



European Digital Media Observatory

UKRAINE, GAZA AND ELECTIONS: HOW RUSSIA, CHINA AND DOMESTIC ACTORS USE DISINFORMATION TO FOSTER THEIR AGENDAS

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UKRAINE AND THE EU ARE STILL THE MOST TARGETED TOPICS BY DISINFORMATION. FALSE NEWS ABOUT THE CRISIS IN GAZA AND COVID-19 ARE INCREASING

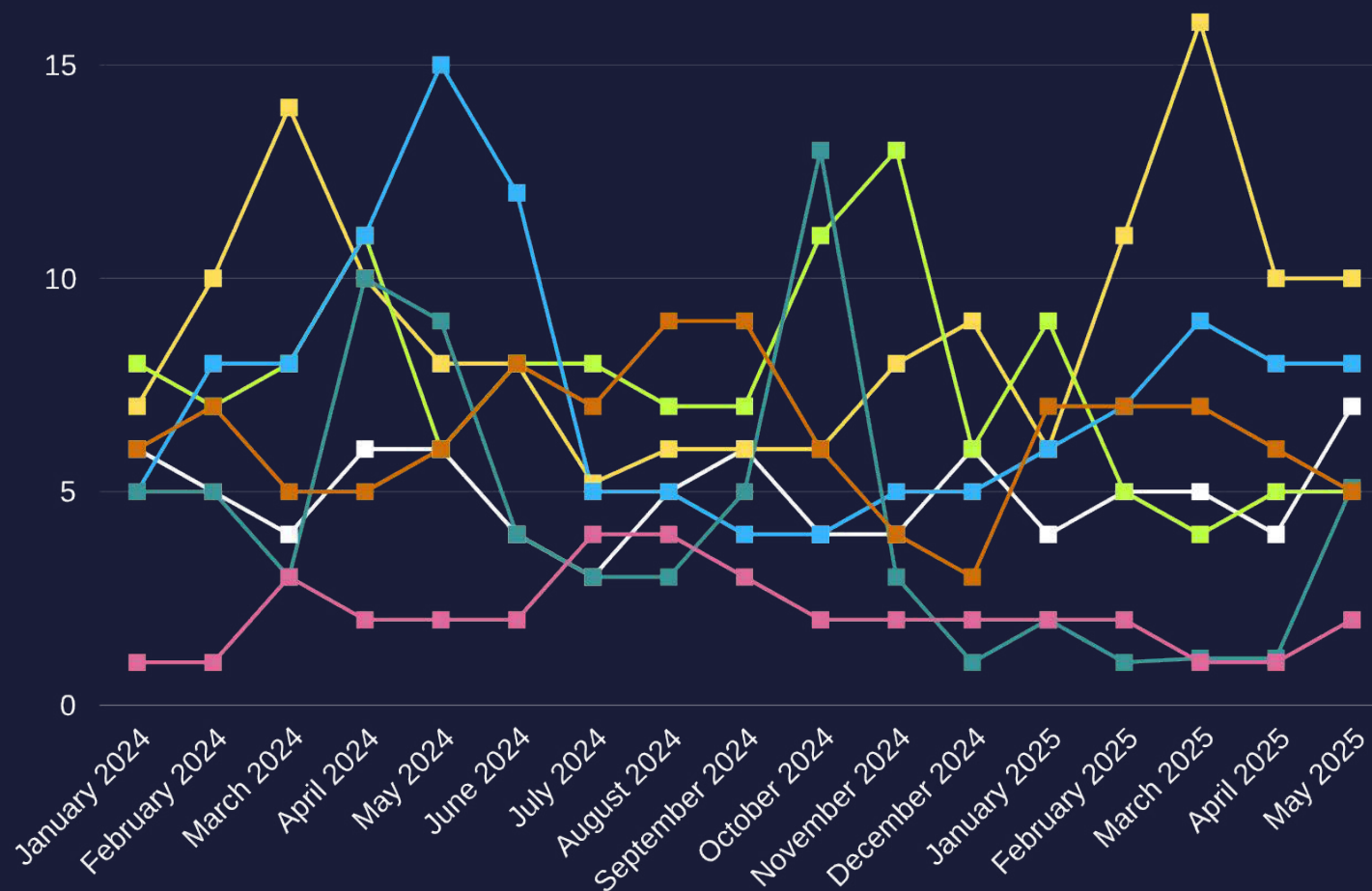
The 33 organizations* part of the EDMO fact-checking network that contributed to this brief published a total of 1.760 fact-checking articles in May 2025. Out of these articles, 173 (10%) focused on Ukraine-related disinformation; 138 (8%) on disinformation related to the EU; 118 (7%) on COVID-19-related disinformation; 89 (5%) on disinformation related to immigration; 86 (5%) on the Middle Eastern regional conflict; 82 (5%) on climate change-related disinformation; and 29 (2%) on disinformation about LGBTQ+ and gender issues.

Disinformation about the conflict in the Middle East increases significantly after months of minimal relevance. False information on Covid-19 also made a comeback, rising by three percentage points and reaching the highest value since May 2023 (7%). False news related to the war in Ukraine and the EU, which are still the most targeted topics by disinformation in the month of May, remained stable on the levels registered in April, respectively 10% and 8%.

The shares of false information about the other topics monitored by these briefs remained stable or showed only minor fluctuations.

** Organizations that contributed to this brief: AFP, APA-Faktencheck, Correctiv, Delfi.lt, Demagog.cz, Demagog.sk, Deutsche Welle, EFE Verifica, Ellinika Hoaxes, Eurocomunicare, Facta/Pagella Politica, Faktabaari, Faktisk.no, Factcheck.Vlaanderen, Funky Citizens, Greece Fact Check, Infoveritas, Källkritikbyrå, Knack, Lakmusz, Les Surligneurs, Maldita.es, Newtral, Oštro/Razkrinkavanje.si, Polígrafo, Pravda Association, Provereno Media, Re:Baltica, The Journal FactCheck, TjekDet, VerificaRTVE, Verificat, 15min.lt*

% of related disinformation on total detected disinformation, by topic



INTERNATIONAL CRISIS AND DISINFORMATION - UKRAINE



Disinformation produces its biggest damages in the long term, working like the drop of water that excavates the rock, eroding trust in institutions, democracies and reality itself. Thus the recurrence of the main disinformation narratives about the war in Ukraine, pushed by pro-Russia propaganda, is not surprising. False news detected in May try to target public opinion in the EU with the same messages over and over:

- Ukrainians refugees are “parasites”, EU member States treat them better than their own citizens and use them to subvert democracy;
- People in Europe are on the side of Russia (even the Pope and Ukrainians themselves are), while European political leadership is composed by warmongers (and coke-addicted, like Zelensky, who is also corrupted) ignoring the desire for peace of Ukrainians;
- Russia did not commit war crimes e.g. in Bucha, culprits are Ukraine instead;
- Even in the past, during WWII, the Allies were bad, while the USSR (and even Stalin) was good. This last narrative was pushed significantly in May, probably because of the Victory Day recurrence on May 9.

Moreover, Russian disinformation and propaganda found a way to pollute LLMs-powered chatbots, as discovered for English language by *Newsguard* and more recently verified for Scandinavian languages by the EDMO Hub NORDIS.

INTERNATIONAL CRISIS AND DISINFORMATION - GAZA AND KASHMIR



The expansion of Israel's military activities in Palestine and the worsening of the humanitarian crisis in Gaza were recurring topics in the news in the EU in May. Disinformation immediately followed, spreading recurring false narratives (e.g. Pallywood conspiracy theory, or exaggerations of the support for Palestinians). Many fact-checking organizations also detected a relatively new phenomenon this month, well spread in the EU (see slide 8), i.e. the dissemination of false news portraying China as the most active State in protecting and helping civilians in Gaza, taking a strong stance against Israel. In the EU, pro-China disinformation is not very widespread and, when detected, is often aimed to increase China's popularity (e.g. false news detected during the pandemic regarding Europeans allegedly thanking China for its effort in fighting the virus). This last example seems to be of the same kind, but further investigations are necessary.



The spiraling situation in Kashmir following a terrorist attack on April 22, with growing violence and tensions between India and Pakistan, was another hot topic in the news in May, fueling disinformation. However, without clear interests from foreign or domestic actors in pushing specific narratives in the EU, the nature of this flare of disinformation seemed to be mostly click-baiting: old and/or unrelated content passed off as pertinent to the current situation were widely detected in the EU in May (see slide 8).

ELECTIONS AND DISINFORMATION



After the annulment of the elections in December 2024 due to alleged Russian interference and illegal conduct by candidate Călin Georgescu, new elections were called for May 2025. In the first turn, on May 4, the far-right candidate George Simion gained the most votes. However, the pro-UE candidate Nicușor Dan, after a significant comeback, won the run-off on May 18. This stream of events, as documented by the EDMO Hub BROD, polarized Romanian society and exacerbated social tensions, creating an environment extremely favorable for the circulation of disinformation and conspiracy theories before and after the elections, with attacks to the pro-UE candidate and EU institutions, false stories regarding alleged fraud in the electoral process or external influence – sometimes supposedly involving French president Emmanuel Macron.

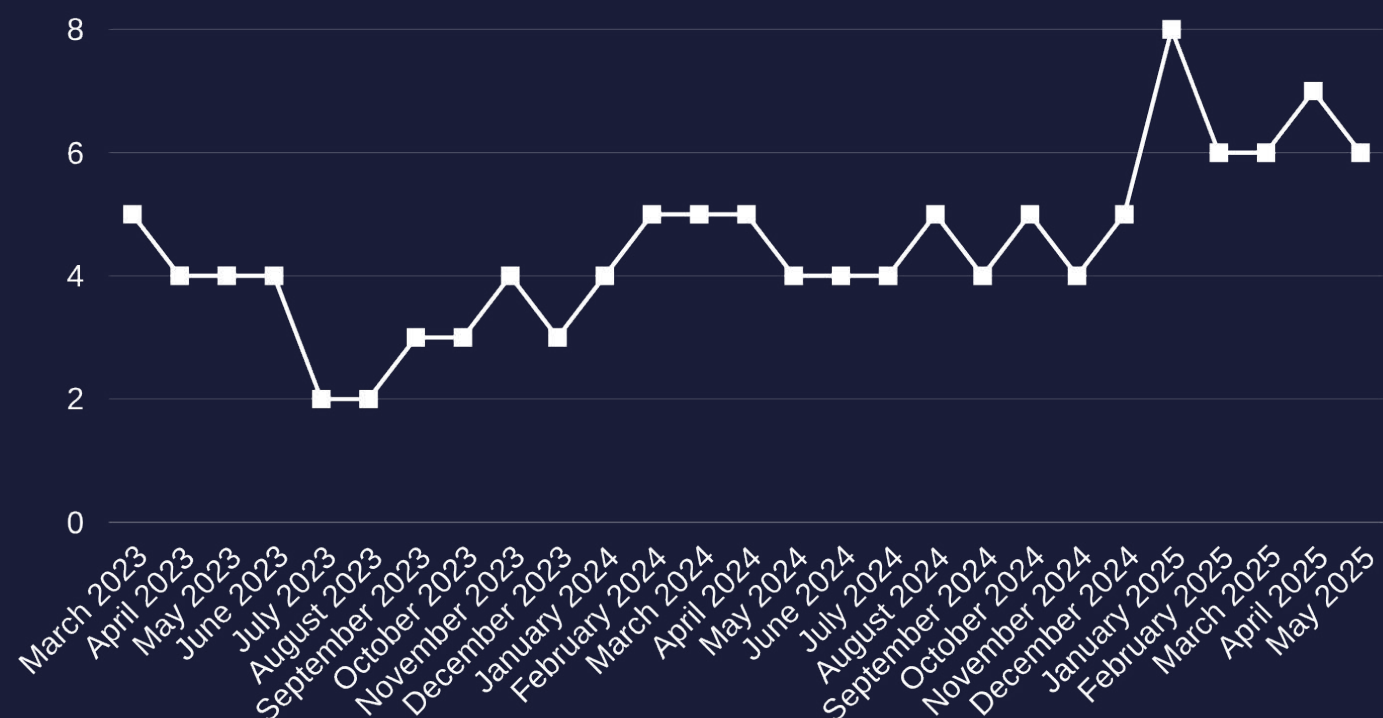


During the electoral campaign for the presidential election that took place in Poland on May 18, disinformation content attacking both candidates spread online. On TikTok, various far-right and fake accounts targeted liberal candidate Rafał Trzaskowski, while videos with millions of views called into question the integrity of the elections. Meanwhile, on Meta platforms, a coordinated operation promoted advertisements for the value of nearly half a million Polish zlotys with the aim of advocating for Trzaskowski's campaign and downgrading his rivals, namely Karol Nawrocki and Slawomir Mentzen (the case is currently being investigated by the Polish Internal Security Agency). After the elections, no major disinformation incidents were reported.

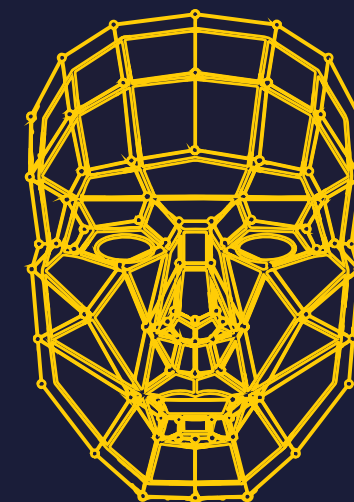
With regard to the Portuguese elections of May 18, we did not record any particularly significant instances of disinformation.

AI-GENERATED DISINFORMATION

The percentage of disinformation stories using AI-generated content remained stable in May, resembling April's figures. Out of 1.760 fact-checking articles, 110 addressed the use of this technology in disinformation, representing 6% of the total.



AI-generated disinformation targeted the electoral campaigns in Poland, with a video of liberal candidate Rafal Trzaskowski allegedly stating that he does not believe in democracy. Similarly, the elections in Romania were also subjected to false news, and a deepfake video of newly elected president Nicusor Dan dancing circulated widely. Interestingly, there was also a case of AI used as an alleged proof that the media fabricated the figure of the Syrian man who overpowered the perpetrator of a knife attack in Hamburg (Germany) on May 23, 2025.





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

- Macron, Merz and Starmer used cocaine during their train trip to Ukraine
- Romania presidential elections have been manipulated to secure Dan's victory
- ▲ Videos and images allegedly portraying Chinese aircrafts delivering humanitarian aid to Gaza
- ◆ Decontextualized/false/AI-generated content about the escalation in Kashmir between India and Pakistan

THE MOST SIGNIFICANT DISINFORMATION STORIES AT THE NATIONAL LEVEL:



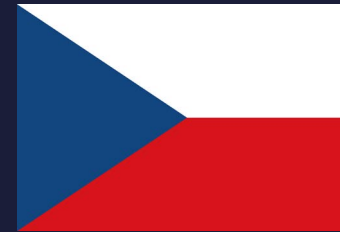
Spanish PM Pedro Sánchez is allegedly responsible for the blackout in Spain on April 28, 2025



US Foreign Agents Registration Act (FARA) is stricter than the proposed Hungarian “foreign agent” law



Czech president Petr Pavel wants to cancel elections that will be held in October 2025



The presence of German troops in Lithuania is illegal



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 May 2025. Number of respondents: 33. Main editors of this brief: Lucia Bertoldini and Tommaso Canetta, Pagella Politica/Facta.
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