



European Digital Media Observatory

# **DISINFORMATION IN THE EU LOOKS AT THE US PRESIDENTIAL RACE IN SEPTEMBER**

Monthly brief no. 40 – EDMO fact-checking network

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## **THE US PRESIDENTIAL RACE IS THE MOST TARGETED TOPIC BY FALSE STORIES, WHILE DISINFORMATION ABOUT IMMIGRATION REMAINS INTENSE**

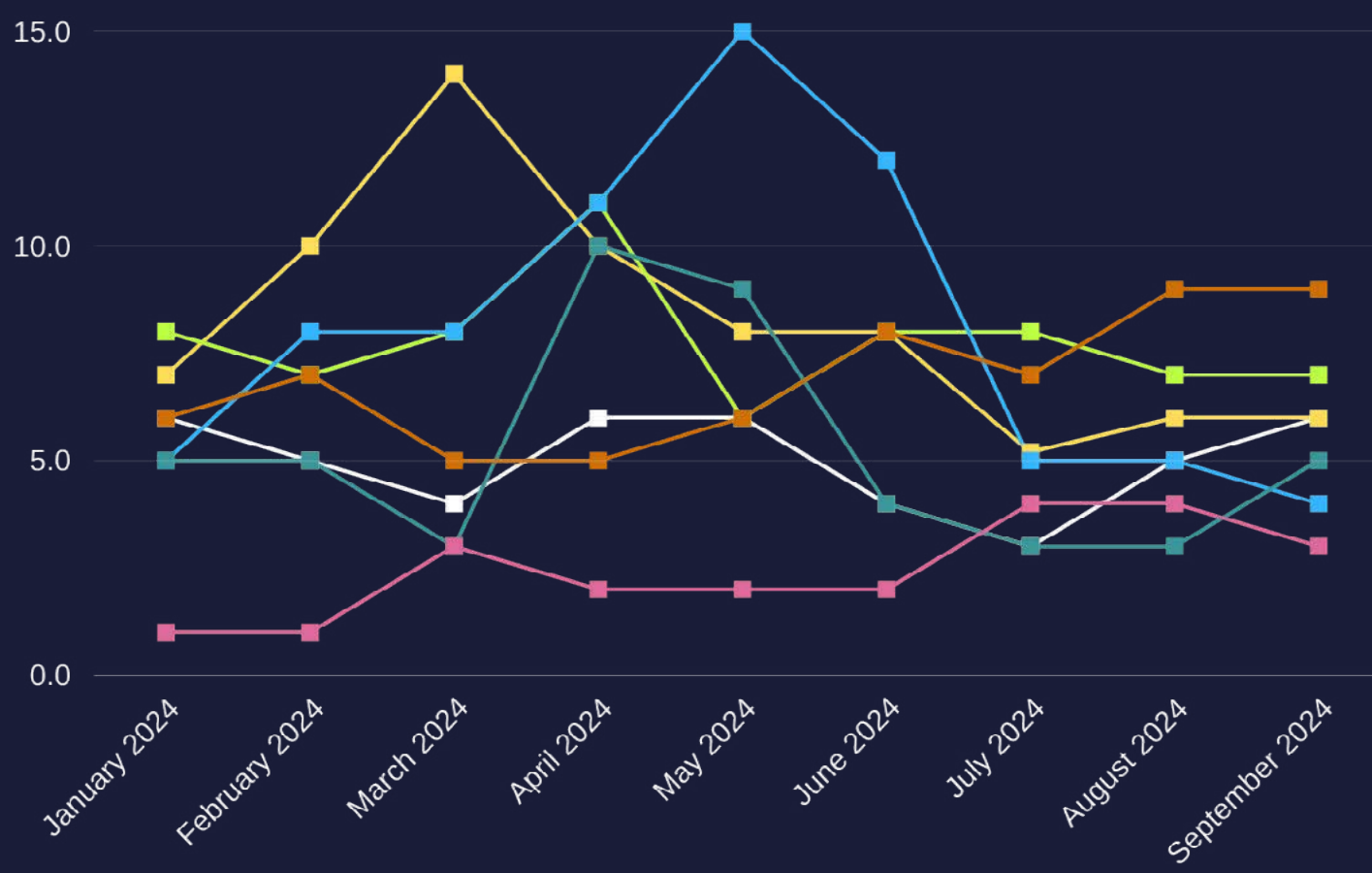
The 36 organizations\* part of the EDMO fact-checking network that contributed to this brief published a total of 1.817 fact-checking articles in September 2024. Out of these articles, 107 (6%) focused on Ukraine-related disinformation; 125 (7%) on climate change-related disinformation; 71 (4%) on disinformation related to the EU; 83 (5%) on the conflict between Israel and Hamas; 116 (6%) on COVID-19-related disinformation; 163 (9%) on disinformation related to immigration; and 61 (3%) on disinformation about LGBTQ+ and gender issues.

Disinformation about migration remained stable and relatively high in September, after a significant increase in previous months. Both the percentages of false stories about the conflict in the Middle East and COVID-19-related issues increased slightly after reaching their lowest levels during the summer. False information about the other constantly monitored topics remained stable or decreased slightly, as in the case of EU-related and LGBTQ+-related disinformation.

US Presidential election-related disinformation, new in the quantitative monitoring of the EDMO fact-checking network, emerges as the most targeted by baseless claims and stories.

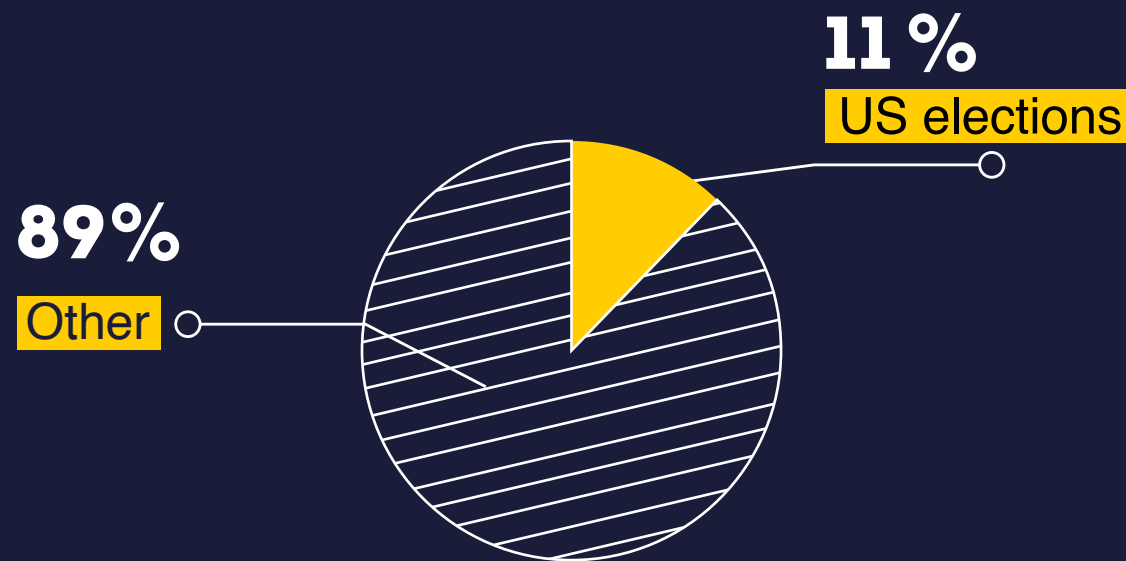
*\* Organizations that contributed to this brief: 15min, AFP, APA, Correctiv, Demagog.cz, Demagog.pl, Demagog.sk, DPA, DW, Eesti Päevaleht, EFE Verifica, Ellinika Hoaxes, Fact Check Cyprus, Fatico, FactReview, Faktisk, FranceTV, Funky, Greece Fact Check, Källkritikbyrå, Knack, InfoVeritas, Lakmusz, Les Surligneurs, Logically Facts, Maldita, Neutral, Oštro, PagellaPolitica/Facta, Polígrafo, Pravda, Re:Baltica, The Journal Fact-Check, TjekDet, VerificaRTVE, Verificat*

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



## **DISINFORMATION ABOUT THE US PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION CAMPAIGN: QUANTITATIVE MONITORING**

In September, EDMO started the quantitative monitoring of disinformation related to the upcoming US presidential election. Its value amounted to 11% of the total disinformation detected by the EDMO fact-checking network, i.e., shared in EU languages and verified by European fact-checkers. It is the highest percentage, for this month, among the topics quantitatively monitored.



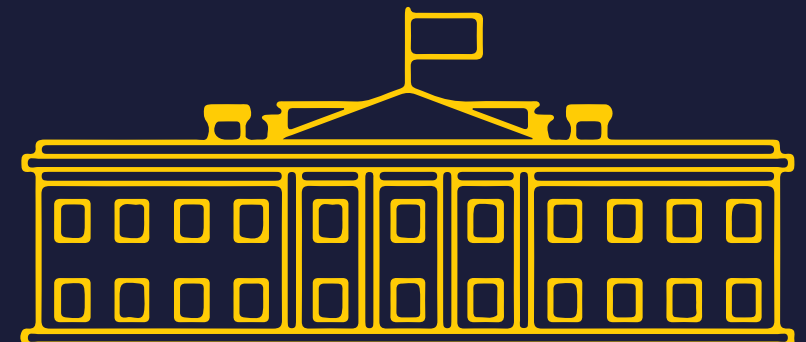
This specific monitoring started this month and will continue in October and November, to track its evolution before and immediately after the election day.

## **DISINFORMATION ABOUT THE US PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION CAMPAIGN: QUALITATIVE MONITORING**

As highlighted in the previous slide, the presidential race in the US continues to gain growing attention in disinformation narratives in the EU. The false stories circulating on the issue mainly target the Democratic candidate, current Vice President Kamala Harris, often exploiting misogynistic biases. In September, she was accused of seriously injuring a girl in a car accident, of being friends with criminals and sex offenders, of cheating during the presidential debate, of being drunk or interested in promoting dystopian agendas and of being a former sex worker. Also people backing her, e.g. singer Taylor Swift, are discredited by baseless information. These false stories are in line with those reported in the previous months, which questioned Harris' intellectual and moral integrity to undermine her public representation, as underlined in a recent EDMO article on the issue.

At the same time, other false stories amplify the rhetoric and arguments adopted by the other candidate, former President Donald Trump. The claim that migrants in Ohio would be eating citizens' pets that he made during the sole candidate debate with Harris has been shared massively on social media in the European infosphere, resulting as the most widespread false story detected by European fact-checkers in September (see slide 8). In other cases, false stories amplify his victimist rhetoric and try to exploit the attempts on his life for political gain (we previously reported conspiracy theories attacking Trump, claiming the attacks were “false flag” operations aimed at increasing his popularity).

Trump himself has been the target of some false stories aimed at discrediting him, but on a much smaller scale than the wave of false accusations made against Harris.



## OTHER RELEVANT NARRATIVES



Disinformation on the issue of immigration hasn't shown any significant qualitative changes in its rhetoric, despite its high circulation. False stories about migrants claim that they outnumber Europeans and bend authorities and citizens to their will. They are persistently portrayed as extremely violent - even against those who favor them, thus ridiculing them - and criminals, and institutions are described as encouraging their violent behaviors.

Although these narratives have been circulating for years, they seem to remain effective and are thus exploited in political campaigns, especially by nationalist parties. Moreover, the repetition of false stories reinforces belief in them, studies say.



In recent elections in EU member states, such as local elections in Germany, the integrity of the electoral process has been questioned without evidence (and in particular by far-right parties). This has been the case in the vast majority of recent national elections, including those for the EU Parliament.



The attacks by Israel in Lebanon and by Iran in Israel have raised fears of a regional conflict in the Middle East. The situation has been exploited by disinformation, with decontextualized images and videos exaggerating the scale of the operations, the support for the conflicting sides and alleged links to the war in Ukraine, suggesting that Ukrainian officials were hit in the pager attack carried out by Israel in Lebanon.

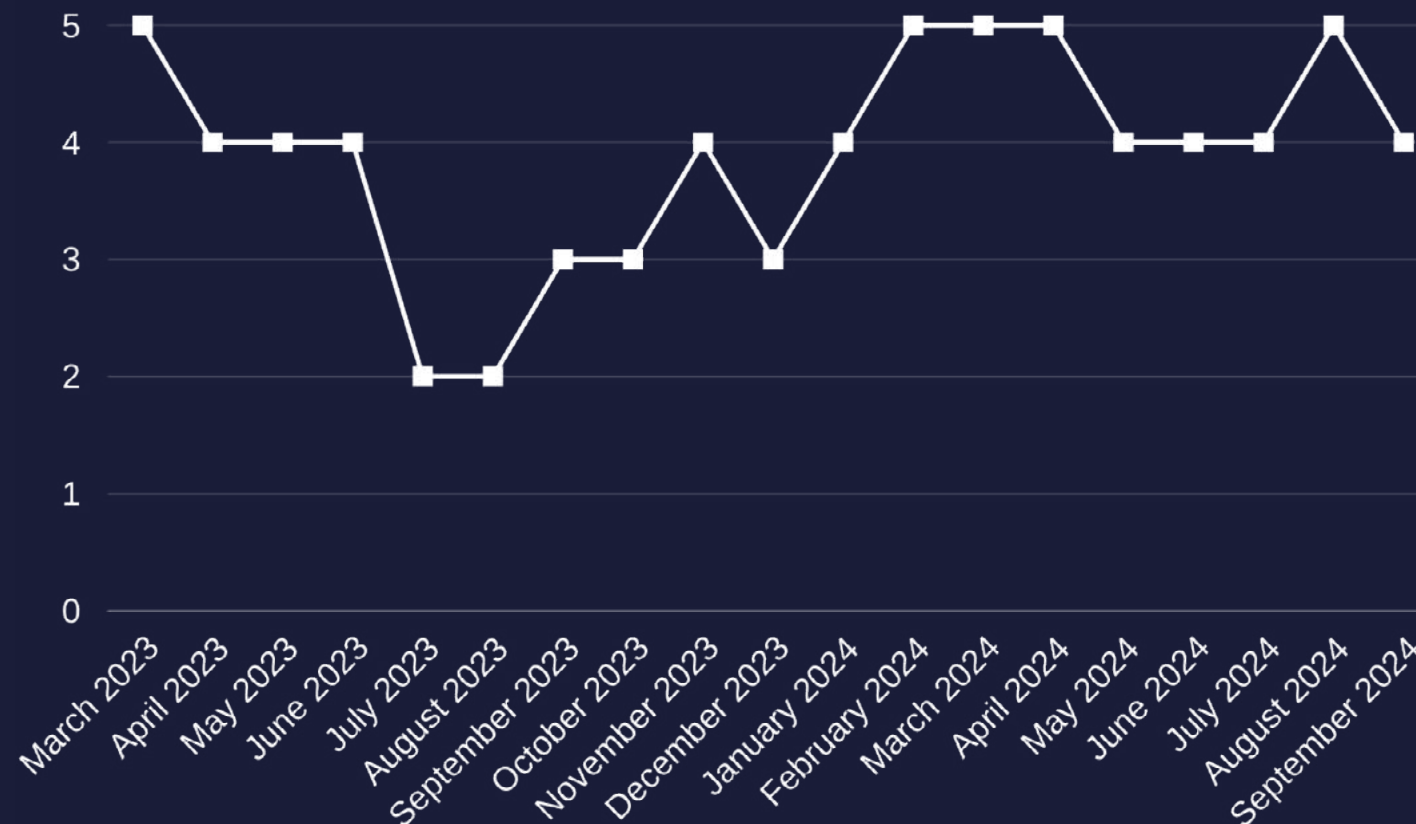


As frequently happened in the past with similar cases, violent floods that hit Central Europe in September have been used to question the effectiveness of authorities' actions, blame EU institutions or Ukrainians, and spread various conspiracies (see slide 8).

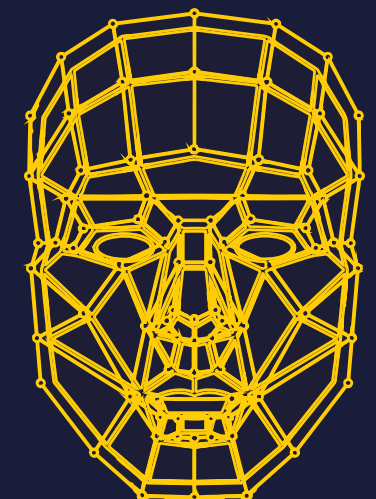
Disinformation on the other monitored topics showed no notable development, with false stories being in line with narratives identified in previous months.

## AI-GENERATED DISINFORMATION

The percentage of disinformation stories using AI-generated content slightly decreased in September. Out of 1.817 fact-checking articles, 78 addressed the use of this technology in disinformation. This represents 4% of the total as it was for various months before August, when it amounted to 5% of the total disinformation detected.



The most relevant false stories of this kind in September were a deepfake video of the Irish Prime Minister Simon Harris ‘congratulating’ Irish anti-immigrant groups and a video showing the nervous reaction of a representative of a party that lost the local elections in Germany, likely edited using AI tools.







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

- Haitian migrants in Ohio, US, eat cats, dogs and other pets of the residents
- The recent floods that hit Central Europe were caused by geoengineering, the HAARP project, chemtrails or cloud seeding
- ▲ Kamala Harris used special “earrings” to get answer suggestions during presidential debate
- ◆ In Ireland, a Christian teacher was expelled from the school and imprisoned three times for refusing to teach “gender ideology”



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



Flood in Poland was caused by actions of Czech authorities



Ukrainians living in the Czech Republic did not help Czech citizens during floods



Parents face community service if they do not sign their children's education contract, which allows interventions without parental consent and the storage of students' biometric data



## 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: 1-30 September 2024. Number of respondents: 36.  
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