



European Digital Media Observatory

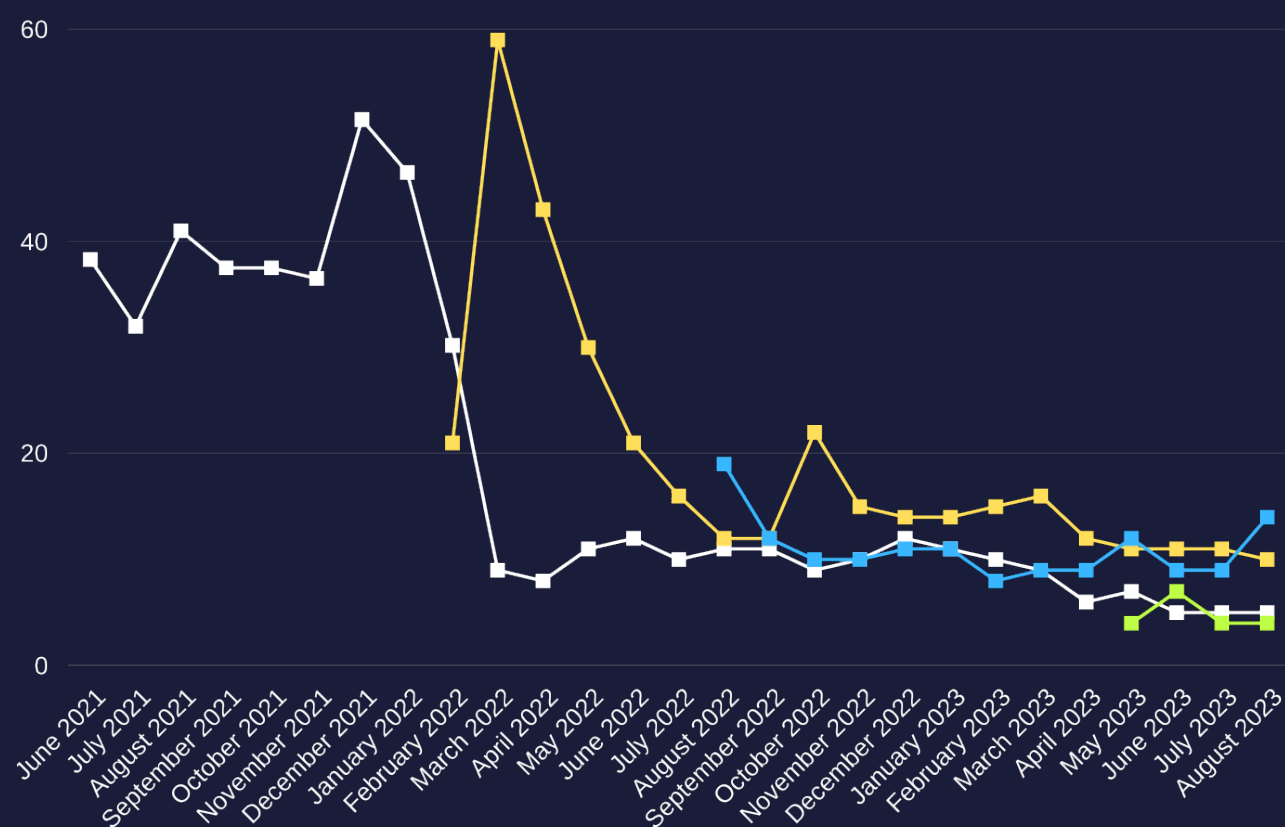
CONSPIRACY THEORIES ABOUT WILDFIRES BOOST CLIMATE CHANGE DISINFORMATION IN AUGUST

Monthly brief no. 27 – EDMO fact-checking network

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CLIMATE-RELATED DISINFORMATION SURGES IN AUGUST, WHILE THE OTHER MAIN DISINFORMATION TOPICS REMAIN STABLE

The 31 organizations* part of the EDMO fact-checking network that contributed to this brief published a total of 1.509 fact-checking articles in August 2023.



Out of these articles, 145 (10%) focused on Ukraine-related disinformation; 70 (5%) on COVID-19-related disinformation; 212 (14%) on climate change-related disinformation; and 64 (4%) on disinformation related to the EU.

The percentage of disinformation about climate change increased significantly (+5%) compared to the previous month, reaching its highest level this year. The other percentages are the same or similar to those recorded in July.

<p>% of COVID-19-related disinformation on total detected disinformation</p>	<p>% of Ukraine-related disinformation on total detected disinformation</p>	<p>% of climate change-related disinformation on total detected disinformation</p>	<p>% of EU-related disinformation on total detected disinformation</p>
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* Organizations that contributed to this brief: 15min, AFP, Correctiv, Delfi, Demagog.cz, Demagog.pl, Demagog.sk, DPA, DW, Eesti Päevaleht, EFE Verifica, Ellinika Hoaxes, Eurocomunicare, Faktisk, FranceTV, Funky, Greece Fact Checking, Källkritikbyrå, Knack, Lakmusz, Maldita, Newtral, PagellaPolitica/Facta, Re:Baltica, Polígrafo, The Journal Fact-Check, Times of Malta, TjekDet, Verificat, VerificaRTVE, VRTNWS

MAIN NARRATIVES ABOUT CLIMATE CHANGE

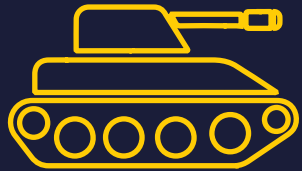
New conspiracy theories about climate change have led to a significant rise of disinformation on this topic. The new conspiracy theories mainly concern the various wildfires that occurred in different parts of the world in August.

In particular, one of the most common false stories is that the fire in Maui, Hawaii, was caused by Directed Energy Weapons, a kind of destructive laser beam. This conspiracy theory is often linked to other false claims. For example, that the fires are supposedly part of a strategy to impose the “15 minutes” urban concept, or that they were predicted in some cartoons. Forest fires in Greece were described as being set to make way for wind farms, and disinformation about fires in the north-east of the country led to incidents of violence against migrants (see slide 5).

At the same time, long-running false narratives, e.g. that climate change is not real or not caused by human activity, as well as that electric vehicles are dangerous or useless, are still widespread in several European countries. EU institutions are also falsely accused of planning severe restrictions in the name of the climate crisis.



MAIN NARRATIVES ABOUT WAR IN UKRAINE



Regarding the war in Ukraine, one of the main topics of disinformation in August was the supposed death of Yevgeny Prigozhin, the head of the Wagner mercenary company. Several fake videos were circulated purporting to show the crash of the plane in which he was supposedly travelling. Another false story claimed that the BBC had reported that Prigozhin was alive after the incident. In general, unfounded stories and theories about his death circulated in several countries, including Belgium, Denmark, Germany, Italy and Spain.



In Slovakia, where elections will be held on 30 September, disinformation about the war in Ukraine appears to be very relevant. For example, a Slovakian politician spread the false information that only a minimal amount of Ukrainian grain goes to poor countries, while another shared a post falsely attributing the murder of some children to “Bandera soldiers”, in line with recurring Russian propaganda narratives.



There are no other notable developments in the disinformation narratives about the war outlined in previous months. Many of the false stories concern Ukrainian refugees, who are accused of mistreating European citizens or damaging the economies of their host countries. Unsubstantiated information has also claimed that Wagner soldiers are hiding among them in order to enter Poland.

WILDFIRE IN NORTH-EASTERN GREECE FUEL DISINFORMATION AGAINST IMMIGRANTS

The forest fire that broke out on 19 August in the Evros region (north-eastern Greece) has been declared the largest ever recorded in Europe, with tragic consequences. Although local authorities say the Evros fire was probably caused by lightning, a number of false stories were spread on social media, often accompanied by racist messages, accusing migrants of deliberately starting the fires.

A few days later, a Greek TV station wrongly announced the arrest of two migrants for setting the fire. Although the authorities denied any arrest and the TV station itself corrected the mistake the following day, the statement was echoed by several online media and by many citizens on social networks. This has exacerbated the xenophobic sentiments, which are already very strong in border areas such as Evros. In recent weeks, these violent messages have even led to attacks and physical violence against migrants.



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



- Maui wildfires, in the Hawaii, were caused by Directed Energy Weapons
- The daughter of the WEF president Klaus Schwab said that climate lockdowns are coming
- ▲ Ukrainian refugees beating Polish citizens because they refuse to say “Slava Ukraini”
- ◆ A German weather forecast aired an image of a map with temperatures and burning flames

THE MOST SIGNIFICANT VERIFIED DISINFORMATION STORIES AT THE NATIONAL LEVEL:



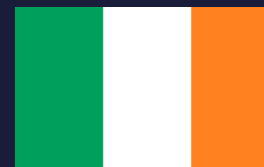
Lithuania and Poland are ready for independent military intervention in Ukraine



A campaign asking people not to have children in order to save the planet, linked to an élite plan to replace Europeans with people from other continents



A laboratory growing human meat for consumption



A violent immigrant riot in Cyprus



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 August 2023. Number of respondents: 31.
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