



European Digital Media Observatory

DISINFORMATION ABOUT FARMERS' PROTESTS KEEPS GROWING IN FEBRUARY, FUELING ANTI EU SENTIMENT

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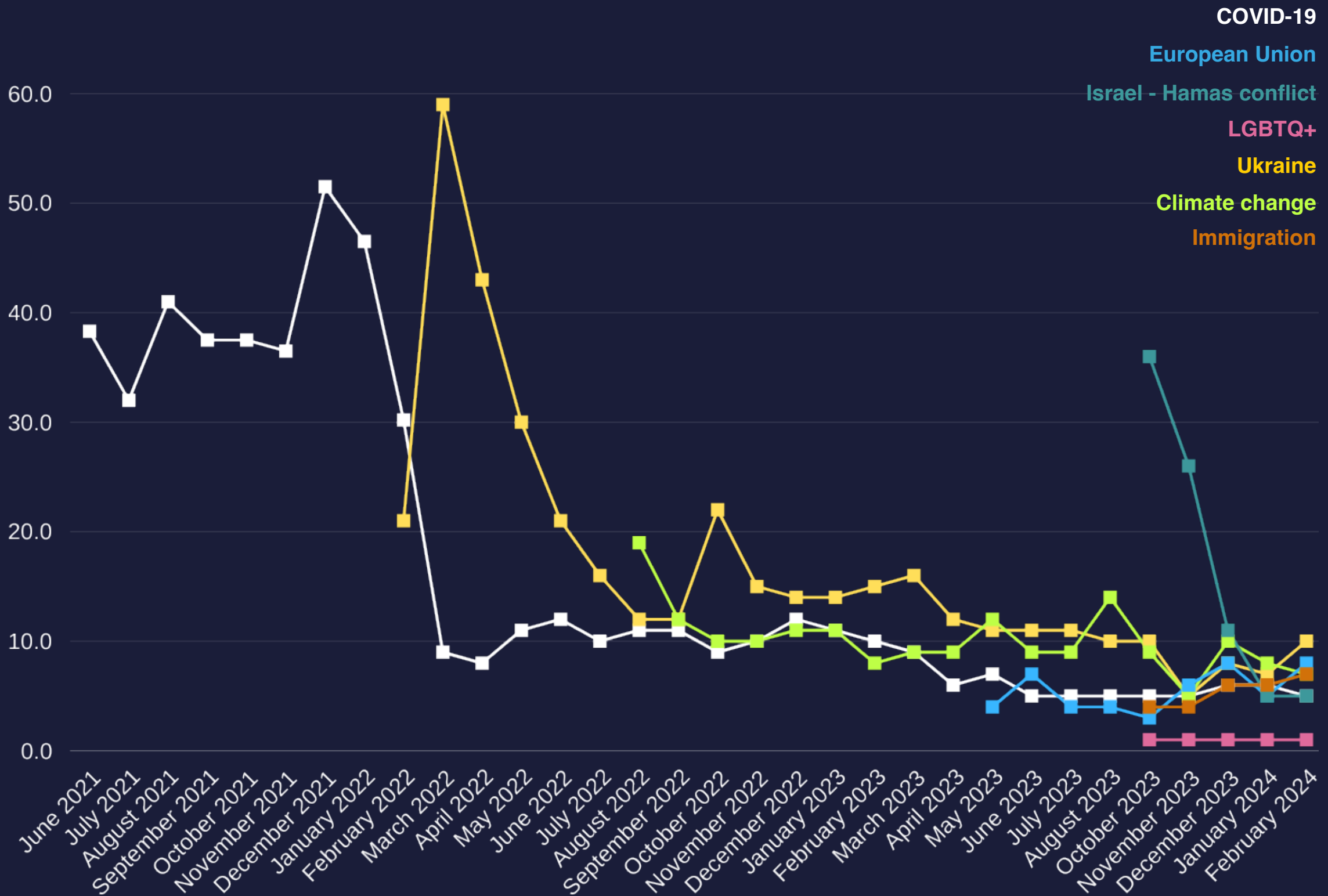
DISINFORMATION ABOUT UKRAINE GROWS, AS DOES FALSE CONTENT ABOUT THE EU AND IMMIGRATION

The 35 organizations* part of the EDMO fact-checking network that contributed to this brief published a total of 1.488 fact-checking articles in February 2024. Out of these articles, 71 (5%) focused on the conflict between Israel and Hamas; 101 (7%) on climate change-related disinformation; 152 (10%) on Ukraine-related disinformation; 113 (8%) on disinformation related to the EU; 76 (5%) on COVID-19-related disinformation; 98 (7%) on disinformation related to immigration; and 26 (1%) on disinformation about LGBTQ+ and gender issues.

Disinformation about the war in Ukraine increased by a few percentage points, going from 7% in January to 10% the following month. Disinformation about immigration and disinformation about the EU also increased, even if more moderately. Shares of the other constantly monitored disinformation topics remained stable (as in the case of false stories about the conflict in the Middle East and those about LGBTQ+ issues) or decreased slightly (as in the case of climate change and Covid-related disinformation).

** Organizations that contributed to this brief: 15min, AFP, APA, Correctiv, Check4facts, Delfi, Demagog.cz, Demagog.sk, DPA, Eesti Päevaleht, EFE Verifica, Ellinika Hoaxes, Fact Check Cyprus, Factcheck Vlaanderen, FactReview, Faktabaari, Faktisk, FranceTV, Funky, Greece Fact Check, Källkritikbyrå, 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



DISINFORMATION ABOUT FARMERS' PROTESTS EXPANDS, BOOSTING ANTI EU FEELINGS AND BEING EXPLOITED BY RUSSIAN PROPAGANDA

As farmer protests intensified across Europe in February, so did disinformation about them. With wider media coverage in many EU countries false stories about the tractors increased, often exaggerating the support received by the farmers or (as happened in January) the size of their rallies. These false stories used old or unrelated videos, recaptioning them as related to the ongoing protests and often accompanied by invectives against the EU or its “environmental rules”.

Current issues concerning the agricultural and food sectors have been exploited by false stories trying to exacerbate negative sentiments towards EU institutions. For example, an old false narrative about edible insects resurfaced, claiming that European citizens were being forced to eat them, while unfounded information spread the message that the EU had approved the sale of lab-grown meat. Other false stories claimed that the EU imports waste or toxic food into its borders, which does not pass phytosanitary controls but is intended for citizens in different countries.



Pro-Russian disinformation also tried to capitalize on the centrality and relevance of the rallies in the public debate. After false stories claimed in January that the Russian Embassy in Berlin had turned on a siren to show solidarity with the tractor protests, in February it was claimed that farmers had thrown manure at the Ukrainian Embassy in Paris, allegedly because of its calls on French farmers to end the demonstrations. This false story circulated in several countries, including the Netherlands, Germany, Austria, Italy, Spain, Greece, Bulgaria, and Hungary. Exploiting cracks and social tensions in Western societies, fueling them through disinformation, is a well-known strategy of Russian propaganda.



RUSSIAN DISINFORMATION FOCUS ON NAVALNY' S DEATH

Aside from the usual recurring false stories about Ukraine, the main theme of pro-Russia false stories was the death of Alexei Navalny, the most prominent opponent of the Russian government, which was blamed on the Kremlin by several international organizations and leaders. On the contrary, false stories attributed his death to “Western vaccines”, while other unfounded news tried to discredit his role and profile. For example, it was falsely claimed that a picture showed him making the Nazi salute or that he was trying to stage a coup in Russia with the help of Western countries.

Since his widow Yulia Navalnaya has vowed to continue his political mission, false stories targeting her have increased significantly, as highlighted by a recent EDMO investigation. She was falsely accused of having extramarital relationships and of planning the speech before her husband’s death, suggesting his death itself was planned. One widely circulated false story (see slide 8) used AI-generated audio of Navalny’s mother to spread the message that she was blaming his widow for leaving her son alone and causing his death.



DISINFORMATION NARRATIVES ABOUT MIGRATION

Disinformation about immigration was particularly strong in Ireland and Spain. In both countries, false stories attempted to portray the EU or national governments as endorsing uncontrolled migration or as too weak to deal with it.



In Spain, it was falsely claimed that the EU deports all irregular migrants to the country and that Japan bans unemployed migrants from meeting in the streets, suggesting that they are violent. False stories also claimed that Pedro Sanchez announced an investment of public money in Morocco, although the African country allegedly imports products that violate fair competition in the agricultural market.

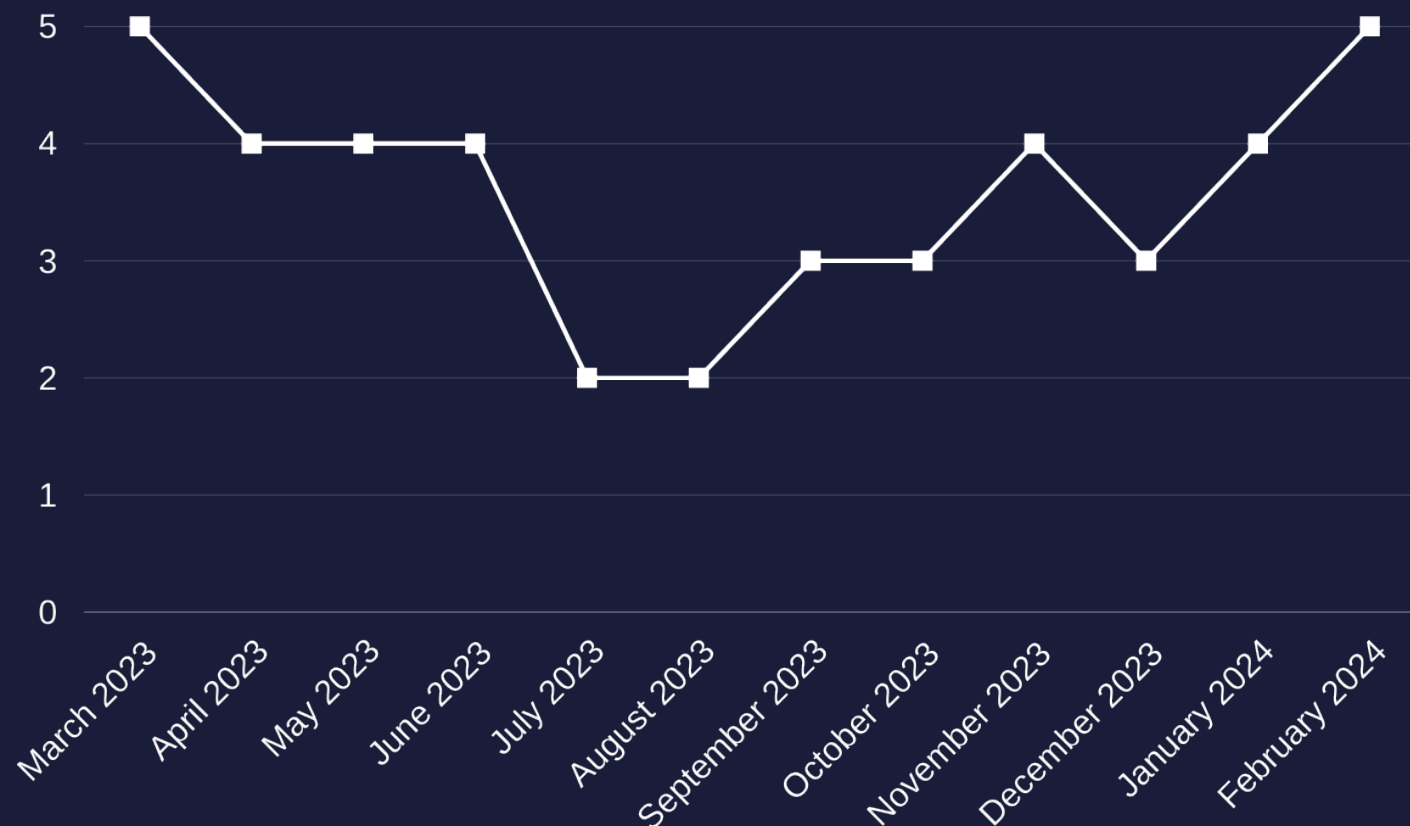


In Ireland, stickers have been circulated purporting to have been created by the Irish Muslim Council to advocate the introduction of “Sharia Law” in the country. It was also claimed that migrants are paid €80,000 to move within the country’s borders, while a viral meme suggested that Norway had recently deported 1,600 Somalians. Another relevant false story used an audio recording – likely AI-generated – of British celebrity chef Gordon Ramsay praising Irish anti-migrant protesters.



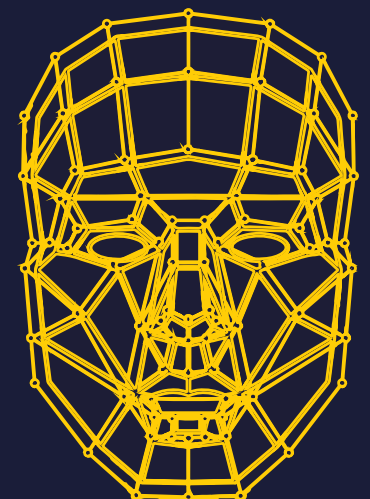
AI-GENERATED DISINFORMATION

The percentage of disinformation stories using AI-generated content increased slightly in February. Out of 1.488 fact-checking articles, 73 used this disinformation technique. This corresponds to around 5% of the total, up from 4% in the previous months.



Apart from the aforementioned AI-generated voice of Navalny's mother, the most widely circulated false content was an AI-generated image showing tractors and straw bales in front of the Eiffel Tower in Paris. A deep fake of a France24 anchor was also widely shared, suggesting that a trip of President Macron of France to Ukraine was canceled because of a secret Ukrainian plan to kill him.

See the spread of these false stories on slide 8.



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

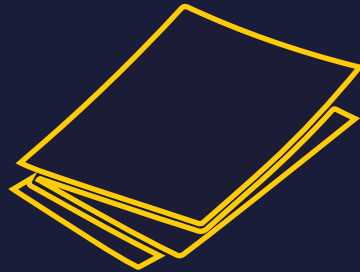


- AI-generated images of haystacks and tractors in front of the Eiffel Tower in Paris
- AI-generated audio of Ludmilla Navalnaya (mother of Alexei Navalny) accusing Yulia Navalnaya (his widow)
- ▲ A deepfake of France24 announcing that President Emmanuel Macron canceled a visit to Kyiv because of an Ukrainian plot to kill him
- ◆ Video allegedly portraying rockets fired by Houthi forces in the Red Sea against US navy ships (including USS Labone) - actually a videogame (Arma3)

THE MOST SIGNIFICANT VERIFIED DISINFORMATION STORIES AT THE NATIONAL LEVEL:



In the context of the legislative elections, a doctored image tried to link André Ventura, leader of the right-wing Chega party, to Nazism.



Two months before the presidential elections, thousands of social network users shared fake documents, claiming that the main opposition candidate, Ivan Korčok, had collaborated with the State Security in the mid-1980s.



Emmanuel Macron has legalized rape.



A dairy firm removed a mother figure from milk cartons, amid a government initiative to legalize marriage and adoption for same-sex couples.



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: 1-29 February 2024. Number of respondents: 35.
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