



European Digital Media Observatory

THE WAR IN THE MIDDLE EAST AND CLIMATE DISASTERS RETURN IN THE GUNSIGHT OF DISINFORMATION IN OCTOBER

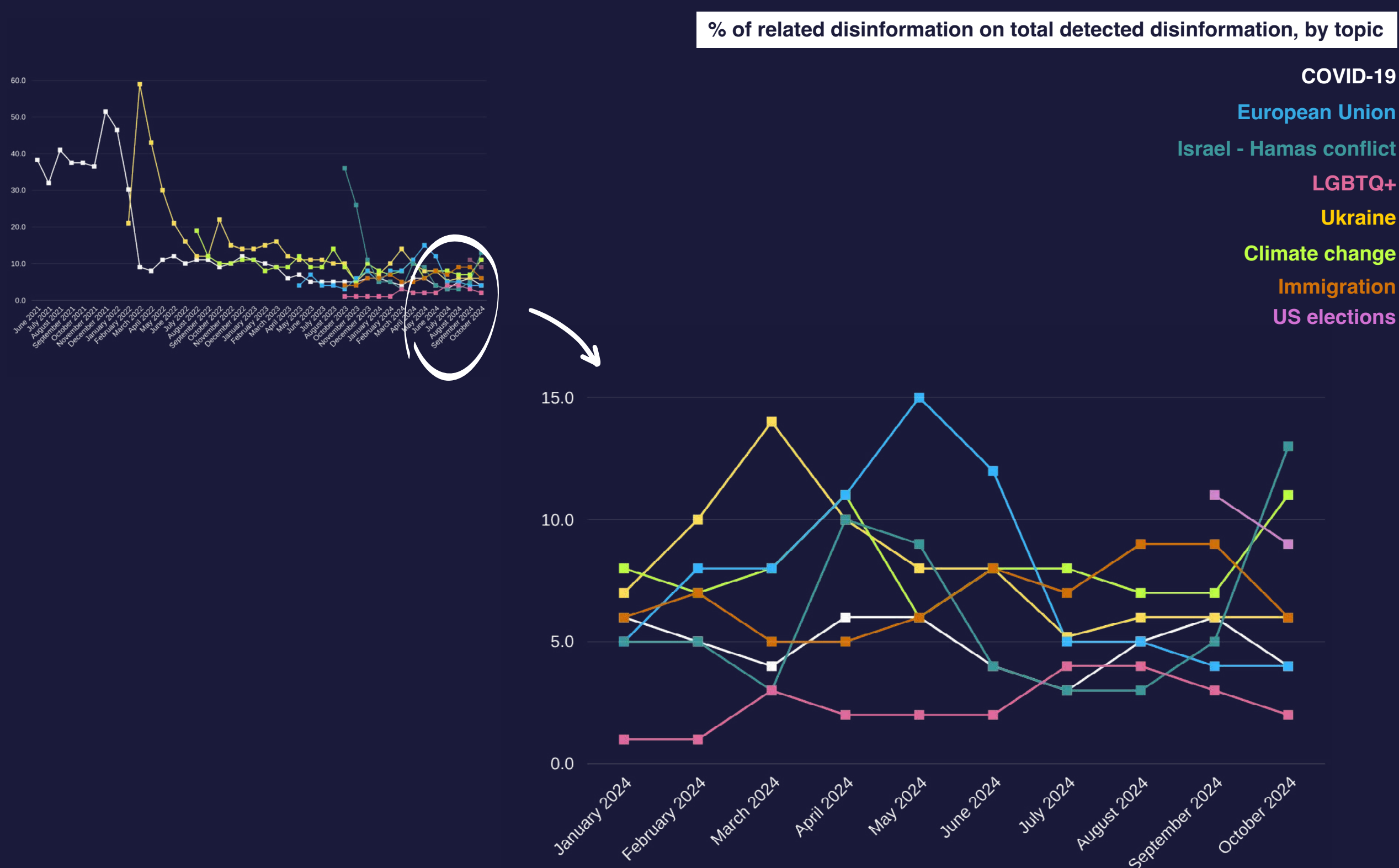
Monthly brief no. 41 – EDMO fact-checking network

DISINFORMATION ABOUT THE WAR IN THE MIDDLE EAST DOUBLES

The 33 organizations* part of the EDMO fact-checking network that contributed to this brief published a total of 1.812 fact-checking articles in October 2024. Out of these articles, 101 (6%) focused on Ukraine-related disinformation; 196 (11%) on climate change-related disinformation; 78 (4%) on disinformation related to the EU; 227 (13%) on the Middle Eastern regional conflict; 77 (4%) on COVID-19-related disinformation; 102 (6%) on disinformation related to immigration; and 29 (2%) on disinformation about LGBTQ+ and gender issues. Articles disinformation related to the US presidential election were 155 out of 1812, which is 9% of the total.

The war in the Middle East emerged as the most targeted topic by false stories in October. The percentage of disinformation related to the issue more than doubled during the last month, it was 5% of the total in September. False information on climate change also grew notably, passing from 7% to 11% in one month, exploiting the climate disasters that occurred within and outside the EU.

The shares of disinformation on the other constantly monitored topics remained stable or decreased by a few percentage points, as in the case of baseless claims about migration, COVID-19, and LGBTQ+-related issues.



* Organizations that contributed to this brief: AFP, Correctiv, Delfi, Demagog.cz, Demagog.pl, Demagog.sk, DPA, Eesti Päevaleht, EFE Verifica, Ellinika Hoaxes, Eurocomunicare, Fact Check Cyprus, Factcheck Vlaanderen, FactReview, Faktabaari, Greece Fact Check, Källkritikbyrå, Knack, InfoVeritas, Lakmusz, Les Surligneurs, Logically Facts, Maldita, Medizin transparent, Newtral, Oštro, PagellaPolitica/Facta, Polígrafo, Pravda, Re:Baltica, The Journal Fact-Check, TjekDet, VerificaRTVE

DISINFORMATION ABOUT THE CONFLICT IN THE MIDDLE EAST

Due to the anniversary of the 7 October Hamas-led terrorist attack on Israel and of the following war in Gaza, and due to the recent killing by Israel of the leader of Hamas and of a top Hezbollah official in Lebanon, the Middle-Eastern regional conflict was at the center of international attention and media coverage in October, and disinformation on the issue surged.

Some false stories on this topic scaremongered the escalation of the conflict, with alleged direct consequences for EU countries, such as military mobilization or the resettlement of Israeli citizens on EU soil. Other misleading content exaggerated the military actions or the support for this or that warring side. Yahya Sinwar's death was followed by propaganda narratives from both Israel and Hamas, while false stories suggested that UNRWA, a UN humanitarian organization operating in Gaza, mourned his departure or that he and his family had enriched themselves thanks to the war in Palestine.



FALSE STORIES EXPLOITING CLIMATE DISASTERS

As in the past, the occurrence of climate disasters has been followed by a resurgence of climate disinformation. In addition to the ever-present circulation of false claims denying global warming, the impact of human activity on it, and the effectiveness of countermeasures to the crisis, disinformation in October focused on specific events: in particular, the hurricanes in the United States and the devastating floods in Spain.



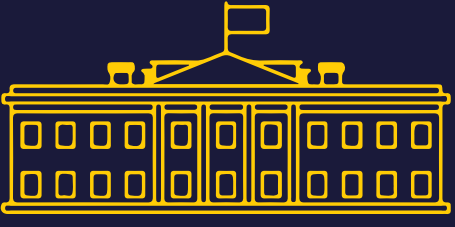
At the beginning of the month, the US was hit by two destructive hurricanes, named Helene and Milton. In the European infosphere, old or unrelated photos and videos, as well as AI-generated content, were used to exaggerate the phenomena and attract the attention of social media users. Various conspiracies also circulated, for example claiming that the hurricanes had been deliberately provoked using geoengineering techniques. At the same time, with the US presidential race in full swing, false stories spread by Republican propaganda – magnifying Trump’s contribution to the emergency and suggesting that the Democrats were slowing down or obstructing aid to the affected areas – reached the EU.



The catastrophic flash floods that hit southern Spain at the end of October have been named the “Spanish floods of the century”. In the aftermath of the disaster, a huge amount of disinformation stories began to circulate, including panic-triggering claims and false warnings. Related disinformation stories claimed that the storm was intentionally caused using alleged weather modification techniques, or that the flooding was the result of the government’s deliberate demolition of dams, another false narrative recycled from disinformation about past catastrophic events. As this extreme phenomenon occurred in the last days of October, these unsubstantiated claims have been tracked mainly in Spain, but it will likely be possible to track their spread in other EU countries, in the next brief about disinformation in November.



OTHER RELEVANT FALSE NARRATIVES



In October, false disinformation about the US election campaign focused on questioning the fairness of the voting procedures, multiplying baseless allegations about electoral irregularities, for example alleging that ballots for Trump were being destroyed or that Democrats allowed irregular migrants to vote. At the same time, false narratives identified in previous months kept circulating, discrediting the Democratic candidates. Elon Musk, the owner of X (formerly Twitter), campaigned for Trump and actively disseminated disinformation on his platform.

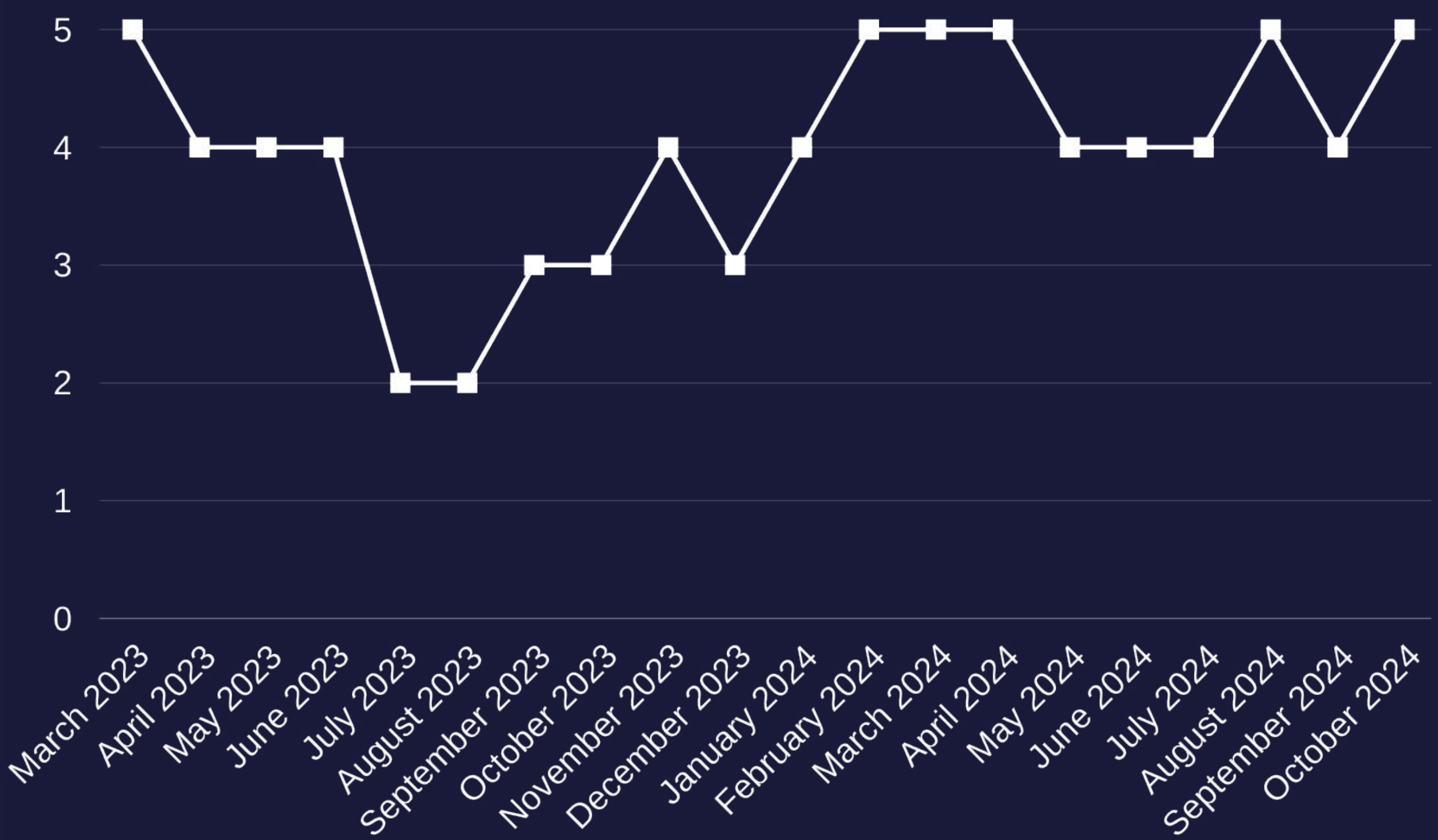


Among disinformation depicting European policies as irrational and authoritarian, a false story about worms and insect-based food being given to children in schools in the Netherlands as been tracked in various countries, such as the Netherlands, Austria, Germany, Bulgaria, and Estonia.

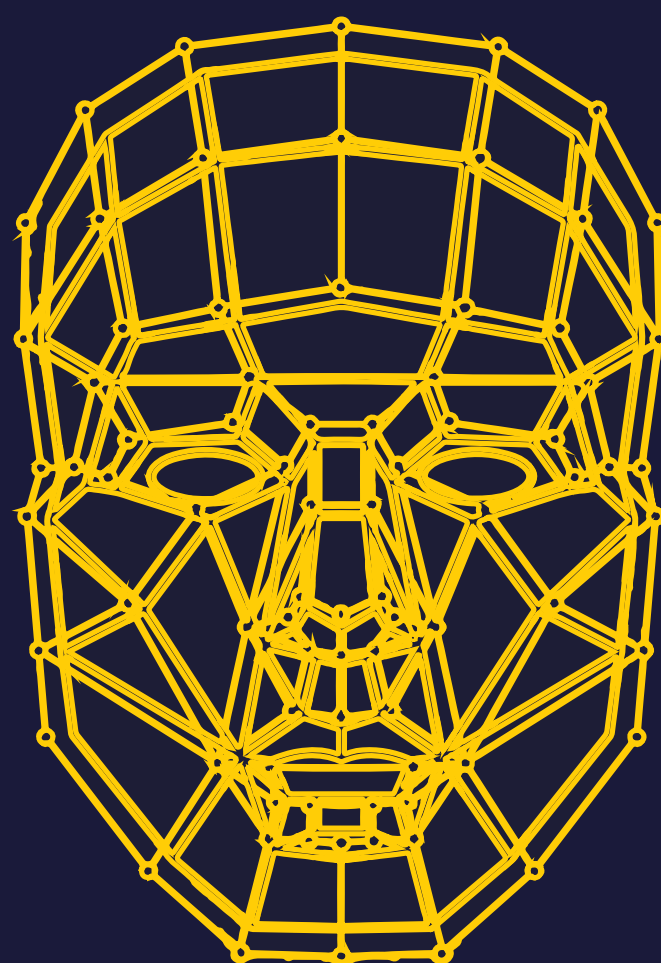
Disinformation on the other monitored topics showed no notable development, with false stories being in line with narratives identified in previous months.

AI-GENERATED DISINFORMATION

The percentage of disinformation stories using AI-generated content slightly increased in October. Out of 1.812 fact-checking articles, 86 addressed the use of this technology in disinformation, representing 5% of the total.

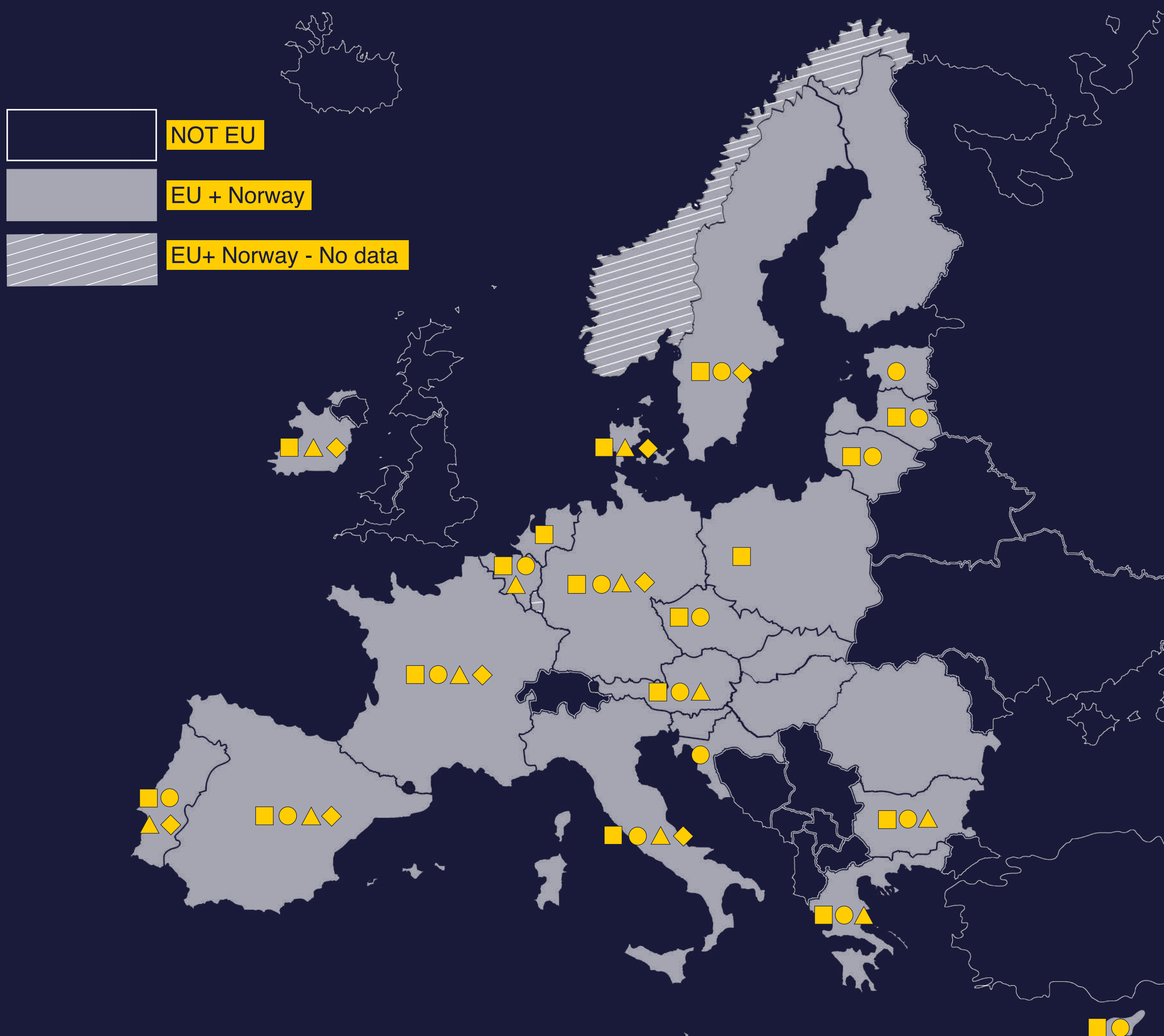


Many of the false stories involving AI-generated or modified content related to the conflict in the Middle East, with cinematic images of a plane supposedly landing in Lebanon amid heavy bombing, real footage altered to supposedly show expensive bags in Sinwar's den, or banners commemorating Israeli hostages supposedly shown at a football match in Italy. A generated video of Hurricane Milton was also circulated.



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

- Milton Hurricane was created artificially
- Ukrainian President Zelensky bought Adolf Hitler's limousine
- ▲ A video of Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu running in a hallway, captioned as if he's running for the bunker during Iran's missile attack on the 1st of October
- ◆ Tim Waltz, the Democrat vice presidential candidate, molested a former student of his at a concert in 1995



THE MOST SIGNIFICANT VERIFIED DISINFORMATION STORIES AT THE NATIONAL LEVEL:



The European Parliament did not allow a minute's silence for the victims of the floods in Valencia



In areas affected by the floods in September, Ukrainians with knives are attacking people, destroying food, stealing, robbing houses and stores



People are being arrested in France just for expressing their opinion about the opening ceremony of the Olympic Games



Germany is investing \$22 billion in South Africa's electricity grid



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 October 2024. Number of respondents: 33.

Main editor of this brief: Enzo Panizio and Tommaso Canetta,
Pagella Politica/Facta.

For further information: [*t.canetta@pagellapolitica.it*](mailto:t.canetta@pagellapolitica.it).



EDMO has received funding
from the European Union
under Contract number: “LC-01935415”