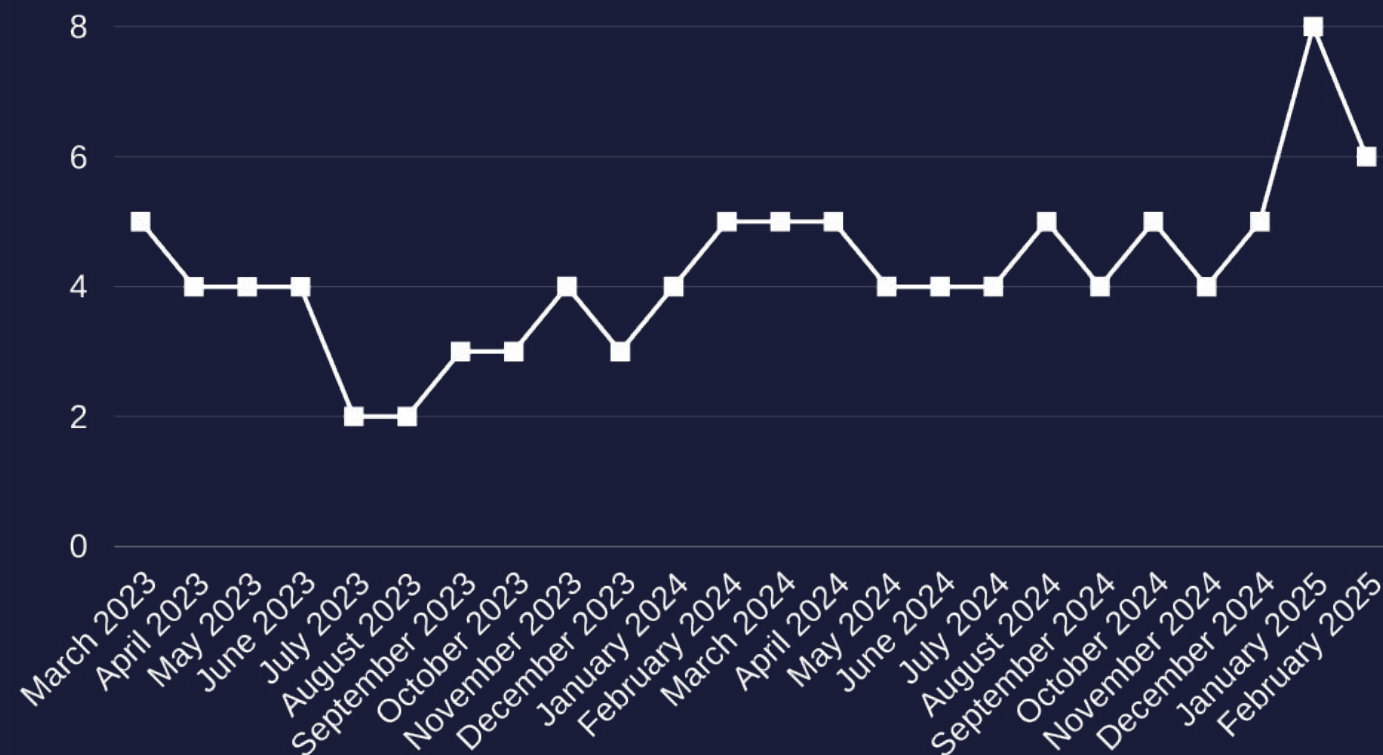
This narrative could evolve and enlarge in March, since the Romanian Constitutional Court barred the pro-Russia candidate Calin Georgescu for "not meeting the conditions of legality". The judges of the Constitutional Court have already been falsely accused of being under criminal investigation by the International Criminal Court (ICC) in Romania.
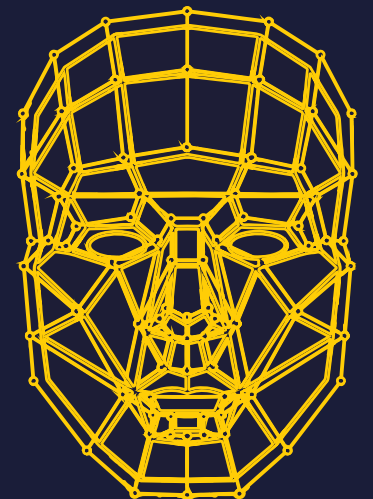
It is worth noting that both Germany and Romania witnessed, and/or are witnessing, interference from the US in their national politics, in particular from the vice-president J.D. Vance and Elon Musk, fostering the disinformation narrative that the EU and some of its member States censor free-speech and are not democratic.

AI-GENERATED DISINFORMATION

The percentage of disinformation stories using AI-generated content decreased in February, after the peak measured in January. Out of 1.376 fact-checking articles, 79 addressed the use of this technology in disinformation, representing 6% of the total.

An <u>analysis</u> by *Maldita* identified 35 YouTube channels, mostly created between 2024 and 2025, that disseminate political disinformation using AI-generated images and synthetic voices, amassing millions of views with few misleading videos. About the German elections, <u>videos of fake influencers created with AI</u> to try to influence the direction of the vote were identified. Among the other most significant false news exploiting AI-generated content are those <u>announcing</u> the alleged death of Pope Francis.

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

■ The Washington plane crash <u>was caused</u> by a transgender pilot named Jo Ellis

● Hollywood stars <u>received</u> millions from USAID to support Ukraine

▲ The European Democracy Shield <u>has been created</u> by the EU to annul elections' results that are not appreciated by the EU itself

◆ Videos/Images allegedly <u>showing</u> postal ballots for AfD being destroyed

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

THE MOST SIGNIFICANT VERIFIED DISINFORMATION STORIES AT THE NATIONAL LEVEL:

The Slovak President Robert Fico was supposed to be assassinated during his visit to Czechia by a Ukrainian citizen with the help of a Ukrainian diplomat

The former Deutsche Bank CEO Alfred Herrhausen said that the Euro was "created to bankrupt Europe"

The draft of a new media bill proposes a ban on criticizing the government and provides a basis for regulating the spread of opinions

Trump's administration was in talks with Albania to accept 100.000 people from Gaza

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: 1-28 February 2025. Number of respondents: 33.
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