DISINFORMATION LANDSCAPE IN LUXEMBOURG

EU DISINFO LAB

Belgium-Luxembourg
Digital Media and
Disinformation Observatory

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INTRODUCTION

- Luxemburg is a small country enjoying high freedom of expression and quality press. However, it has still been affected by narratives of disinformation related, for instance, to the COVID-19 pandemic or the Russian invasion of Ukraine, following the spread of hoaxes in the different languages of the neighbouring countries.

- The awareness of disinformation is still recent, the regulation is developing, and the community is building capacity.

- Luxembourg does not have a law penalising the propagation of false news as such and does not plan to introduce one, preferring to wait for European regulations to be put in place.

EMBLEMATIC CASES

DATE-RAPE DRUGS HOAX

- At the beginning of 2023, several incidents involving "KO drops," or date-rape drugs, were reported to RTL following two popular student parties in Luxembourg.

- Allegations of the use of these substances surfaced following the "Zürcher Bal" and the New Year's Eve party held at the same revenue (Luxexpo), as many young partygoers – especially girls – were brought to the emergency room after they found themselves highly intoxicated.

- However, it was not possible to determine whether illegal substances were used. Moreover, the police lack specific figures on incidents involving KO drops.

OVERESTIMATING DEATHS BY VACCINES

- On 23 July 2022, a German website published numbers of vaccine-related deaths, noting that in the European Union, more than 25.800 such cases occurred in relation to COVID-19 vaccines. However, this is incorrect: the numbers were misinterpret to misrepresent vaccines.

- According to data published by the Ministry of Health in Luxembourg, there have been 16 suspected vaccine deaths in the Grand Duchy as of 16 May 2022.

- Among these, only one could be linked to the AstraZeneca vaccine. The other 15 cases could not be analysed, as the victims' families did not allow authorities to conduct autopsies.

TRANSPHOBIC & POLITICAL ATTACKS

- Recently, a photo circulating on social media claimed to show "the Luxembourgian Prime Minister and his girlfriend" at a gala event. The image was accompanied by angry or laughing emojis and offensive comments.

- This is a case of false connection, where an authentic image contains an incorrect caption. In fact, the photo from 2019 is authentic, but it does not show Prime Minister Xavier Better. Instead, it portrays singer Conchita Wurst and her manager.

A quick research in the database maintained by [AFP Factuel](#) shows that Luxembourg is more the scene of hoaxes circulating in neighbouring countries (for instance, the claim that French [gendarmes and fire-fighters](#) fill up in Luxembourg or the French professor [Christian Perronne](#)'s misleading statements about COVID-19 vaccines to Luxembourg MPs) than a transmitter of new, original ones.

ANTI-VAX DISINFORMATION

- As reported in the previous section, the country was not immune to vaccine-related disinformation. For instance, the video of a [Luxembourgian doctor](#) explaining that vaccinated people risk "micro-thromboses all over their body" and death was shared several thousand times on social media.

- In another video, the same doctor argues that the [spike protein](#) produced by the body after an injection of a messenger RNA COVID-19 vaccine is "sexually transmissible".

- Other hoaxes include a [Luxembourgian lawyer](#)'s unscientific declarations that the Pfizer/BioNTech COVID-19 vaccine is a "gene therapy" that is "dangerous," "useless," and even "illegal." She calls for the immediate suspension of the vaccine because it would allegedly destroy the immune system, cause sterilisation, and DNA alteration.

CLIMATE CHANGE INFORMATION DISORDER

- False, conspiratorial, and misleading statements about climate change and the environment pollute the information ecosystem in Luxembourg. These hoaxes adapt quickly to their surroundings, such as the unscientific conviction that [earthquakes](#) can be predicted, which spread after the seismic shocks in Turkey in early 2023.

- Climate change denialism or delayism (i.e., aimed at postponing relevant policy initiatives) [downplays](#) the impact of [CO2 emissions](#) and other human responsibility on global warming. They also criticise the energy transition stressing the presumed danger of [electric cars](#), with decontextualised videos of vehicles exploding.

- Luxembourgian fact-checkers reported the alarming practice of sneaking [false research results](#) into peer-reviewed journalism, trying to exploit the system to undermine climate protection.

- Clickbait content tried to provoke sensationalism on hoaxes about unprecedented snow in [Saudi Arabia](#) or [South Africa](#), as well as the decontexualised video pretending that a [tornado](#) occurred in Luxembourg.

UKRAINE-WAR RELATED DECEPTIONS

- Disinformation and propaganda in the context of the Russian attack on Ukraine spread to Luxembourg too, ranging from unproved allegations about [Zelensky](#)'s net worth to the false claim that people experiencing [homelessness](#) are being recruited to fight in Donbass against the Russian army.

- Interestingly, a deception "made in Luxembourg" portrays the wife of a Russian dignitary – directly involved in the Ukrainian invasion – traveling in a luxury car with Luxembourg plates. Fact-checkers explain that the image dates back to 2018 and that the car was registered in 2011.

LUXEMBOURG-SPECIFIC DISINFORMATIVE CONTENT

- As Luxembourg is a very small nation and disinformation tends to travel across borders, narratives or single hoaxes unique to the microstate are unusual. For instance, the idea that the Luxembourgish language is disappearing, a fear shared by many, including right-wing politician Fred Keup (Alternative Democratic Reform Party), was debunked. Verifiers confirmed that Luxembourgish is still the most spoken language in the country.

- To avoid potential misunderstandings, the fact-checking article provides useful explanations about local issues such as the new rental law or how much Luxembourg benefits from the EU budget.

COMMUNITY COUNTERING DISINFO

The community fighting disinformation in Luxembourg is yet still quite rudimentary but growing.

BEE SECURE

- A governmental initiative of the Grand Duchy of Luxembourg, Bee Secure is operated by the Service National de la Jeunesse (SNJ) and the KJT in partnership with the Luxembourg House of Cybersecurity, the Luxembourg Police, and the Public Prosecutor's Office of the Grand Duchy of Luxembourg, and co-funded by the EU Commission.

- It offers digital literacy to the public (starting with two categories considered as the more at risk: the young and the senior).

- Disinformation is, among many others, one of the issues it tackles. A 90 minutes-long training module, named Check your facts, has been developed and offered to the schools.

DECLARATION ON BUILDING TRUST AND REINFORCING DEMOCRACY

- In November 2022, Ministers and high-level representatives from 38 OECD member and candidate countries adopted the Luxembourg Declaration on Building Trust and Reinforcing Democracy. Among various commitments and concrete actions, there is an action plan for combating misinformation and disinformation through government policies aimed at building more resilient societies, proactively counteractions threats, strengthening the information ecosystem, and increasing platform accountability.

- Luxembourg also participates in the OECD DIS/MIS Resource Hub, a peer learning platform for sharing knowledge, data, and analysis government approaches to tackling mis- and disinformation.

EDMO BELUX

- Launched in October 2021 and funded by the European Commission, EDMO BELUX is a hub for research, fact-checking, and media literacy on online disinformation in Luxembourg and Belgium.

- Among the partners is the major local media, RTL (the list of all the stakeholders, including the EU DisinfoLab, is here).

FOUNDATION ZENTRUM FIR POLITESCH BILDUNG

- ZPB is a foundation that aims to promote citizenship by better understanding of democracy and current societal challenges. It encourages children and young people, as well as the general population, to participate in political life and debates. Through its publications and website, the foundation also contributes to educating and empowering people against disinformation.

RESPECT.LU

- A state-funded website, respect.lu, affiliated with a local NGO, SOS Radicalisation a.s.b.l., in charge since 2017 of countering violent extremism, is developing programs on disinformation.

- These programs seem so far to focus on conspiracy theories. It trains school personnel and educators alike on these subjects.

RTL LUXEMBOURG

- RTL Luxembourg is the leading media brand in Luxembourg, combining the public service television channel RTL Télé Lëtzebuerg, the radio station RTL Radio Lëtzebuerg and a digital offer in Luxembourgish, French, and English. The websites rtl.lu, rtltoday.lu and rtlinfos.lu have a fact-checking section.

- Luxembourg's media enjoy a great deal of freedom, including freedom of expression and protection of sources, according to Reporters without Borders. They also benefit from significant state aid. However, the media freedom watchdog notices that "access to state-held information is not guaranteed, despite repeated requests from the journalists' union, which opposes the withholding of public information by the authorities on the grounds of protecting personal data."

- In its 2022 country report, the Media Pluralism Monitor (MPM) laments that "to date, there are no legal/policy frameworks aiming at effectively fighting disinformation in Luxembourg," leading to poor scores on the online disinformation indicator.

- There's in the local law no crime of "false news," even when it is of a nature to disturb public order or aim at influencing the sincerity of a vote. According to a lawyer, "Luxembourg does not intend to legislate on this issue. Noting the international nature of the internet, Luxembourg prefers to wait for a European approach on the subject."

- However, Luxembourg law imposes on journalists a duty of accuracy and integrity regarding the facts they communicate and the obligation to spontaneously rectify facts as soon as they become aware of the inaccuracy of their statements.

- Luxembourg plans to create a whistleblower office and offer better protection for employees who reveal misconduct or wrongdoing as part of an EU-wide directive. The Grand Duchy was marked in 2014 by the LuxLeaks, an attempt by the International Consortium of Investigative Journalists to break the local bank secrecy that allows tax avoidance. The LuxLeaks actually paved the way for the EU protection scheme for whistleblowers. But, according to observers, Luxembourg's transposition of this regulation is unclear. For instance, whistleblowers can't obtain the information they want to leak through a so-called "self-standing criminal offence," but there's no clear definition of what constitutes such an offence.

- Some journalists have been threatened on social media in connection with the Covid-19 pandemic or subjected to intimidation attempts during protests against health restrictions, notes Reporters without Borders, lamenting that "such activity is not currently penalized by any existing law."

- On the international stage, the Luxembourg Ministry of Justice made a financial contribution of €100.000 to the OECD Resource Centre on Disinformation and Misinformation in March 2023. This funding contributed to the launch of the OECD Resource Centre on Disinformation and Misinformation platform that should "help governments, the media, and civil society organisations improve their individual and joint actions to strengthen information integrity."