



European Digital Media Observatory

# **AS THE FARMERS' PROTESTS GAIN TRACTION IN THE PUBLIC DEBATE IN JANUARY, SO DOES THE DISINFORMATION ABOUT THEM**

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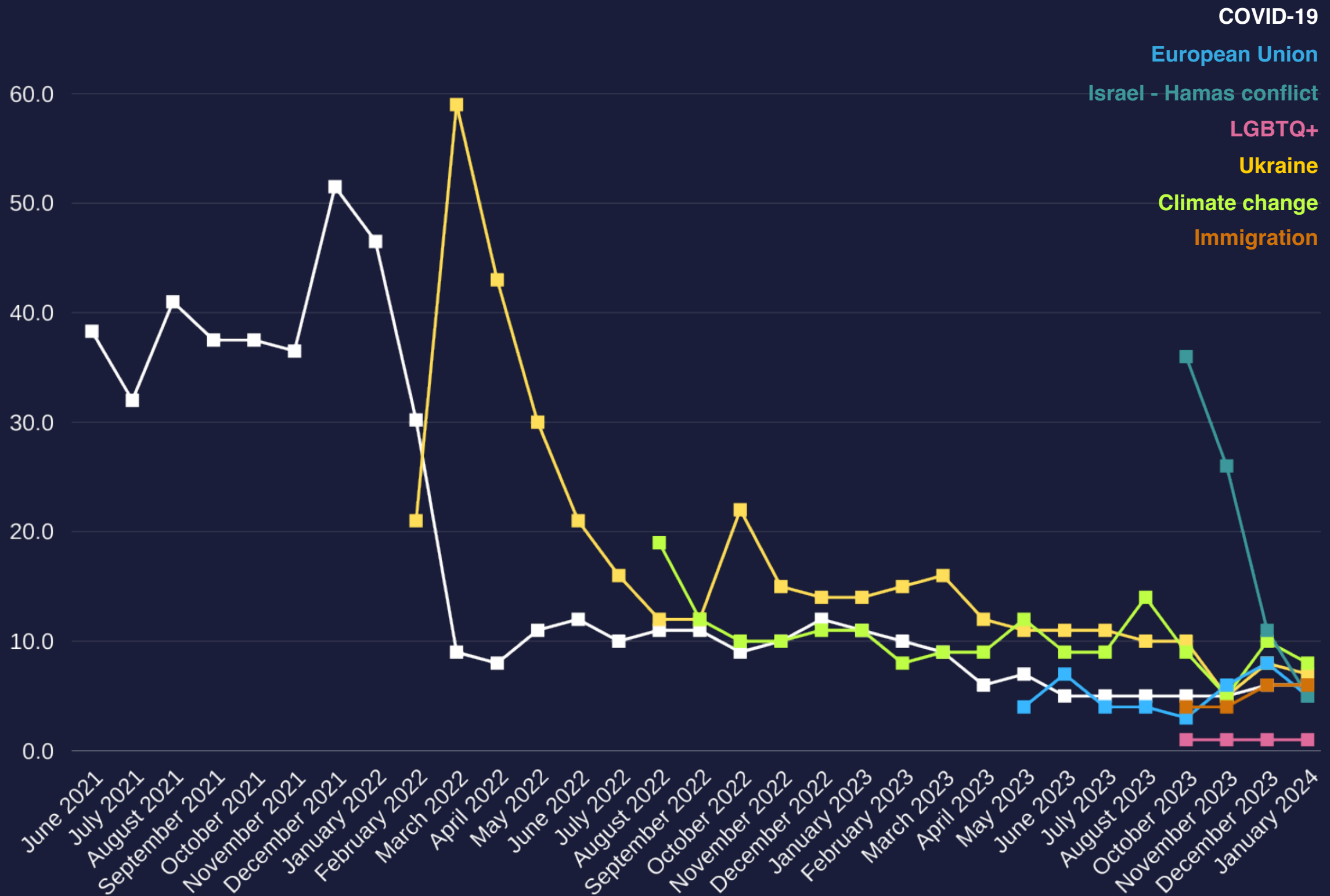
## **DISINFORMATION ABOUT THE ISRAEL-HAMAS WAR HITS A NEW MINIMUM, WHILE OTHER MONITORED DISINFORMATION NARRATIVES REMAIN STABLE OR DECREASE SLIGHTLY**

The 34 organizations\* part of the EDMO fact-checking network that contributed to this brief published a total of 1.490 fact-checking articles in January 2024. Out of these articles, 68 (5%) focused on the conflict between Israel and Hamas; 118 (8%) on climate change-related disinformation; 98 (7%) on Ukraine-related disinformation; 81 (5%) on disinformation related to the EU; 91 (6%) on COVID-19-related disinformation; 88 (6%) on disinformation related to immigration; and 11 (1%) on disinformation about LGBTQ+ and gender issues.

Disinformation about the war in the Middle East more than halved compared to December, reaching a new low after months of progressively decreasing attention. Climate-related disinformation decreased by two percentage points in January, and disinformation about the European Union dropped by 3%. The remaining constantly monitored topics stayed by and large stable.

*\* Organizations that contributed to this brief: AFP, Correctiv, Check4facts, Delfi, Demagog.cz, Demagog.pl, DPA, DW, Eesti Päevaleht, EFE Verifica, Ellinika Hoaxes, Eurocomunicare, Fact Check Cyprus, Factcheck Vlaanderen, FactReview, Faktabaari, Faktisk, Funky, Greece Fact Check, Källkritikbyrå, Knack, Lakmusz, Maldita, Medizin transparent, Newtral, Oštro, PagellaPolitica/Facta, Polígrafo, Pravda, Re:Baltica, The Journal Fact-Check, TjekDet, Verifica RTVE, Verificat*

**% of related disinformation on total detected disinformation, by topic**



## DISINFORMATION EXAGGERATES FARMERS' PROTESTS AND DIMINISHES ANTI FAR RIGHT DEMONSTRATIONS



Farmers in several EU countries began a new wave of protests in January, following smaller demonstrations in previous months, and the disinformation about those protests surged.

Several false stories soon exaggerated the scale of the demonstrations, using old and unrelated photos and videos and linking them to the tractor mobilizations in France and Germany, the two countries where the new round of rallies started. This technique was also used to spread unfounded information about German army tanks going to help farmers or tractors vandalizing a government building in Germany, along with false claims of escalating support from other countries or alleged attempts to stop them – and even with violent means, e.g. police holding a farmer at gunpoint –.



In Germany, after *Correctiv* – an organization part of the Edmo fact-checking network – revealed a secret meeting of the far-right party AfD with neo-Nazis (discussing a mass deportation plan for migrants and “non-assimilated” German citizens), people started demonstrating against right-wing extremism. Footage from these mass demonstrations was used to claim it showed the tractors protests. At the same time, real footage of anti-Afd rallies was questioned with false claims that it was manipulated to make the number of participants appear higher or that people were paid to participate, falsely portraying the demonstration as much smaller.

In general, the farmers' protests were also used to spread anti-EU narratives and conspiracies or Russian propaganda messages. For example, farmers in Germany were allegedly protesting because the government sends “all the money to Ukraine” or spends too many resources to support the invaded nation or even immigration, while a false story circulated in several EU countries (see slide 9 ) claimed that the Russian Embassy in Berlin had turned on a siren to show solidarity with the tractors rallies. In Hungary, protests were exploited by a far-right opinion leader who claimed that the farmers were protesting in the Netherlands because the Dutch government is “planning new housing estates on farmland taken from farmers to address the severe housing crisis resulting from its headless immigration policy”.

## DISINFORMATION ABOUT CLIMATE CHANGE AND THE EUROPEAN UNION



As reported in the previous brief and a recent EDMO investigation, climate disinformation has recently exploited the low temperatures. In particular, it has been claimed that electric vehicles (EVs) are ineffective at low temperatures and that cold weather would prove that climate change doesn't exist or doesn't relate to human activities. These narratives have been present and further exaggerated in January.

- About the usual denialism – still widespread in various countries – false stories in January claimed that Dubai had experienced heavy snowfall and that cold weather conditions in Norway were so extreme that living animals instantly froze while walking.
- About EVs, false stories focused on suggesting the existence of allegedly infinite sources of energy to power cars (such as perpetual motion using magnets or hydrogen) but supposed “elites” prevent their use. Other false stories claimed that, despite the popular perception, electric cars are not that common in “civilized world” and that the US lacks them or that they are more polluting than gas cars.

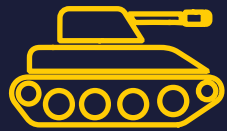


In this context, several unfounded news stories claimed that the EU's end-of-life vehicle directive would ban car repairs and force citizens to buy new cars when they break down or abandon entire industries in the name of climate change.



In Spain, as the eastern part of the country is experiencing a serious drought, old conspiracy theories resurface, suggesting an alleged political will to empty the dams.

## OTHER RELEVANT DISINFORMATION NARRATIVES



False stories about the war in Ukraine varied in January. The most widespread unfounded claim (see slide 9) was that Ukrainian President Zelensky had allegedly purchased a villa formerly owned by a prominent Nazi, in line with the narrative portraying Ukrainians – and those who support them – as Nazis. Zelensky was also accused of trying to annex Russian territory, murdering journalists, and selling Ukrainian land to Western countries, while other baseless stories presented signals of an escalation of the conflict, with alleged mobilization of Ukrainian citizens in the EU, involvement of officials of NATO countries in the fighting in Ukraine, or a direct clash between Russia and the United States.



The main false content circulating about the conflict between Israel and Hamas was about alleged tunnels under the New York synagogue for the trafficking and abuse of children and images purporting to show an American ship hit by a Houthi missile, pushing antisemitism and fearmongering that the conflict could escalate.



Aside from the well-known false narratives depicting migrants as antisemitic, violent, “incompatible” with Western values, and better treated by authorities than European citizens, false claims about immigration depicted alleged measures taken by European countries. While some politicians overestimated the number of migrants in their countries, other false stories claimed that Germany is deporting migrant people in Spain, France is prohibiting the construction of new mosques, and Denmark is forcing kids to learn Muslim prayers.

## CONSPIRACY THEORIES EXPLOITING SPECIFIC EVENTS

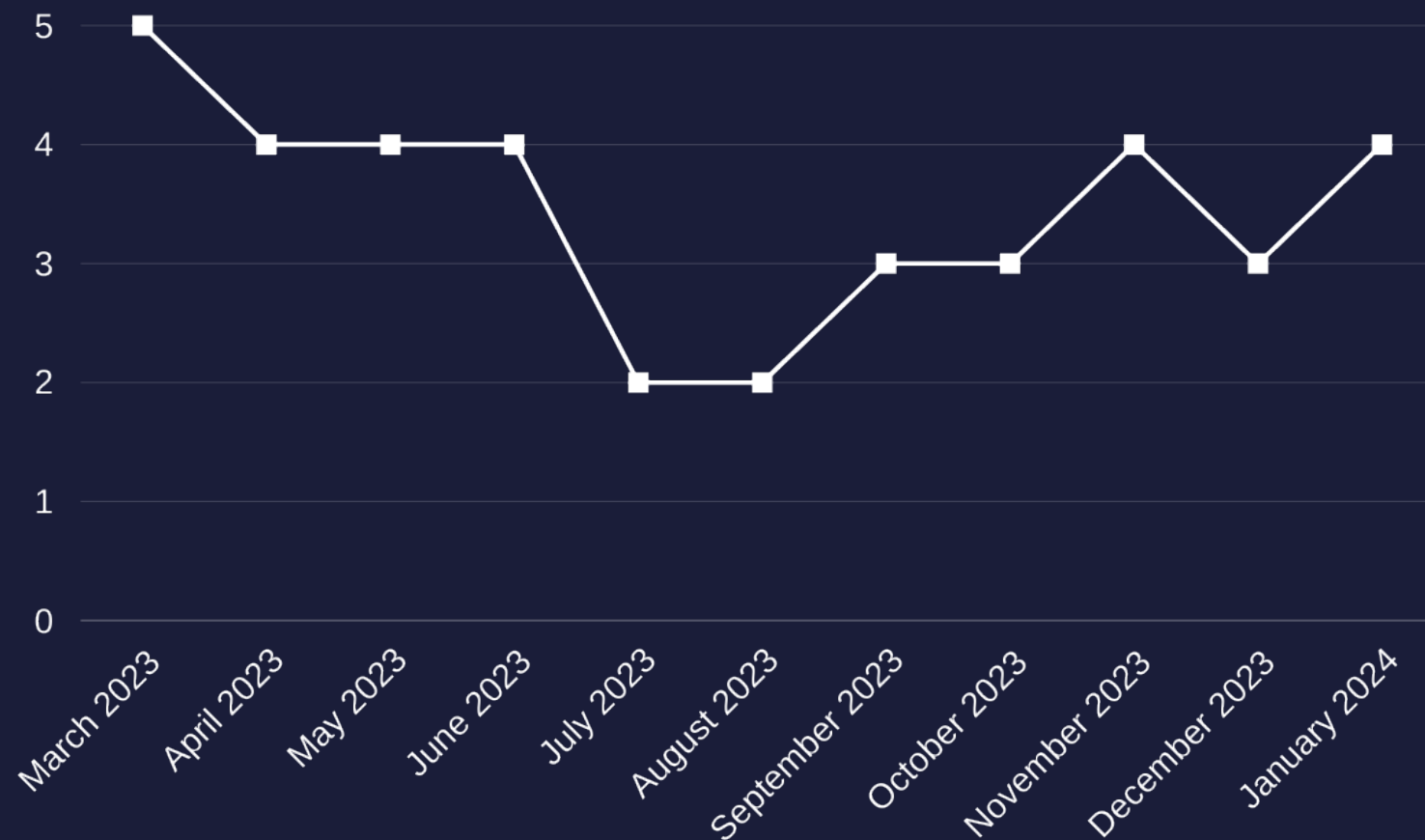


Since the World Economic Forum held its annual meeting in Davos in January, a satirical video by a comedian was presented as real footage of him berating the WEF president on stage. And familiar conspiracy theories have been circulating, accusing the WEF of trying to abolish democracy or impose a new pandemic via an alleged “Disease X”.

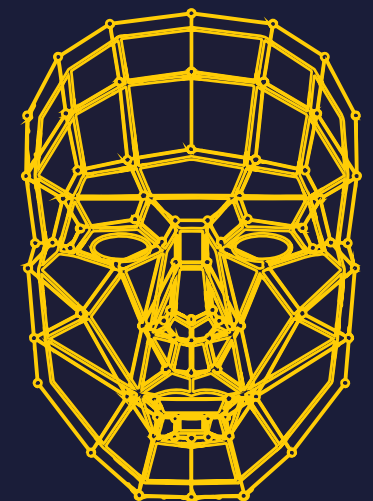
Current events have also been exploited on the occasion of the release of several documents related to the sexual trafficking and abuse case of financier Jeffrey Epstein. These documents have been used to falsely accuse of crimes people only mentioned (or not mentioned at all) in them or as a pretext to make up alleged lists of Epstein’s clients or other false stories about celebrities, portrayed as perverted or criminal.

## AI-GENERATED DISINFORMATION

The percentage of disinformation stories using AI-generated content is low and stable. Out of 1.490 fact-checking articles, 59 used this disinformation technique. This amounts to around 4% of the total, as in the previous months.



In January, false stories involving AI included alleged photos of protesting farmers, generated images of American politicians (e.g. Nikki Haley behind the bars and Donald Trump with Epstein), and altered videos showing the Eiffel Tower burning.







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

- All the electric buses in Norway, or the vast majority of them, blocked by the cold weather, causing also a traffic paralysis in Oslo
- Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky purchased a villa near Berlin that belonged to Nazi propaganda minister Joseph Goebbels
- ▲ Videos and images of humanitarian aid for Gaza being destroyed/dumped in the desert
- ◆ The Russian Embassy in Berlin turned on the siren to show solidarity with the farmers' protest

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



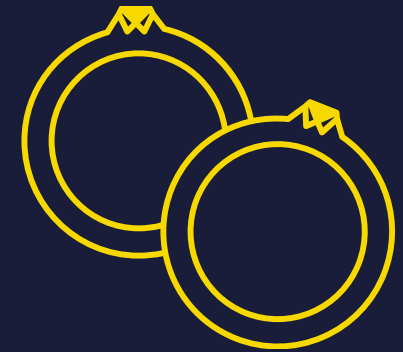
Antony Blinken said that if Mika Aaltola (one of the candidates in the presidential election) was not elected, the USA would reconsider Finland's NATO membership



An upcoming referendum proposes to remove women from the constitution



During recent floods, no one, not even EU countries, offered help to Germany



Women demonstrate in Finland against men who marry only one wife



## 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 January 2024. Number of respondents: 34.  
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