



European Digital Media Observatory

DISINFORMATION ABOUT ATTACKS TO CHRISTMAS BY THE EU, OR OTHER ACTORS, GOES VIRAL IN DECEMBER

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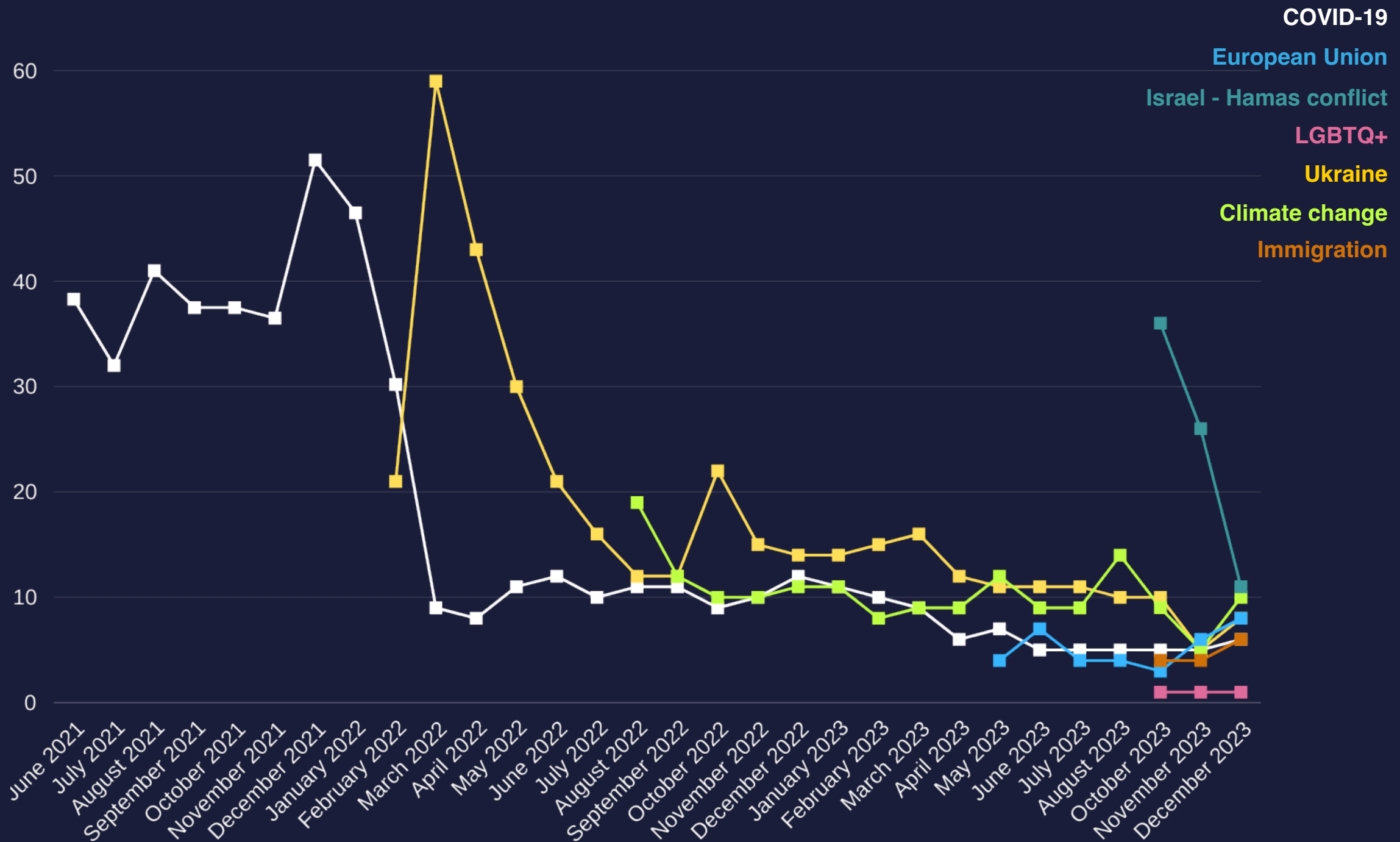
DISINFORMATION ABOUT THE ISRAEL HAMAS WAR SIGNIFICANTLY DECREASES, WHILE DISINFORMATION ABOUT THE EU, CLIMATE CHANGE, UKRAINE AND MIGRANTS GROWS

The 34 organizations* part of the EDMO fact-checking network that contributed to this brief published a total of 1.416 fact-checking articles in December 2023. Out of these articles, 158 (11%) focused on the conflict between Israel and Hamas; 139 (10%) on climate change-related disinformation; 116 (8%) on Ukraine-related disinformation; 108 (8%) on disinformation related to the EU; 89 (6%) on COVID-19-related disinformation; 81 (6%) on disinformation related to immigration; and 20 (1%) on disinformation about LGBTQ+ and gender issues.

The percentage of disinformation about the crisis in the Middle East significantly drops for the second month in a row. It passed from 36% in October to 24% in November, and to 11% in December, most likely as a consequence of the “normalization” of the crisis-situation in the news cycle and in the public perception.

Disinformation about climate change doubled in the past month, from 5% in November to 10% in December. The same happened for EU-related disinformation, but in 2 months, going from 4% in October to 8% in December. The percentages of disinformation about the war in Ukraine and migrants increased by a few points and the other main disinformation topics monitored remained mostly stable.

% of related disinformation on total detected disinformation, by topic



* 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, Faktisk, Faktabaari, Faktisk, FranceTV, Funky, Greece Fact Checking, Källkritikbyrå, Lakmusz, Maldita, Medizin transparent, Oštro, PagellaPolitica/Facta, Polígrafo, Pravda, Re:Baltica, The Journal Fact-Check, Times of Malta, TjekDet, Verificat

DISINFORMATION SPREAD THE FALSE ALARM THAT “CHRISTMAS” AND RELATED TRADITIONS ARE UNDER ATTACK IN EUROPE

In December the fact-checking organizations of the EDMO network detected many false stories about alleged attacks against Christmas.

One of the most viral false stories in the EU (see slide n. 8) is the one about the European Commission prohibiting the use of the term “Christmas”. This story circulated also in previous years, but gained traction again during the recent holiday season.

Other local stories conveyed a similar narrative:

- In France, an AI-generated deepfake video portraying president Emmanuel Macron announcing that Christmas will no longer be a public holiday;
- In Hungary a false story about an alleged decision by the municipality of Berlin was detected, banning Christmas carols at Christmas markets in the city – according to various users, the decision was supposedly taken to avoid hurting the sensitivity of non-christian migrants;
- In Ireland, Dublin City Council was falsely accused to have renamed the city initiative ‘Winter Lights’ to avoid mentioning Christmas, again – according to many public posts online – to avoid offending non-christians.



DISINFORMATION ABOUT ELECTRIC VEHICLES AND CLIMATE CHANGE

The cold season brought a new wave of false content about alleged poor performances by electric vehicles.

Those vehicles have been generally, and wrongly, accused of producing more emissions or of being more flammable than the ones with internal combustion engines. Now the main disinformation narrative conveys the accusation of performing poorly in a cold environment.

One of the most viral false content detected in December in Europe (see slide n.8) is in fact an image of cars blocked in the snow. According to the captions, these are electric cars in Germany whose batteries stopped functioning because of the cold and thus created a traffic jam. But it is false.

More in general, news about cold weather in different parts of Europe has been used by deniers to push the narrative that climate change is a hoax, and traditional media are spreading baseless panic about it.



VIRAL SCAM ON SOCIAL MEDIA EXPLOITS PUBLIC FIGURES WITH DEEPPFAKE TECHNOLOGY

In many EU countries a specific kind of scam which was already detected in the previous months went viral in December on different social media platforms: the image of celebrities was used without their consent to promote fraudulent financial products, often using deepfake technologies and AI to create false videos.

The list of public figures exploited by the scam goes from politicians (including current or former prime ministers, like Giorgia Meloni and Andrej Babiš) to singers, journalists and actors.

In different countries scams about false Christmas promotions also went viral in December.

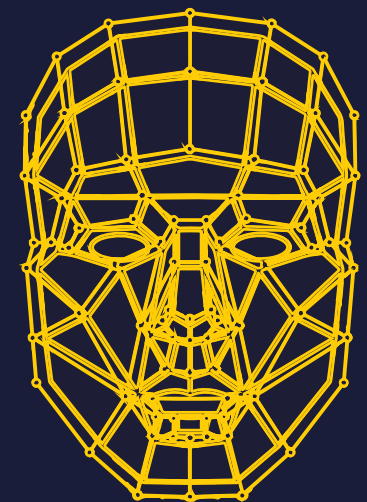


AI GENERATED DISINFORMATION

Aside from the already mentioned AI-generated disinformation content about Macron announcing that Christmas will no longer be a public holiday, and about viral scams on social media platforms, other significant cases of AI-generated disinformation have been detected in December. Those include:

- in Ireland, an AI-generated image of a white homeless mother with children was used to stir animosity against migrants in the context of the housing crisis in the country;
- In the Czech Republic, an AI-generated recording (deepfake) of Volodymyr Zelenskyy and his wife circulated in which the Ukrainian president complains about Western politicians (including Joe Biden) and rejects anti-corruption policies.
- in many EU countries (see slide n.8) AI-generated images of weapons under the Shifa Hospital in Gaza circulated

As for the amount of detected AI-generated disinformation, the percentage is still low (48 articles out of 1.407 total, 3%) and similar to the one recorded in November (4%).



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



- A picture allegedly of electric cars in Germany blocked by the cold
- The EU Commission prohibited the use of the term "Christmas"
- ▲ AI-generated images of weapons under the Shifa Hospital in Gaza
- ◆ A clip of a plane in wintry weather captioned with claims that the aircraft was bound for the Dubai conference on climate change but froze on the runway

THE MOST SIGNIFICANT VERIFIED DISINFORMATION STORIES AT THE NATIONAL LEVEL:



Documents prove that Alexander Soros brokered a deal between Western companies and Kiev authorities to dispose toxic waste in Ukraine



16 European countries have issued a statement against a Spanish law that will amnesty Catalan independentists who were convicted after the secession attempt in 2017, and asked that European funds be taken away from Spain if it is approved



The Jewish celebration of Hanukkah is a Satanic holiday



US and France requested Greece to accommodate over 100,000 displaced Palestinian refugees from Gaza



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 December 2023. Number of respondents: 34.
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