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EU-RELATED DISINFORMATION KEEPS GROWING BEFORE THE EU PARLIAMENT ELECTIONS

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DISINFORMATION ABOUT THE EU CONTINUES TO GROW THE MONTH BEFORE THE EU VOTE, WHILE FALSE STORIES ABOUT CLIMATE CHANGE DECREASE

The 34 organizations* part of the EDMO fact-checking network that contributed to this brief published a total of 1.643 fact-checking articles in May 2024. Out of these articles, 121 (8%) focused on Ukraine-related disinformation; 104 (6%) on climate change-related disinformation; 250 (15%) on disinformation related to the EU; 152 (9%) on the conflict between Israel and Hamas; 104 (6%) on COVID-19-related disinformation; 97 (6%) on disinformation related to immigration; and 36 (2%) on disinformation about LGBTQ+ and gender issues.

EU-related disinformation reached its highest level, since EDMO's dedicated monitoring began, in May 2023. It amounted to 15% of the total detected disinformation the month before the EU elections, it was 11% in April. The share is the highest percentage among the topics constantly monitored by EDMO for the second month in a row. Climate change-related disinformation diminished significantly, almost halving. False stories about Ukraine slightly diminished in numbers, as did those about the conflict in the Middle East, while disinformation about other topics constantly monitored remained stable.

** Organizations that contributed to this brief: 15min, AFP, APA, BNT Provereno, Correctiv, Delfi, Demagog.cz, Demagog.pl, Demagog.sk, Eesti Päevaleht, EFE Verifica, Ellinika Hoaxes, Fact Check Cyprus, FactReview, Faktabaari, FranceTV, Freedom House Romania, Greece Fact Check, Källkritikbyrån, Knack, InfoVeritas, Les Surligneurs, Logically Facts, Maldita, Medizin transparent, Newtral, Oštro, PagellaPolitica/Facta, Polígrafo, Re:Baltica, The Journal Fact-Check, TjekDet, VerificaRTVE*

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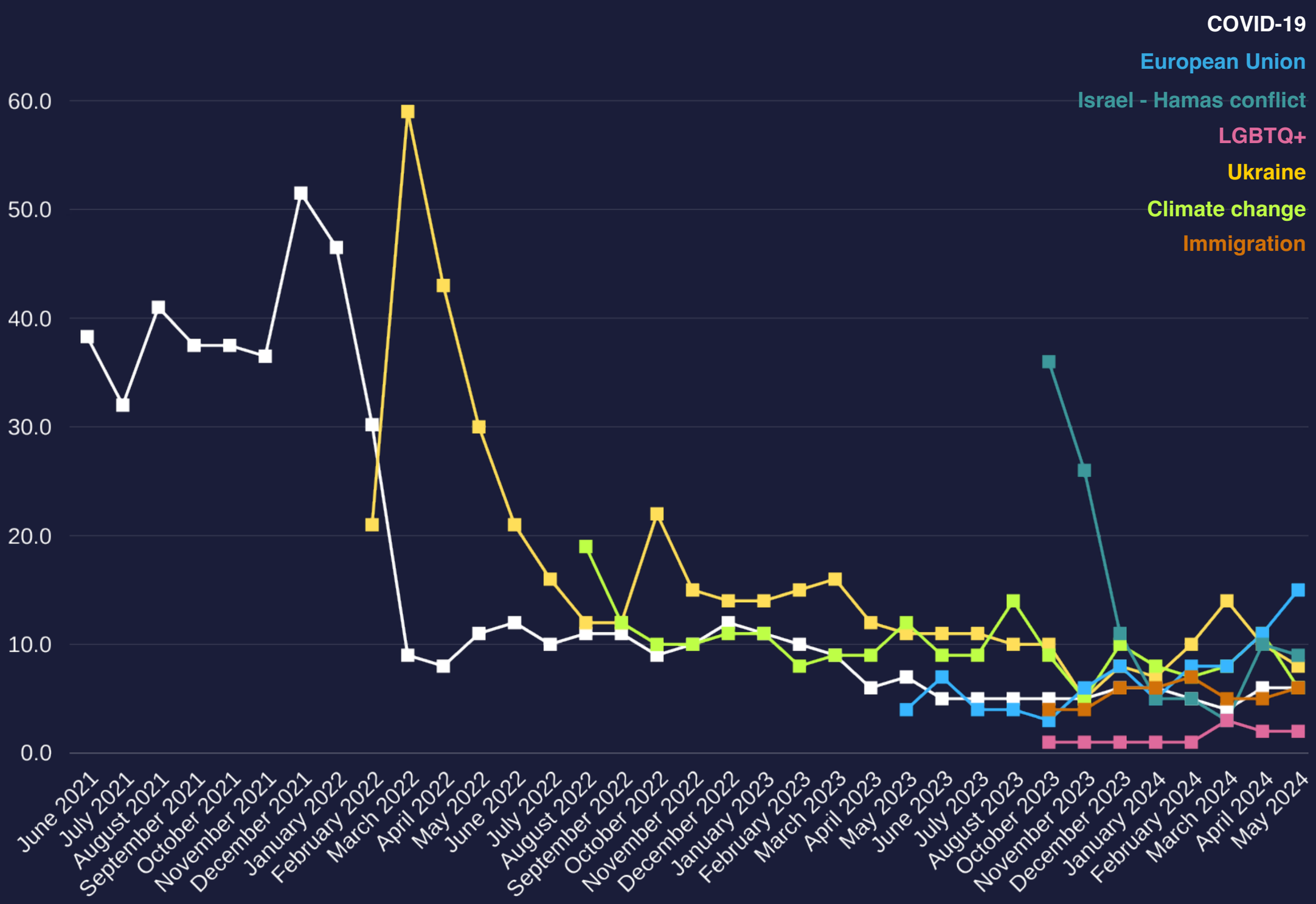
% of related disinformation on total detected disinformation, by topic



THE FALSE NARRATIVES PORTRAYING THE EU AS CORRUPT AND THE ELECTIONS AS RIGGED

In May, false stories targeting the EU were diverse but consistent in portraying it as corrupt or opposed to the different national interests.

Some false stories attacked EU leaders. For example, the President of the EU Commission, Ursula Von der Leyen, was targeted and described as being linked to Nazism, having a conflict of interest in managing the pandemic phase or even being arrested in the EU Parliament. In France, it was also claimed that she was "not elected by anyone", following a broader effort to depict EU institutions as anti-democratic.

During the month, false stories emerged in some countries suggesting manipulation and fraud ahead of the June vote. In Germany, in particular, it was claimed that ballots with holes or corners cut are invalid "since the beginning", that the voting for the far-right party AfD would follow stricter rules, or even that this party had been excluded from the EU elections. Other false claims circulating in the country – similar to others identified in Spain – seemed aimed at pushing citizens to invalidate their legitimate choices, suggesting multiple voting or signing the ballots, practices that would invalidate the votes.

DISINFORMATION NARRATIVES DESCRIBING THE EU AS OPPOSED TO THE VARIOUS NATIONAL INTERESTS

In general, EU legislation is claimed to be jeopardizing member countries and citizens by several false stories.

- A major strand within this false narrative concerned the recently approved Migration and Asylum Pact and the issue in general, exaggerating its consequences, for example disseminating false numbers about the migrants that member states will have to accept and/or about the money that they can pay as an alternative. This rhetoric has been sometimes exploited also by politicians in their election campaigns.

- In line with this narrative, false stories portraying EU membership as disadvantageous, claiming for example that the EU imposes unfair economic conditions and unreasonable bureaucracy on its member countries, have resurfaced. False claims allege that the introduction of the euro in Croatia led to a doubling of prices, that the European digital identity is imminent and will fully control citizens, and that the European Central Bank is planning to introduce the Digital Euro and ban cash for surveillance purposes. According to disinformation, national governments are ceding supremacy to EU legislation, exposing citizens to these authoritarian measures.

OTHER RELEVANT DISINFORMATION NARRATIVES

The alleged escalation of war was the main topic targeted by disinformation related to the conflict in Ukraine in May. Several false stories alleged the presence of EU member countries' soldiers– and particularly French ones – in Ukraine, suggesting the direct involvement of NATO troops in ground operations. These false claims were widespread in several countries (see slide 9).

False content also suggested an ongoing military mobilization or that the West started the war because it wanted to appropriate Russia's natural wealth. At the same time, stories proven false by fact-checking organizations within the EDMO network, in late May, exaggerated Russian threats to EU security, describing alleged severe military actions as imminent.

The assassination attempt on Slovak PM Robert Fico that happened on May 15th triggered a storm of false news. One of the most widespread false stories alleged that the shooter's wife is Ukrainian (see slide X), while other baseless claims linked him to the intelligence services of the invaded nation, trying to blame Kiev for the attack. Disinformation also alleged motives tied to the WHO pandemic treaty or to George Soros behind the shooting.

In Slovakia, the attack was promptly exploited to exacerbate the already heavily polarized public opinion. For example, fake images of the shooter portrayed as interacting with Martin Šimečka, journalist and father of the co-founder of Slovakia's main opposition party, or other content linking the attacker to the LGBTQ+ community. It was also falsely claimed that the main opposition party endorsed the violent act.

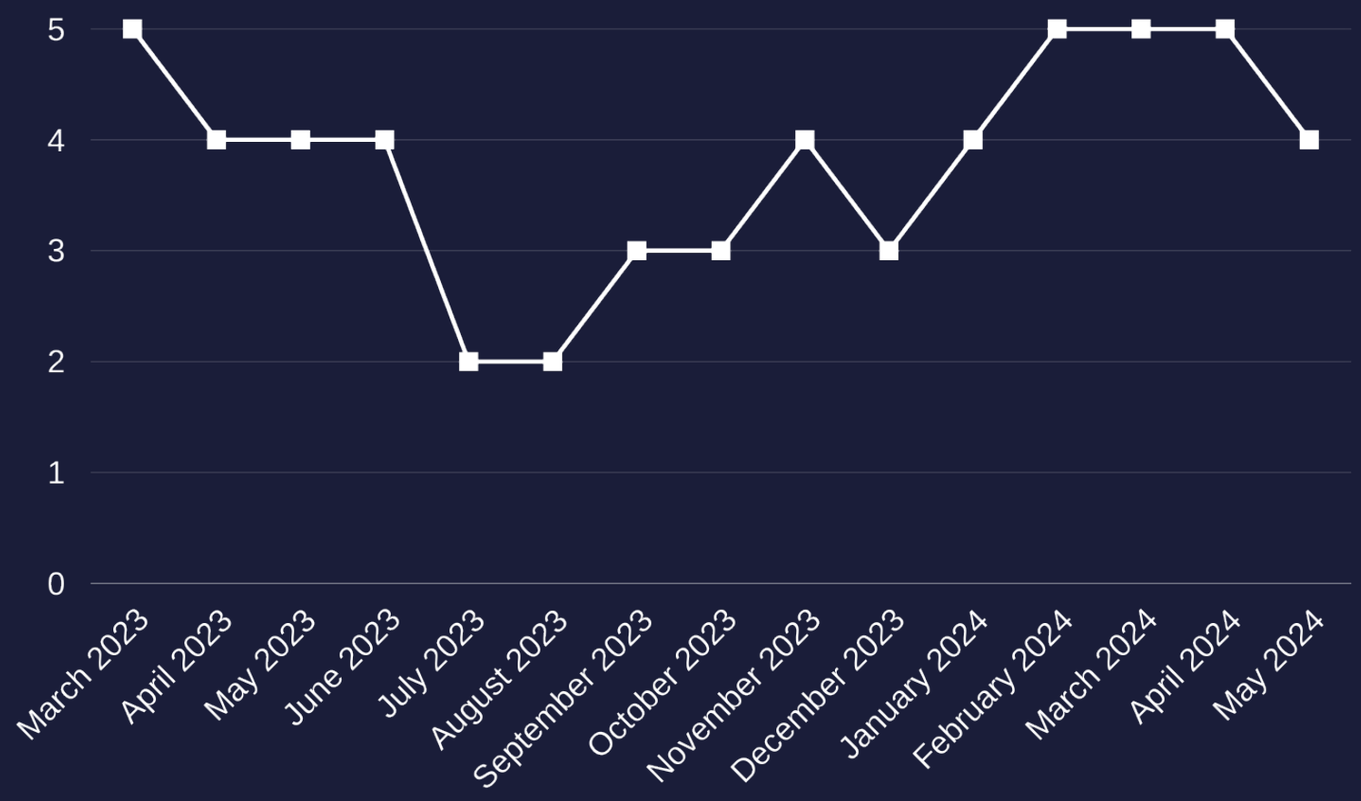
OTHER RELEVANT DISINFORMATION NARRATIVES

In the run-up to the EU elections, anti-immigration disinformation re-emerged in many EU countries, amplifying racist and xenophobic sentiment. As usual, false stories portray migrants as privileged, violent, criminal, and outnumbering EU citizens. This rhetoric is then recalled in conspiracy theories suggesting the willingness to replace citizens or even that migrants are U.N. soldiers who will be deployed to enforce the next pandemic lockdown.

Although few in numbers, false stories about LGBTQ+ issues were significant and mostly aimed at demonizing the LGBTQ+ community – for example claiming that sexually explicit books are being distributed to children with the intent to pervert them – and exaggerating its alleged impact on the political sphere.

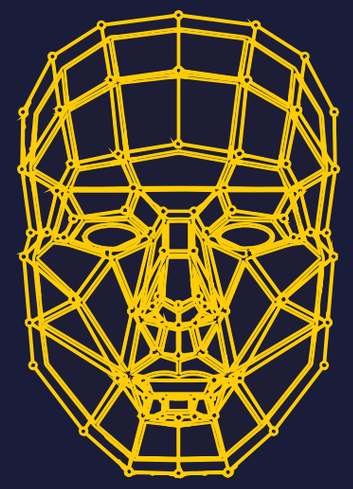
AI-GENERATED DISINFORMATION

The percentage of disinformation stories using AI-generated content slightly decreased in May. Out of 1.643 fact-checking articles, 59 used this disinformation technique. This corresponds to 4% of the total.



This situation is consistent with EDMO's predictions about AI-generated content not circulating massively ahead of the elections, because of the current limitations of the available technology.

Still, it is possible that particularly harmful and potentially impactful AI-generated content (eg. a deepfake audio) will circulate in the last days and hours before the vote, as it happened in Slovakia before the national elections in September 2023.



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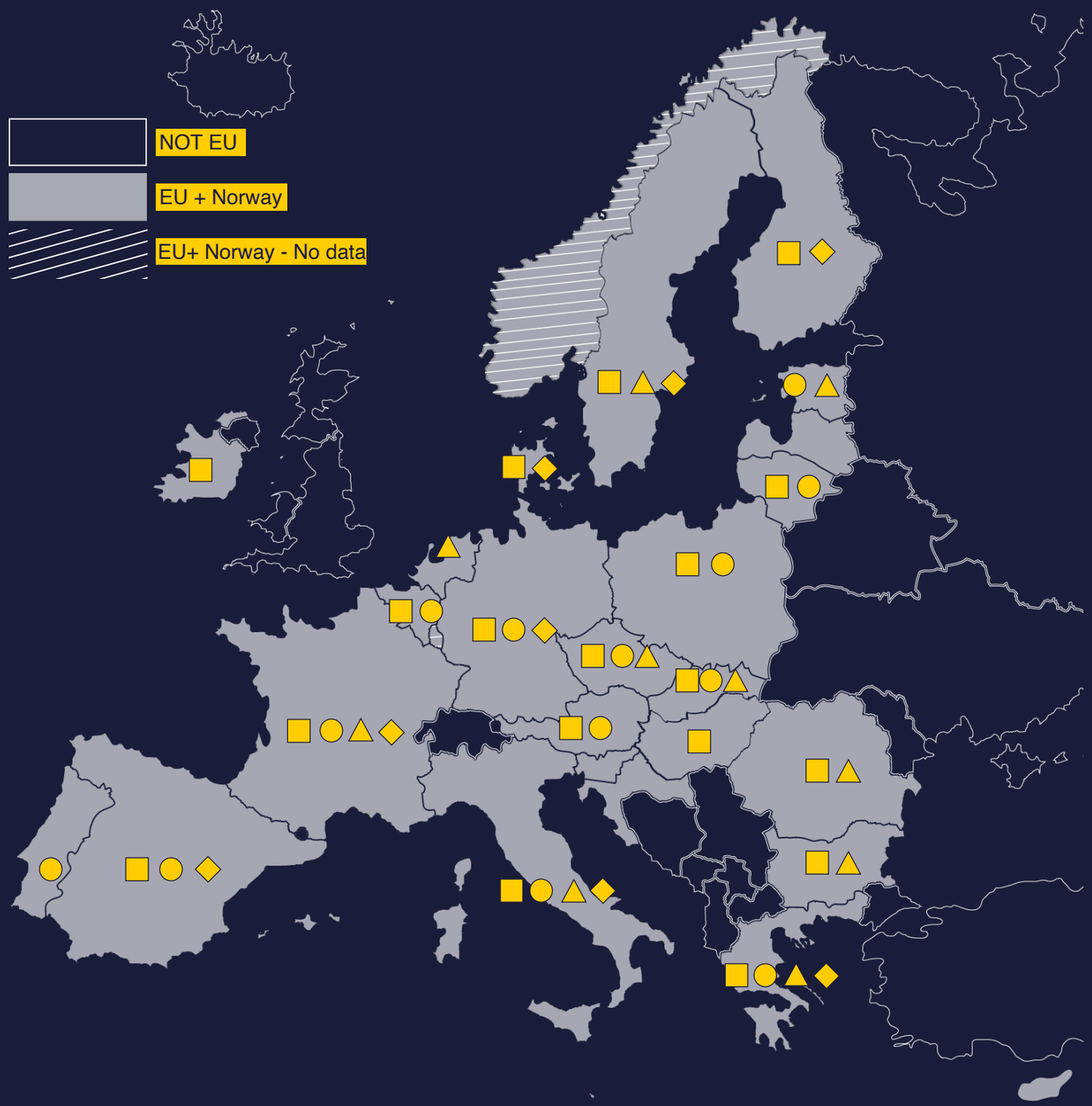
THE FOUR FALSE STORIES WITH THE WIDEST CIRCULATION IN THE EU IN MAY, BASED ON THE FACT-CHECKERS' REPORTS, WERE:



- The wife of the shooter who attacked Slovak Pm Fico is a Ukrainian refugee
- Images, videos and other content falsely exaggerating the escalation of the conflict in Ukraine with a direct involvement of the West/Nato in the conflict
- A White House spokesperson, Karine Jean-Pierre, talked about why the US supports Nazism in Ukraine
- The UN halved the estimate of Palestinian children and women killed in Gaza

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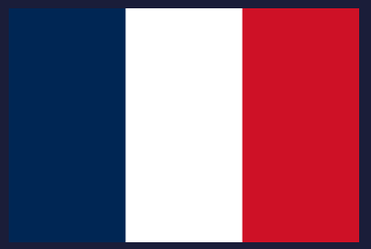
THE MOST SIGNIFICANT VERIFIED DISINFORMATION STORIES AT THE NATIONAL LEVEL:

Pro-European protesters in Georgia have adopted the “Nazi salute”

The number of non-EU citizens found to be illegally present in Ireland last year was the highest in Europe and ten times the EU average

Gender confirmation surgeries follow the child’s intentions expressed during play

The number of homicides in France has multiplied by four in 15 years



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 May 2024. Number of respondents: 34.

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