



European Digital Media Observatory

DISINFORMATION ON IMMIGRATION TAKES TO THE STREETS

Monthly brief no. 39 – EDMO fact-checking network

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DISINFORMATION ABOUT IMMIGRATION RISES AND ACCOUNTS AS THE MOST TARGETED TOPIC BY DISINFORMATION

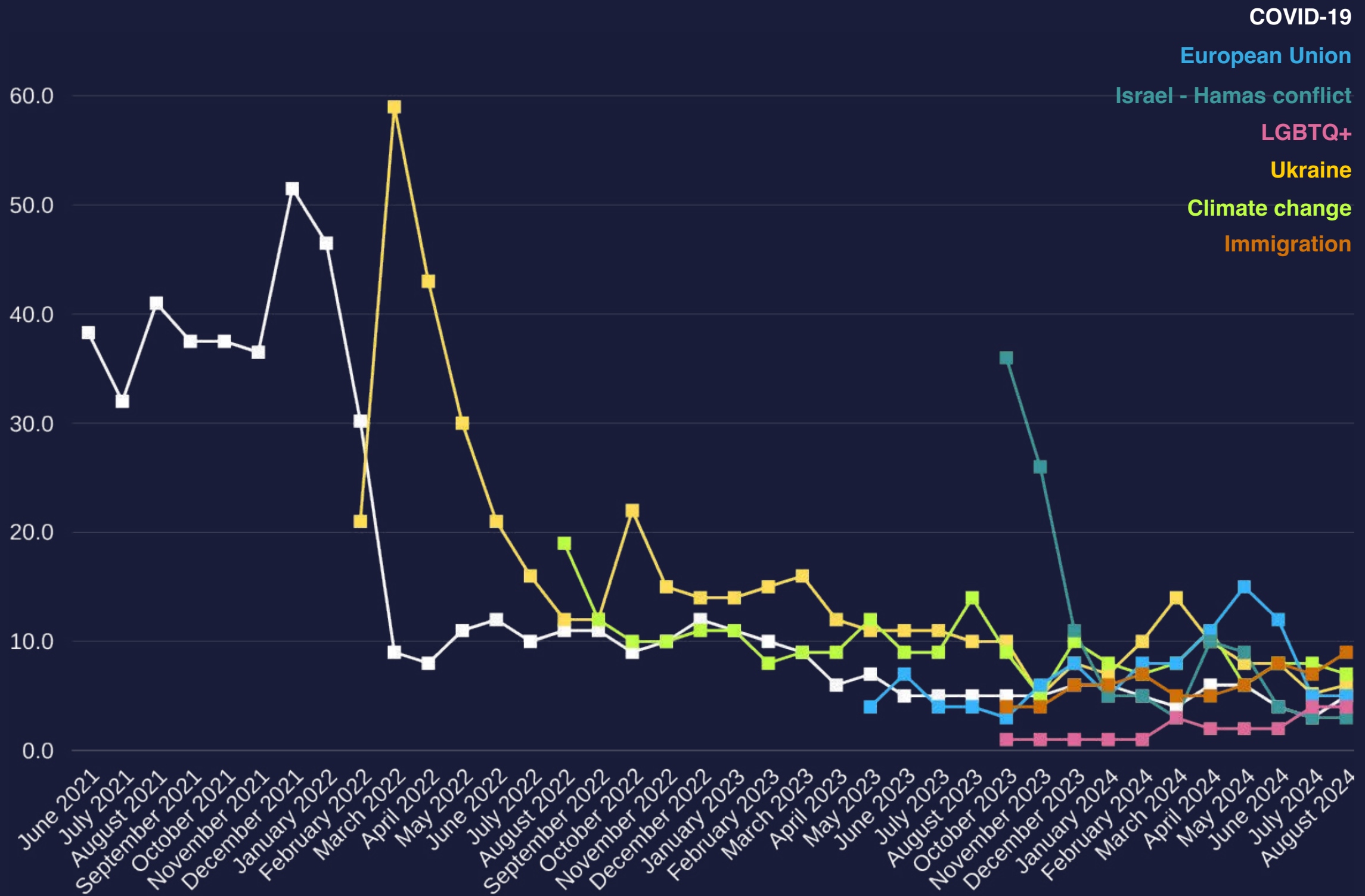
The 36 organizations* part of the EDMO fact-checking network that contributed to this brief published a total of 1.675 fact-checking articles in August 2024. Out of these articles, 99 (6%) focused on Ukraine-related disinformation; 119 (7%) on climate change-related disinformation; 79 (5%) on disinformation related to the EU; 55 (3%) on the conflict between Israel and Hamas; 91 (5%) on COVID-19-related disinformation; 146 (9%) on disinformation related to immigration; and 73 (4%) on disinformation about LGBTQ+ and gender issues.

Disinformation about immigration issues increased in August, rising to 9% from 7% in July. This is its highest level since the dedicated monitoring began and this month the percentage of migration-related disinformation is also the highest among the topics affected by disinformation which EDMO constantly monitors. Disinformation about COVID-19-related issues also grew by two percentage points, after reaching its lowest level ever recorded in July.

Disinformation on the other topics constantly monitored remained almost stable or decreased slightly.

** Organizations that contributed to this brief: 15min, AFP, APA, Correctiv, Delfi, Demagog.cz, Demagog.pl, Demagog.sk, DPA, DW, Eesti Päevaleht, EFE Verifica, Ellinika Hoaxes, Fact Check Cyprus, FactReview, Faktabaari, Faktisk, FranceTV, Funky, Greece Fact Check, InfoVeritas, Lakmusz, Logically Facts, Maldita, Medizin transparent, Newtral, Oštro, PagellaPolitica/Facta, Polígrafo, Pravda, Re:Baltica, The Journal Fact-Check, Times of Malta, TjekDet, VerificaRTVE, Verificat*

% of related disinformation on total detected disinformation, by topic



DISINFORMATION ON IMMIGRATION EXPLOITS CURRENT EVENTS TO DRIVE XENOPHOBIA AND ALARMISM, INCITING VIOLENCE

Aside from the usual false stories that portray migrants collectively as criminals, opposed to Western values or favored by governments and the EU in comparison to national citizens, a new wave of false stories exploited dramatic events in various countries to blame the deaths that occurred on migrants.

At the end of July, a stabbing attack in Southport, UK, left three children dead during a dance class. Hours later, disinformation and false rumors that the attacker was an asylum seeker fueled far-right riots, which led to violence in the streets and the injury of over 50 police officers. As happened last year in a similar episode in Dublin, extremists and far-right activists ignited the violence with several false claims online, which were also reshared by prominent public figures, such as Elon Musk, the owner of X, who also talked about an “inevitable civil war” in the UK. A number of false claims related to the protests in England – blaming migrants, targeting police officers and victimizing far-right protesters – soon spread in several EU countries (see slide 7).

Furthermore, exploiting the stabbing of an 11-year-old boy in a Spanish village, disinformation and baseless claims alleged without evidence that the attacker was a migrant, calling on citizens to take to the streets and leading to racist hate speech on social media. A disinformation narrative claiming that four children were murdered in a few hours in Spain then spread in various countries. These episodes – as well as the terrorist attack that occurred in Solingen, Germany – have been used by far-right groups to spread xenophobia and conspiracies, such as the so-called “Great Replacement” and, more in general, the attempt by migrants to colonize Europe.



OLYMPICS, US POLITICS, VACCINES

The disinformation narratives tracked in July about the presidential race in the US and Olympics expanded.



The opening ceremony of the Games continued to be on target, especially with a performance intended to depict a dinner of pagan gods accused by false stories of Satanism and used to spread homophobia and transphobia.

In this regard, the disinformation strand about transgender athletes participating in female competitions reached maximum dissemination after a boxing match in which an Italian boxer retired after less than one minute, claiming she was being hit with disproportionate force from her opponent. This was followed by false claims that the Algerian boxer Imane Khelif is a man or a transgender woman, and this false story resulted as the most widespread in the EU in August (see slide 7). Baseless claims about the athlete's gender were also made by prominent public figures, such as novelist J.K. Rowling and Elon Musk, named in the lawsuit over cyberbullying Khelif filed against X after winning the gold medal.



False stories about the US election campaign mainly target the Democratic candidate with misogynistic rhetoric. False content claims that Kamala Harris used to be a sex worker (using AI), that she manipulates images of her rallies to make them appear more attended, or that she admitted that climate change policies are aimed at reducing population. As soon as she named Tim Walz as her vice president running mate, various false stories began circulating that he would be willing to protect pedophiles or allow voter fraud.

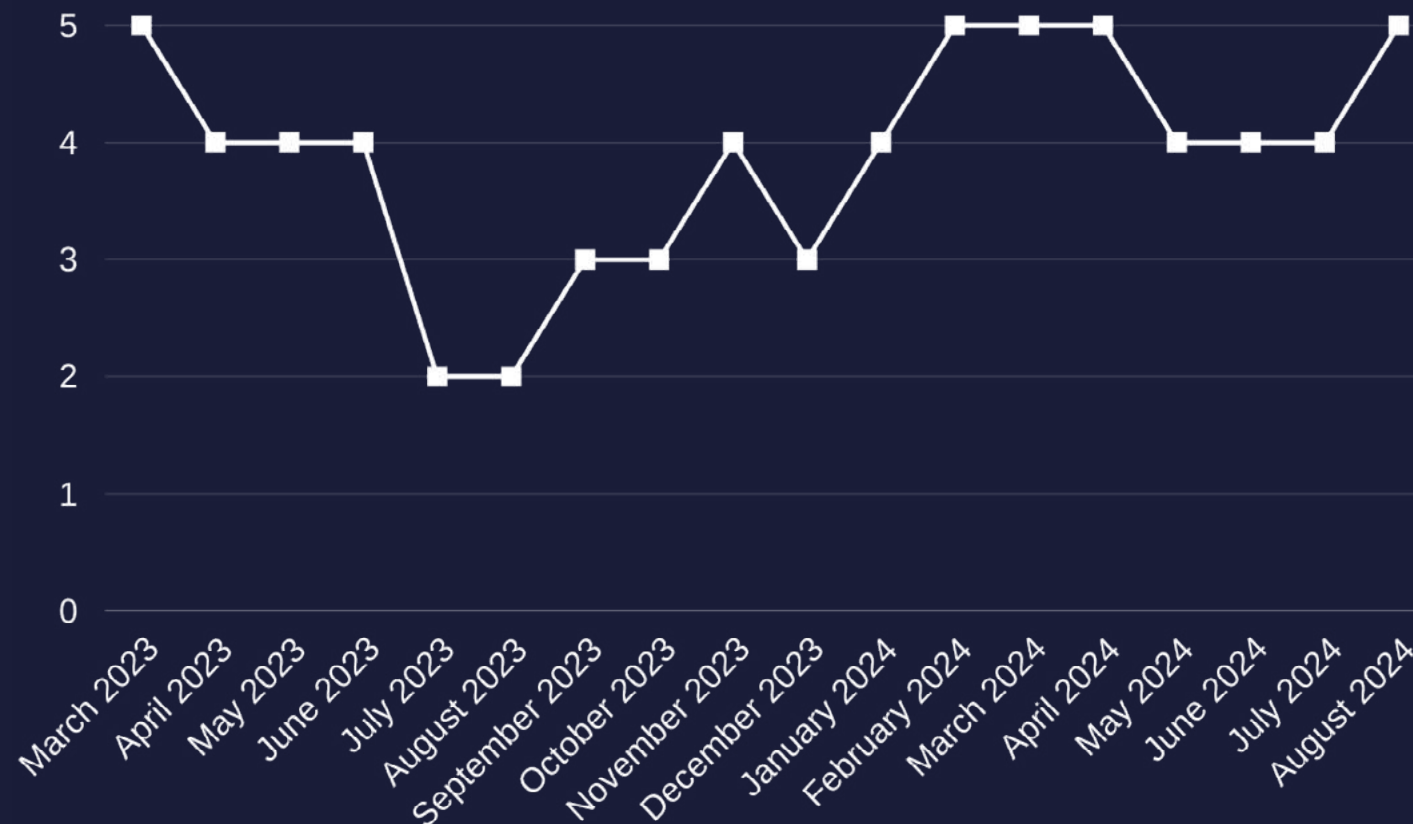


The increase in disinformation about COVID-19 is mainly due to an alleged link between vaccines and the spread of the Mpox disease, and other conspiracies.

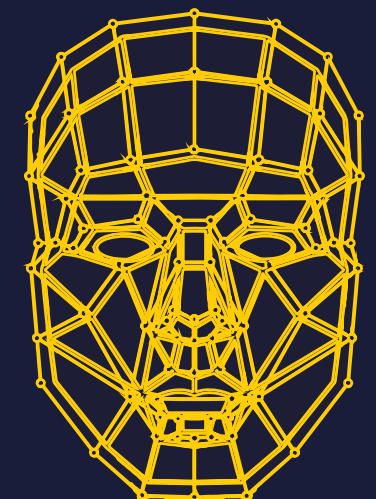
Disinformation on the other monitored topics showed no notable development, with false stories being in line with narratives identified in previous months.

AI-GENERATED DISINFORMATION

The percentage of disinformation stories using AI-generated content slightly increased in August, after months of stable levels. Out of 1.675 fact-checking articles, 80 addressed the use of this technology in disinformation. This represents 5% of the total, in previous months it was 4%.



The most significant false stories involving AI-generated content promoted homophobia and islamophobia, as many others in August. In particular, a video of French President Macron kissing one of his bodyguards and images of British police officers kneeling in front of Muslim preachers. Other false claims instead questioned the authenticity of the Southport victims' photos, another way to exploit the advent of generated content to trick citizens and social media users.





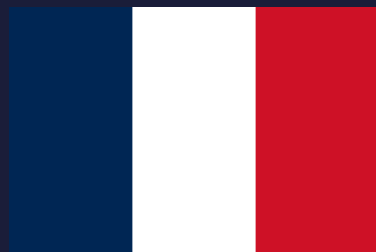
THE FOUR FALSE STORIES WITH THE WIDEST CIRCULATION IN THE EU IN AUGUST, BASED ON THE FACT-CHECKERS' REPORTS, WERE:

- The Algerine boxer Imane Khelif is a man
- Ukraine's President Zelensky bought Sting's wine estate in Tuscany in June 2024
- ▲ Monkeypox virus is transmitted through COVID-19 vaccines
- ◆ The U.K. is releasing violent offenders from prisons to make room for people arrested amid Southport riots

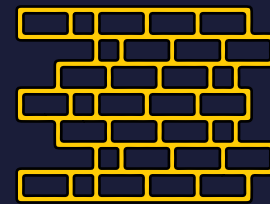
THE MOST SIGNIFICANT VERIFIED DISINFORMATION STORIES AT THE NATIONAL LEVEL:



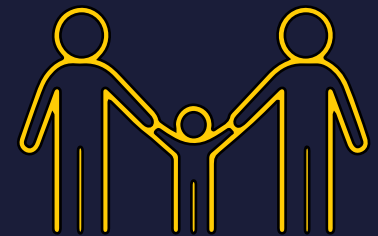
Due to the arrest of Pavel Dourov, the founder of Telegram, the United Arab Emirates canceled the purchase of 80 Rafale aircraft



Portuguese are in danger because of the “Portuguese Islamic Party”



The German Chancellor said that the Berlin’s wall could also be rebuilt



Romanians abroad must return to the country, if they do not want to lose their children



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 2024. Number of respondents: 36.
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