



European Digital Media Observatory

IN NOVEMBER, A CLEAR ATTEMPT TO DRIVE A WEDGE BETWEEN ISRAEL AND UKRAINE SUPPORTERS USING DISINFORMATION

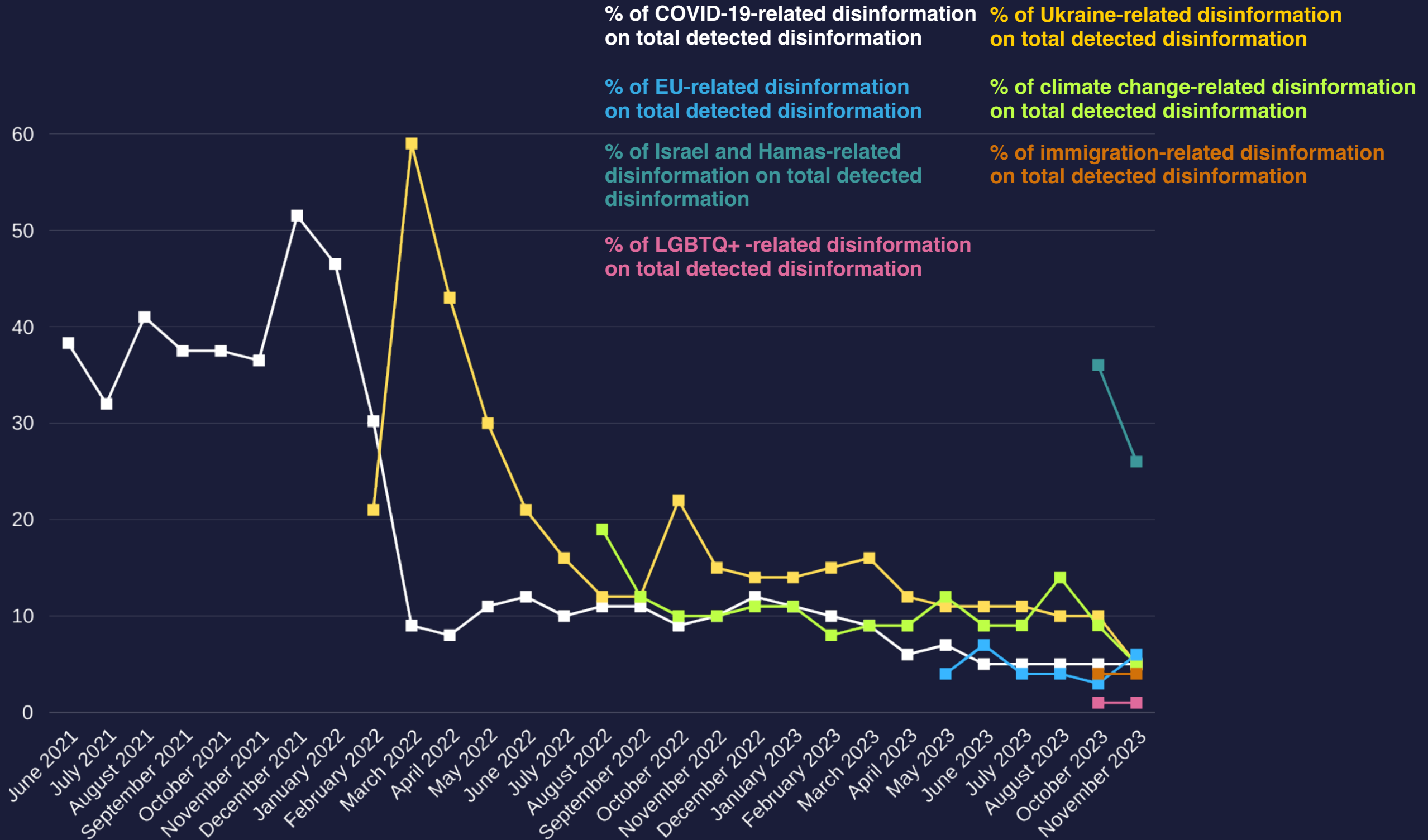
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DISINFORMATION ABOUT THE CONFLICT IN THE MIDDLE EAST REMAINS THE TOPIC WITH THE HIGHEST PROMINENCE IN NOVEMBER

The 32 organizations* part of the EDMO fact-checking network that contributed to this brief published a total of 1.354 fact-checking articles in November 2023. Out of these articles, 349 (26%) focused on the conflict between Israel and Hamas, 72 (5%) on Ukraine-related disinformation; 69 (5%) on COVID-19-related disinformation; 72 (5%) on climate change-related disinformation; 75 (6%) on disinformation related to the EU; 52 (4%) on disinformation related to immigration; and 17 (1%) on disinformation about LGBTQ+ and gender issues.

Although lower than the previous month, disinformation about the Middle East crisis remains by far the biggest disinformation phenomenon in November, with some narratives gaining more traction. The percentage of disinformation about the war in Ukraine decreased slightly in November and EU-related disinformation increased by a few percentage points. The other main disinformation topics monitored remained mostly stable.

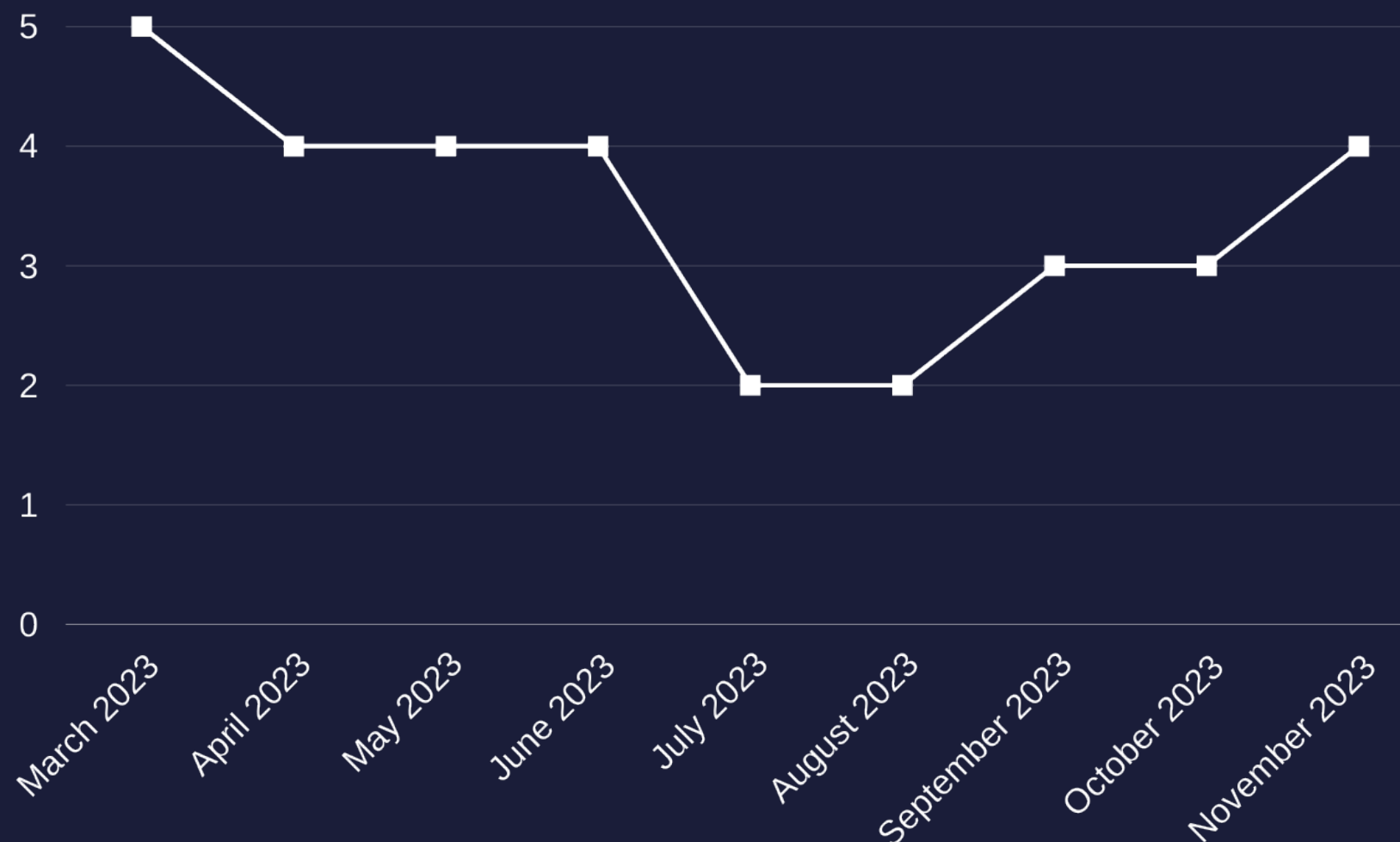


* Organizations that contributed to this brief: AFP, Correctiv, Delfi, Demagog.cz, Demagog.pl, Demagog.sk, DPA, DW, Eesti Päevaleht, EFE Verifica, Ellinika Hoaxes, Eurocomunicare, Factcheck Vlaanderen, FactReview, Faktabaari, Faktisk, FranceTV, Funky, Greece Fact Checking, Källkritikbyrån, Lakmusz, Maldita, Medizin transparent, Oštro, PagellaPolitica/Facta, Polígrafo, Pravda, Re:Baltica, The Journal Fact-Check, Times of Malta, TjekDet, Verificat

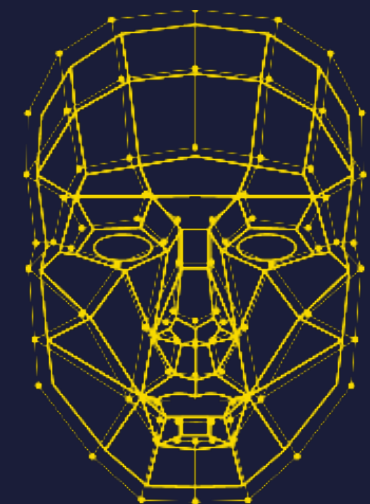
AI GENERATED DISINFO INCREASES

After months of very low percentages, disinformation using content generated by AI tools increased and it was around 4% in November (57 articles out of 1.354). Even if the figure is not particularly significant from a quantitative perspective, there are some worrying developments, with false stories becoming more insidious.

Amid the false information circulated in November, some are worth highlighting: an AI-generated audio with the voice of Valerii Zaluzhnyi, head of the Ukrainian Armed Forces (see slide n. 6); AI-generated images purporting to show migrants at the Finnish border wearing expensive jackets (see slide n. 6); a deepfake of former Czech Prime Minister Andrej Babiš talking about miraculous investments; and generated images used to depict climate activists as hypocritical.



In some cases, the fact that AI-generated content is often challenging to detect confuses people and leads them to question more and more real material as being deepfakes.



DISINFORMATION ON THE ISRAEL/HAMAS CONFLICT

The already known narratives regarding the war between Israel and the Hamas terrorist group are still present and widespread. False stories continue to claim that the suffering of civilians in the Palestinian territories is staged and the victims are crisis actors (the so-called “Pallywood” conspiracy theory), or that the conflict is already escalating and involving other States (an alleged declaration of war against Israel from Yemen was significant in this context).

Many of the false stories on this topic supposedly show exaggerated manifestations of support for the Palestinian cause (or for Israel), sometimes linking unrelated images and videos of crowds to the ongoing conflict. This technique is becoming a standard practice for disinformers when protests occur, also used in the past to magnify protests against coronavirus pandemic measures. Apart from these familiar narratives, some others are becoming more prominent in many EU languages.

In particular, **the attempt to exploit the crisis in the Middle East to weaken support for Ukraine is intensifying**, using unfounded information to portray Kiev as linked to Hamas or to create tension between supporters of Israel and Ukraine. In the first case, it was claimed that the ransom of 500.000 euros for an Israeli woman kidnapped by Hamas was demanded by Ukraine, or that Ukraine was sending weapons received from NATO to Hamas militants. Other false stories claimed that Ukrainian supporters were supposedly expressing their dissatisfaction with military support for Israel, or that pro-Israel messages were replacing those for Ukraine.

In line with the exploitation of the conflict in other contexts, the EU has been falsely accused of voting against a ceasefire in Gaza and in Spain – where several disinformation narratives are trying to delegitimize the new government – and some false stories took advantage of the diplomatic crisis between Spain and Israel following Pedro Sanchez’s visit to the region. For example, it was falsely claimed that Netanyahu had mistreated the re-elected Prime Minister or that a high-ranking Israeli official had information to “destroy” the Spanish government.

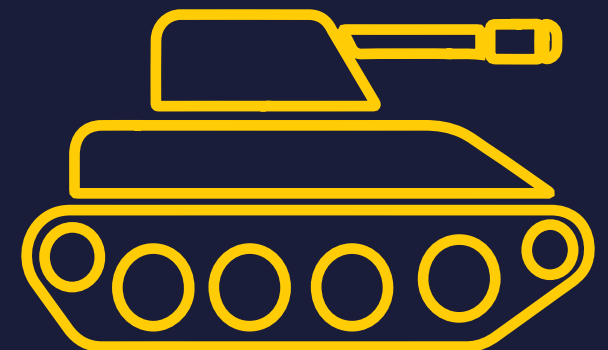


UKRAINE-RELATED DISINFORMATION NARRATIVES

Aside from the ever-present narratives about president Zelensky's alleged drug addiction, the alleged dangerousness of refugees and the alleged Ukrainian widespread sympathies for Nazis, false stories about the war in Ukraine in November focused on undermining support for Kiev (also exploiting the war in the Middle East, as mentioned) and exacerbating the existing internal tensions in its leadership.

In this sense, a very significant false story circulated in Slovakia. A deepfake was created of Valerii Zaluzhnyi, commander-in-chief of the Ukrainian armed forces, accusing Zelensky of being a "traitor" and calling on Ukrainians to rise up against him, leveraging the friction that actually exists between the two leaders. This false content pivots on the recently emerged tensions between the president and the commander in chief of the Ukrainian Armed Forces.

Other false stories used AI to claim that people lured by Russia at the Finnish border were wearing expensive clothes: this narrative, which questions the reality of the harsh situations migrants are often living in, is very well-known. It has been used against migrants from the Global South in countries such as Italy, Spain and Greece, and even against migrants from Ukraine, in particular in Central-Eastern Europe countries.



DISINFORMATION ABOUT THE EUROPEAN UNION

Apart from the slight general increase in EU-related disinformation, particularly interesting cases were detected in some countries, such as Bulgaria and Slovakia.



In Bulgaria, where elections were held on April 2 and the two main rival political parties found an agreement to form a coalition pro-EU government with a rotating prime minister, disinformation targeting the EU and the government itself is significant. For example, since Bulgarian miners and power plant employees demonstrated against the government's proposal to gradually eliminate coal usage, false stories circulated on social media claiming that the EU is backing an alleged imminent closure of coal mines in the country. At the same time, another disinformation story claimed that the majority of French people wanted to leave the EU and NATO, exaggerating the turnout at a very small pro-Frexit rally, while another false story accused the government (and the media) of spreading fake photos to over-represent the attention it receives from European institutions.



In Slovakia, where a government commonly described as eurosceptic is currently in charge, there have been claims that the proposal to abolish the veto power of EU member states would transform the EU into a “military federation”, and that Ursula von der Leyen, the President of the European Commission, is related to a Nazi military figure and has inherited property linked to slavery. Other well-known false stories, already circulated in different countries in the past, such as the one claiming that the EU wants to ban toilet paper in the name of climate change, are still widespread in the country.



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

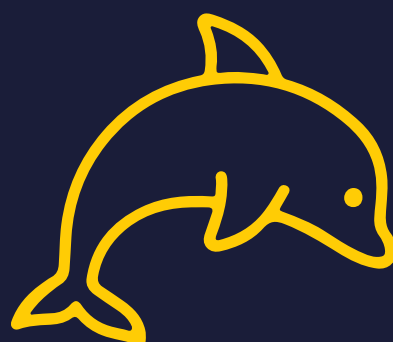


- The US are sending troops in Israel
- The *Washington Post* published an article about weapons supplies from Ukraine to Hamas
- ▲ The European Medicine Agency (EMA) said, in a letter in reply to the request of a MEP (Marcel De Graaf), that nobody under age 60 should have been vaccinated against Covid-19, plus other “shocking” revelations
- ◆ Mammography has been banned in Switzerland because it can cause breast cancer and more than half of the test results are incorrect

THE MOST SIGNIFICANT VERIFIED DISINFORMATION STORIES AT THE NATIONAL LEVEL:



In the context of the recent rioting in Dublin, the Irish Army had been deployed to keep order and the Irish police installed watch towers



Vibrations from offshore wind turbines are beaching dolphins and other marine mammals that use echolocation to navigate



Scientists are working on reviving dead humans using mRNA technology



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: 1-30 November 2023. Number of respondents: 32.
Main editor of this brief: Tommaso Canetta and Enzo Panizio, Pagella Politica/Facta.
For further information: [*t.canetta@pagellapolitica.it*](mailto:t.canetta@pagellapolitica.it).



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