



European Digital Media Observatory

# **THE EARTHQUAKE IN TURKEY AND SYRIA SPARKS DISINFORMATION AND CONSPIRACY THEORIES ALL OVER THE EU**

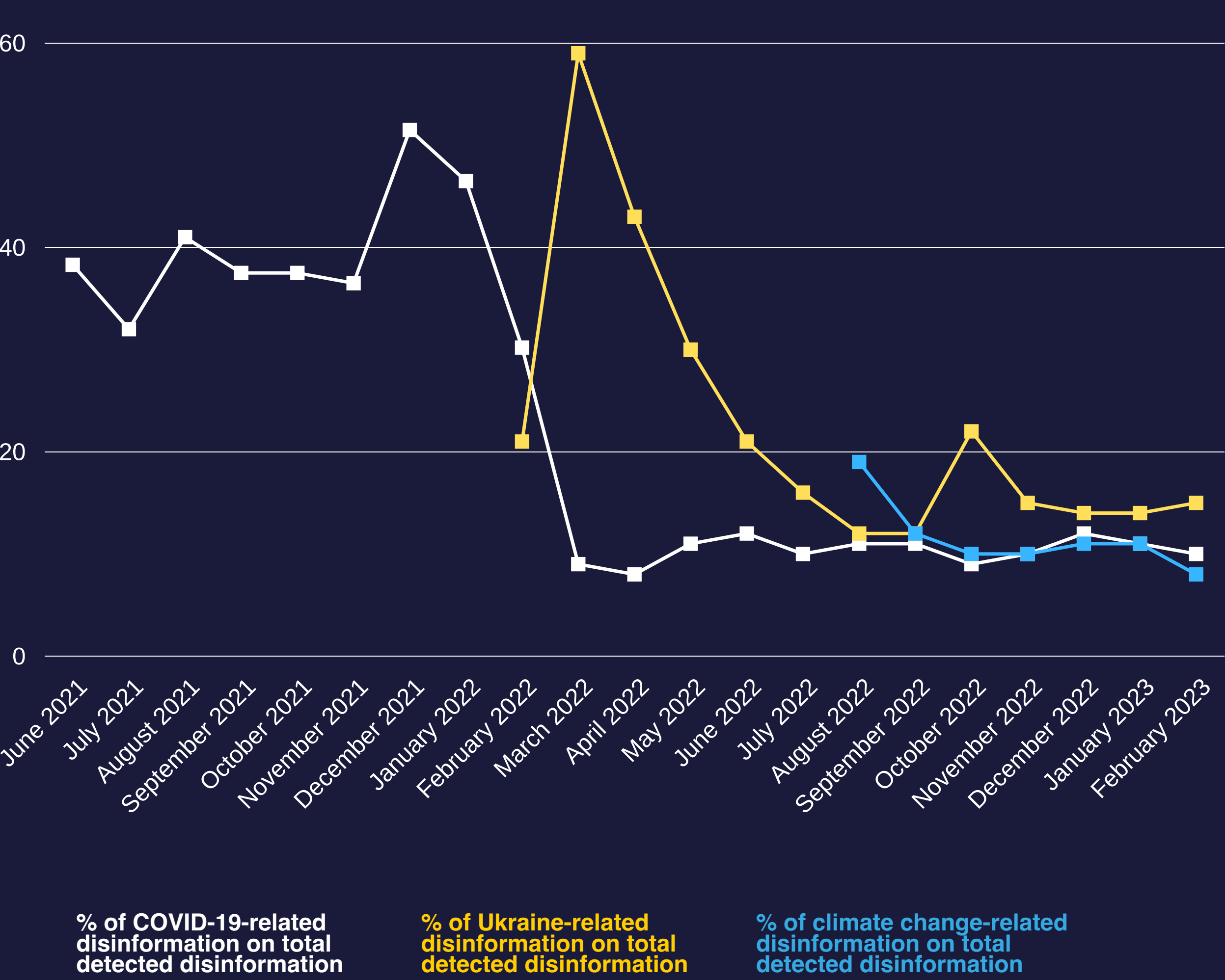
Monthly brief no. 21 – EDMO fact-checking network



# COVID- AND UKRAINE-RELATED DISINFORMATION REMAINS STABLE IN FEBRUARY, WHILE THE TOPIC OF CLIMATE CHANGE IS DROPPING

The 28 organizations\* part of the EDMO fact-checking network that contributed to this brief published a total of 1.114 fact-checking articles in February 2023.

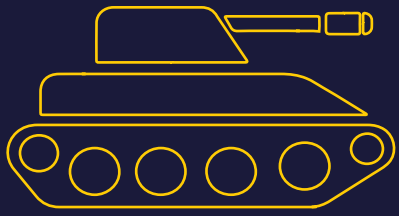
Out of these articles, 163 (15%) focused on Ukraine-related disinformation; 111 (10%) focused on COVID-19-related disinformation; and only 85 (8%) focused on climate change-related disinformation: the minimum recorded since the beginning of the monitoring period.



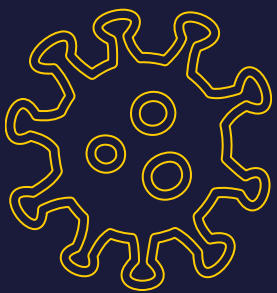
\* Organizations that contributed to this brief: AFP, APA, Correctiv, Delfi, Demagog.cz, Demagog.pl, DPA, Eesti Päevaleht, EFE Verifica, Eurocomunicare, Faktabaari, Freedom House Romania, Greece Fact Checking, Källkritikbyrån, Knack, Lakmusz, Les Surligneurs, Maldita, Nieuwscheckers, PagellaPolitica/Facta, Público, Pravda, Re:Baltica, The Journal Fact-Check, TjekDet, VerificaRTVE, Verificat, VRTNWS



## MAIN DISINFORMATION NARRATIVES DETECTED:



The main disinformation narratives about Ukraine remain the same detected in the recent past. Two specific phenomena are particularly relevant in the reporting period: a wide circulation in February, especially in Central and Eastern Europe (but not only), of false news about the escalation of the conflict as well as the direct involvement of other countries (e.g. Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Lithuania and Poland); the ongoing disinformation campaign against Ukrainian refugees (e.g. in Czech Republic and in Germany).



About climate change: together with the usual denialism, it is worth noting a surge of conspiracy theories about “climate lockdowns”, that in many case have roots in the misunderstanding of the urbanistic concept of the “15 minute city”, which seeks to reduce cars’ use by ensuring the proximity of basic services (e.g. in Romania and in Spain).



The main narratives conveyed by false news about COVID-19 are generally the same as those detected in the past, with a focus in February on vaccines supposedly killing huge numbers of people.

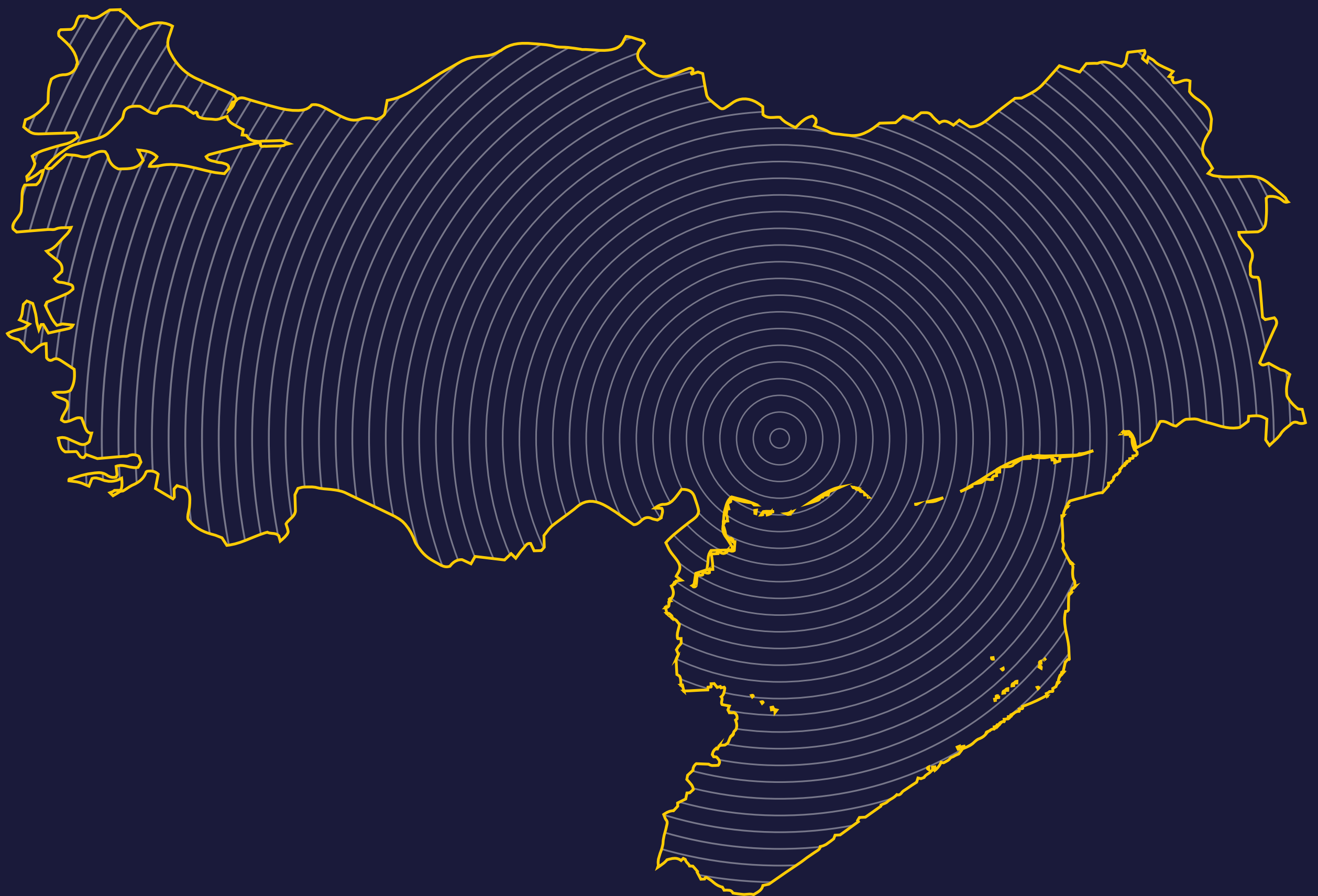


## EARTHQUAKE IN TURKEY AND SYRIA

The devastating earthquake that hit Turkey and Syria on Monday February 6, 2023 was major news and, as usually happens with major media stories, disinformation immediately followed.

- The vast majority of the detected disinformation in the EU does not appear to push a specific agenda (e.g. false images or videos of the disaster that do not foster or suggest specific narratives to the general public).
- But soon some conspiracy theories also started circulating in the EU, in particular about the earthquake being caused by the High-frequency active auroral research program (Haarp) technology, and being a USA/ NATO's revenge against Erdoğan.

In Turkey though, as explained by the Turkish fact-checking organization Teyit, the situation was different: together with agenda-free disinformation and conspiracy theories, political disinformation was detected too. The country will have general elections in a few months, and the earthquake entered the political discourse as a topic of polarization and disinformation.







## **DISINFORMATION ABOUT THE EU AND EDIBLE INSECTS IS A WIDESPREAD PHENOMENON IN JANUARY**

Disinformation about the EU and edible insects, which was the main disinformation phenomenon detected in January, kept circulating widely in February. The narratives are the same, and the biggest one remains that the EU wants to force its citizens to eat insects hidden in food products, without any information on the labels.



## **DISINFORMATION ABOUT MIGRANTS IS GROWING IN THE EU**

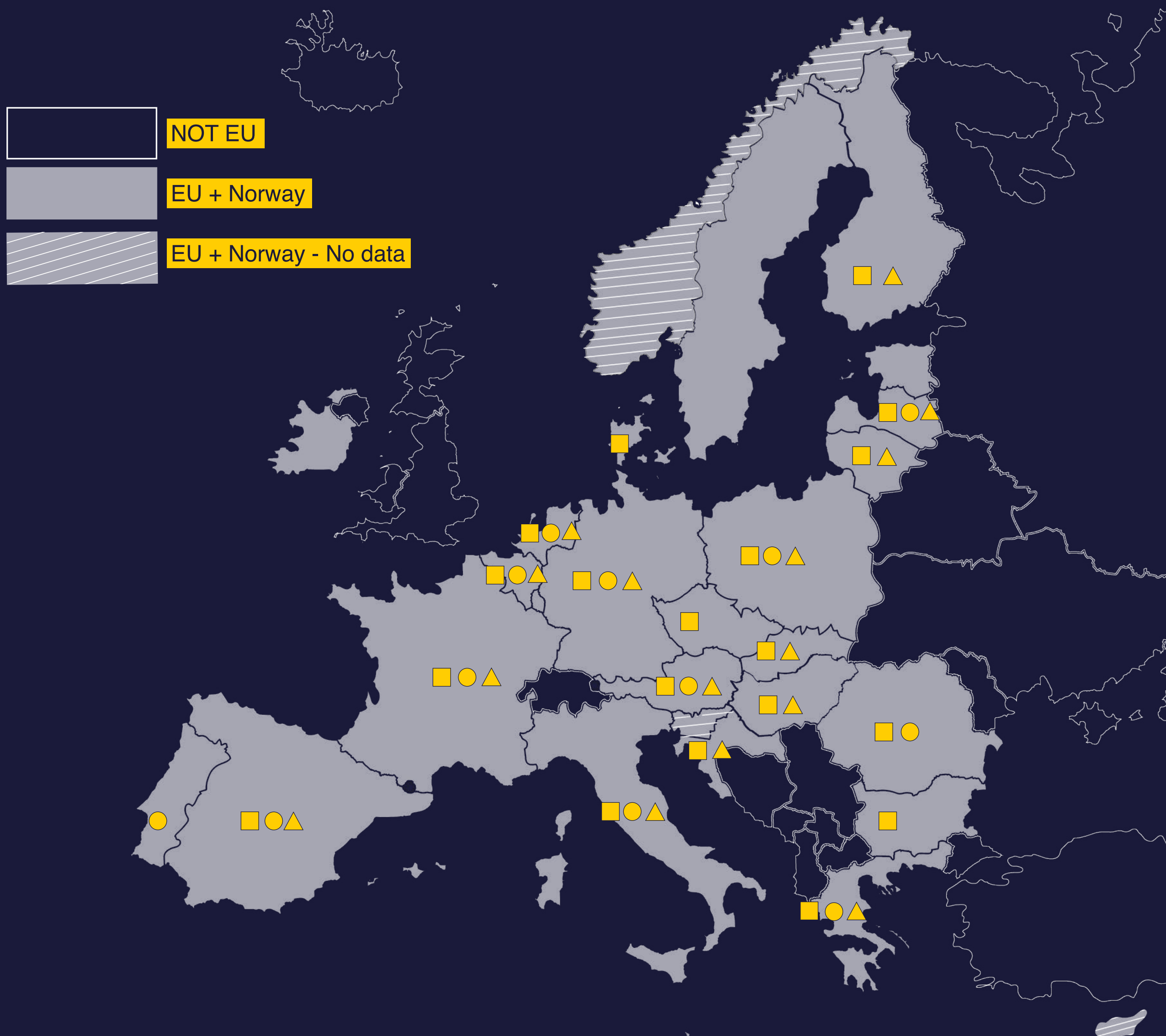
February was also characterized by a big amount of disinformation targeting migrants. In Ireland, for example, this was the main disinformation issue (ex. 1, ex. 2), but it was detected as viral by different fact-checking organizations also in Germany (ex. 1, ex. 2, ex. 3) and in other countries (e.g. Hungary).

One of the most common techniques - detected in the past in other countries, like Italy or Spain - is to attribute crimes committed by different persons, in different time and/or context, to migrants.



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

- The February earthquake in Turkey was caused by HAARP (*High frequency active auroral research program*) technology.
- Old images and/or videos of a tsunami captioned as pertinent to the February earthquake in Turkey.
- ▲ The EU wants to force its citizens to eat insects.





## THE MOST SIGNIFICANT VERIFIED DISINFORMATION STORIES AT THE NATIONAL LEVEL:



Hungary lost 9.6 billion euros last year due to sanctions against Russia.



Ukrainian president Volodymyr Zelensky, during his tribute to the victims of the earthquake in Turkey, demanded the continuity of the Turkish aid to Ukraine.



The Czech Republic delivered medicinal drugs to Ukraine even though there is a shortage in the country.



Estonian prime minister Kaja Kallas said that Estonia gave Ukraine fighter jets that Estonia doesn't actually have.





## 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 2023. Number of respondents: 28.  
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