EDMO

European Digital Media Observatory

DISINFORMATION ABOUT POLITICS AND THE OLYMPICS TAKES THE STAGE IN JULY

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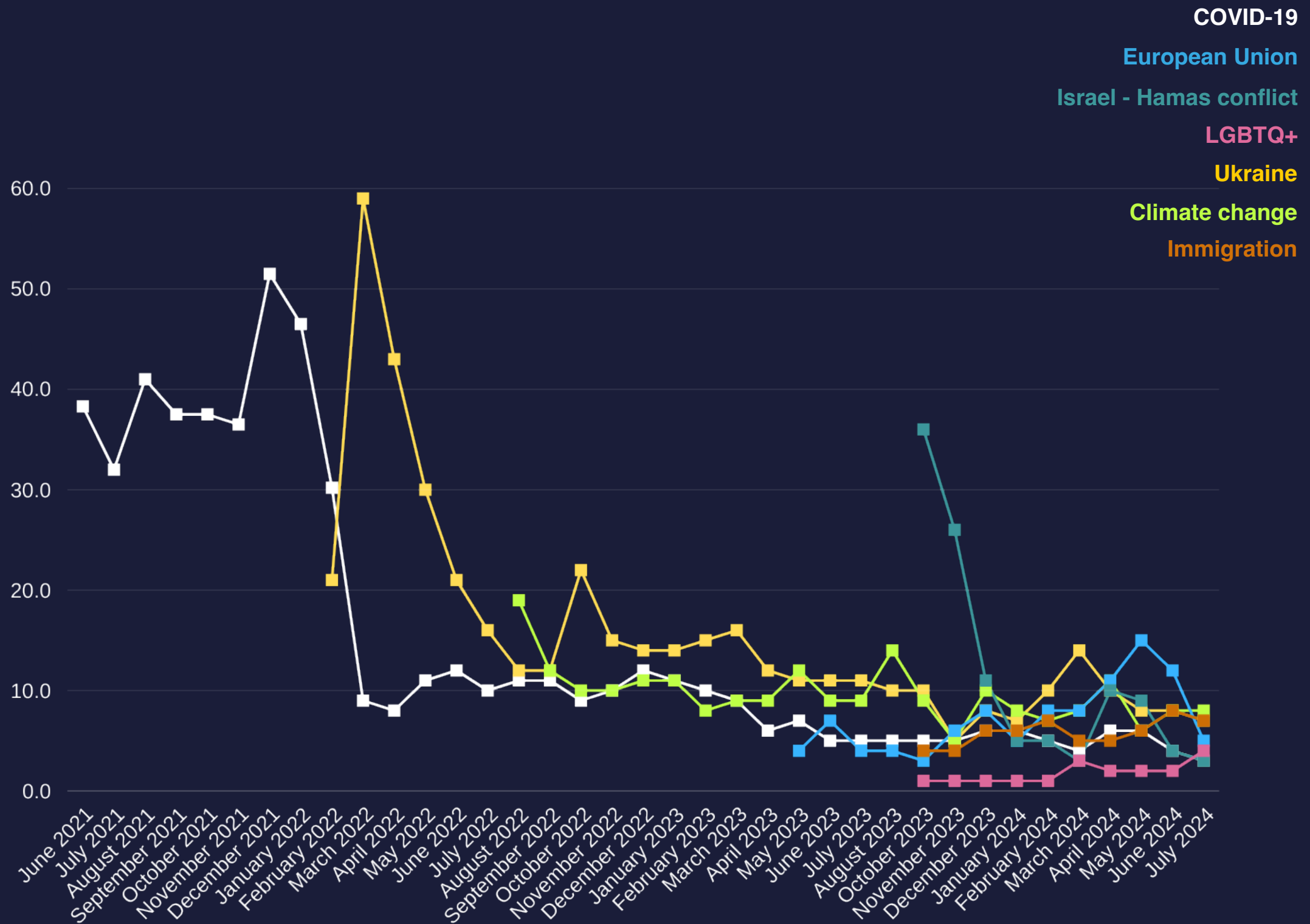# DISINFORMATION ABOUT THE EU DIMINISHES, CLIMATE CHANGE IS THE MOST TARGETED TOPIC BY FALSE STORIES

The 30 organizations* part of the EDMO fact-checking network that contributed to this brief published a total of 1.699 fact-checking articles in July 2024. Out of these articles, 117 (7%) focused on Ukraine-related disinformation; 134 (8%) on climate change-related disinformation; 92 (5%) on disinformation related to the EU; 46 (3%) on the conflict between Israel and Hamas; 55 (3%) on COVID-19-related disinformation; 122 (7%) on disinformation related to immigration; and 62 (4%) on disinformation about LGBTQ+ and gender issues.

After months of noteworthy intensity, disinformation about EU institutions and policies decreased significantly in July. The corresponding percentage more than halved, passing from 12% in June to 5% in July. As a result, the climate crisis emerges as the most targeted issue by disinformation, although the percentage of false stories remained the same as in June, showing no relevant qualitative development. Disinformation about LGBTQ+ issues doubled likely due to a wave of false stories about the Olympics, which was the focus of several false stories.

Percentages related to disinformation on COVID-19 and the conflict in the Middle East are the lowest recorded since their monitoring began. Disinformation about the other topics remained almost stable.

*Organizations that contributed to this brief: AFP, APA, Correctiv, Delfi, Demagog.cz, Demagog.pl, DPA, Eesti Päevaleht, EFE Verifica, Ellinika Hoaxes, Eurocomunicare, Factcheck Vlaanderen, FactReview, Faktisk, FranceTV, Funky, InfoVeritas, Lakmusz, Logically Facts, Maldita, Newtral, Oštro, PagellaPolitica/Facta, Polígrafo, Pravda, Re:Baltica, The Journal Fact-Check, TjekDet, VerificaRTVE, Verificat

% of related disinformation on total detected disinformation, by topic

COVID-19
European Union
Israel - Hamas conflict
LGBTQ+
Ukraine
Climate change
Immigration

DISINFORMATION ABOUT FRENCH AND UK ELECTIONS

The second round of the French legislative elections, which took place on July 7, was one of the main subjects of disinformation narratives in July. In particular, the surprising victory of the left-wing coalition triggered several false stories.

In addition to unsubstantiated allegations of vote rigging, false news stories – identified in various countries in the EU – sought to portray the defeat of the far-right coalition as "a victory for migrants". For example, false claims were made that huge crowds of Muslims had taken to the streets of Paris to celebrate the results, waving Palestinian flags instead of French ones, or holding signs saying "France belongs to the immigrants". Another false story claimed that Jean-Luc Mélenchon, one of the leaders of the winning left-wing coalition, had promised to make Arabic an official language of the country as a reward for the alleged "Arab vote" in the elections. This false news circulated in Germany, Spain, Greece, Portugal, and other EU countries.

The same false messages also affected the aftermath of the British elections. The new Prime Minister, Keir Starmer, was falsely described as willing to introduce Arabic as an official language, while a likely AI-generated image suggested that Muslims welcomed his election.

FALSE STORIES ABOUT US POLITICS TRACKED IN SEVERAL COUNTRIES

Disinformation focusing on relevant political discussions also included those outside Europe. In particular, a number of false stories about the US election campaign were tracked in several EU countries.

The attempted assassination of former president and current candidate Donald Trump has been the subject of various conspiracies and baseless theories. The most widespread false stories claimed that the attack was staged, or carried out by an Antifa activist or a person linked to the Democratic Party (see slide 8). Other unproven claims alleged that the shooter was a trans man, that the sniper protecting Trump was prevented from stopping the shooter, or even that the assassination attempt was planned by the Democrats or certain élites knew about it in advance. The attack was also used to suggest that the failure of the Secret Service, the federal agency protecting political leaders, is due to female agents, described as incapable of doing their job.

At the same time, the current president Joe Biden has been targeted by several conspiracy theories, while after he dropped out of the presidential race disinformation narratives focused on his vice president Kamala Harris, now the Democratic nominee. False stories claimed she was born a man or portrayed her as being linked to sexual predator Jeffrey Epstein. More in general, she became the target of misogynistic and racist narratives, often imported from the US.

OTHER RELEVANT DISINFORMATION NARRATIVES

As with <u>false stories on the European football championship in June</u>, disinformation on the Olympics spread in July. Exploiting the visibility of the event and its geopolitical importance, false stories described its organization as a failure – all the way since the <u>opening</u> <u>ceremony</u> and <u>even</u> <u>before</u>.
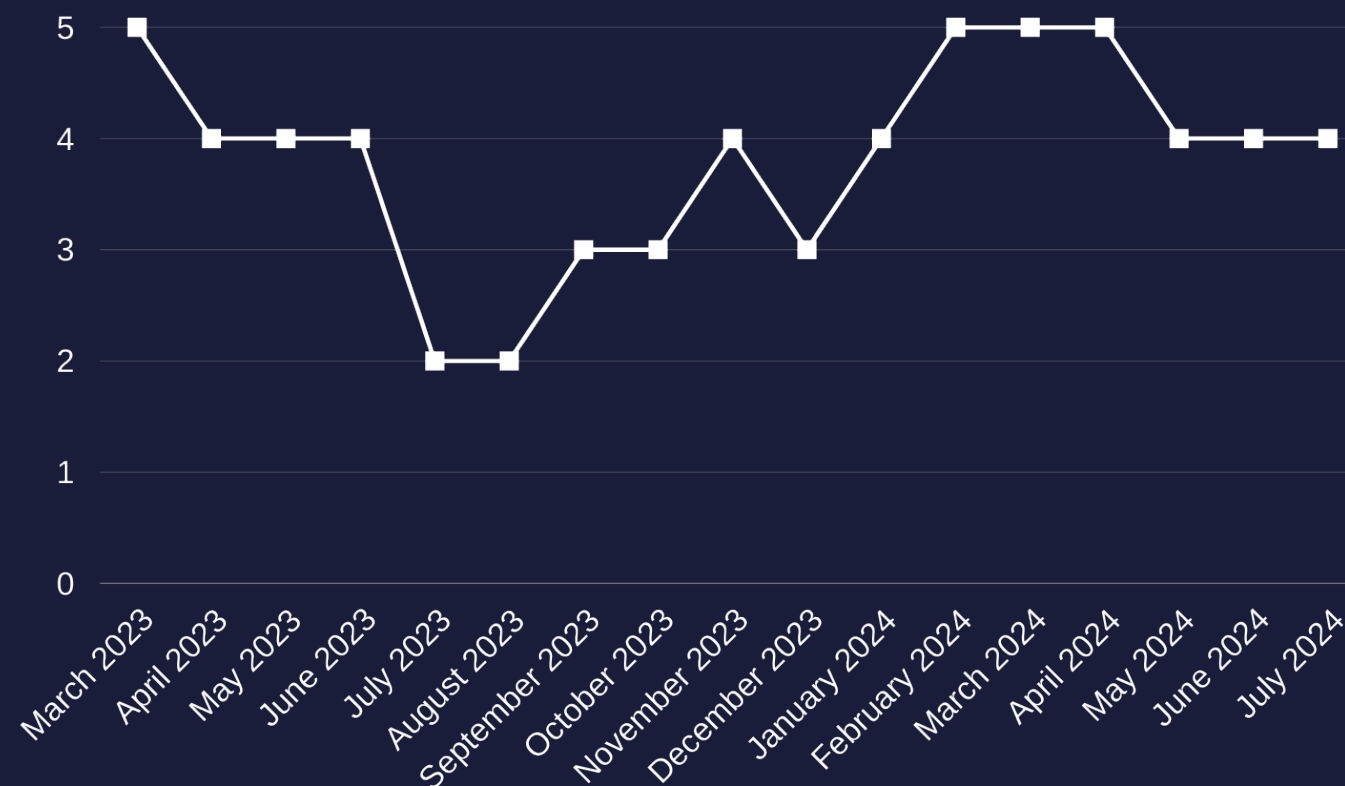
<u>Robberies in the Olympic village</u>, <u>huge opposition rallies from faithful groups</u> and <u>rat pests</u>: false stories, <u>mainly spread by pro-Russia propaganda channels</u>, tried to use the games to criticize France and its leaders or drive wedges in public opinion, <u>leveraging</u> on <u>polarizing</u> <u>issues</u>. A particular strand involved baseless claims that <u>transgender</u> <u>athletes</u> were <u>competing in female categories</u>, questioning the fairness of the games and alleging a political will to favor LGBTQ+ sportspersons.

False information about the war in Ukraine continues to suggest the <u>imminent escalation of the conflict</u>, alleging <u>direct NATO involvement in ground operations</u> or impending <u>participation</u> of <u>EU countries</u> in the war. At the same time, Ukrainian leadership is accused of <u>adopting Nazi ideology</u>, <u>imposing LGBTQ+ values</u>, or enriching itself thanks to the war. In line with a <u>long-running</u> <u>Russian disinformation campaign</u>, the most widely circulated false story in July (see slide 8) alleged that the wife of the President of Ukraine, Olena Zelenska, <u>had purchased a luxury car in France</u> "for almost 4.5 million euros".
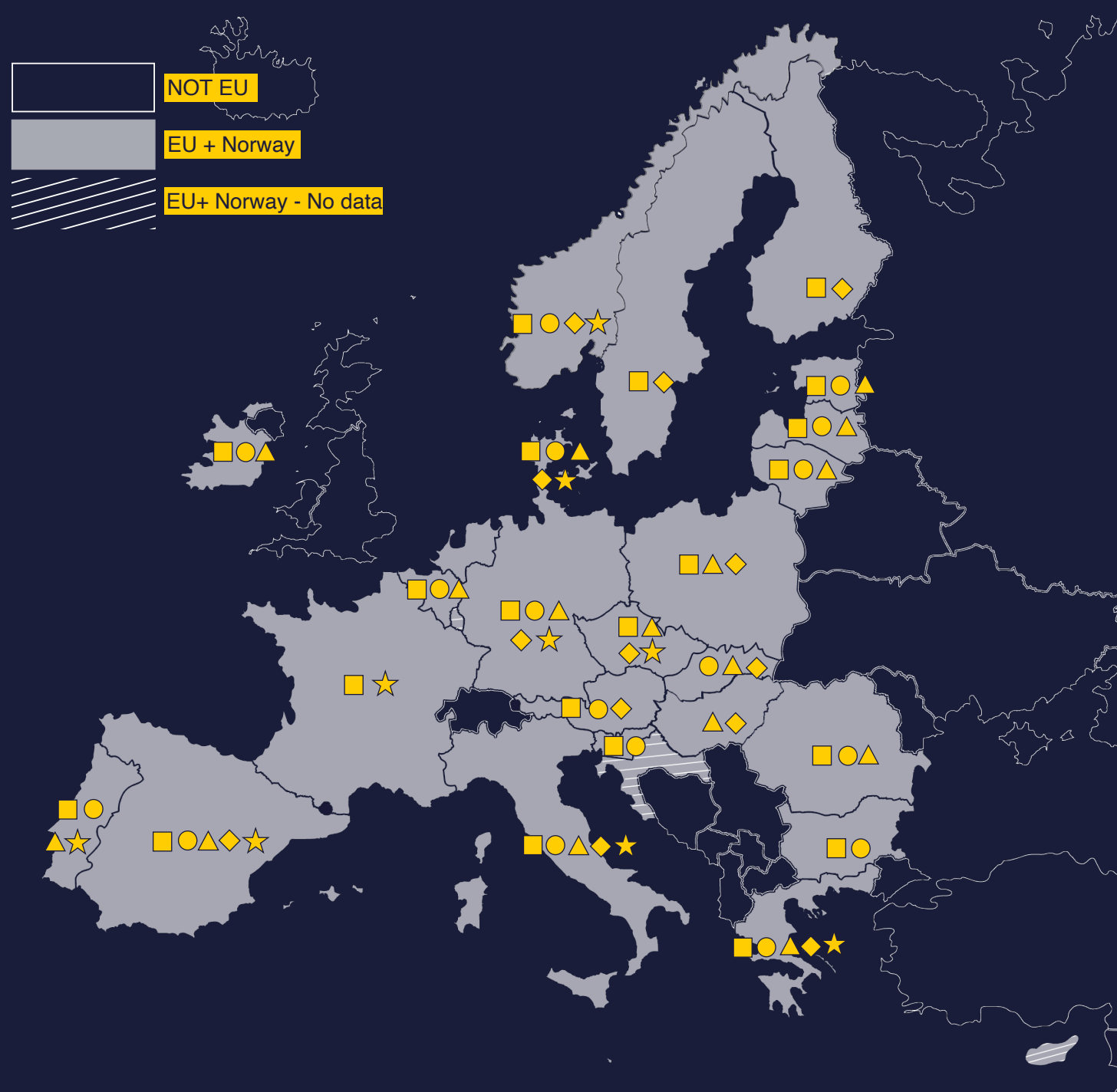
AI-GENERATED DISINFORMATION

The percentage of disinformation stories using AI-generated content remained stable in July, as it was in the previous months. Out of 1.699 fact-checking articles, 68 addressed the use of this technology in disinformation. This represents 4% of the total, the same as in June.

AI-generated content promoting false messages included a series of images of French President Emmanuel Macron bathing in the muddy waters of the Seine or Kamala Harris in intimate situations with Jeffrey Epstein. Deepfake scams are still quite widespread, using national and international public figures to steal data and money. AI-modified videos exploiting the appearance of Elon Musk, which are also circulating in the EU, are believed to have defrauded a lot of people.

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

■ The attack in Pennsylvania against Donald Trump was staged

● The man who shot Donald Trump during a rally in Pennsylvania was an Antifa and/or a registered member of the Democratic Party

▲ The rocket that hit the Okhmatdyt hospital in Kiev was fired by Ukrainian anti-aircraft artillery

◆ Olena Zelenska, wife of Ukrainian President Zelensky, bought a luxury car for several million euros

★ Images of Kamala Harris hugging Jeffrey Epstein

Legend:
- NOT EU
- EU + Norway
- EU+ Norway - No data

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THE MOST SIGNIFICANT VERIFIED DISINFORMATION STORIES AT THE NATIONAL LEVEL:

Ukrainians attempted to kill the Hungarian Prime Minister before his trip to Moscow

Migrants launched "mass attacks" on police officers in Sweden

The island of Serifos was burned to make way for 87 wind turbines

Belarus has a higher standard of living than Latvia, which is almost bankrupt

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.