



European Digital Media Observatory

DISINFORMATION ABOUT THE FLOODS IN SPAIN GOES VIRAL IN NOVEMBER

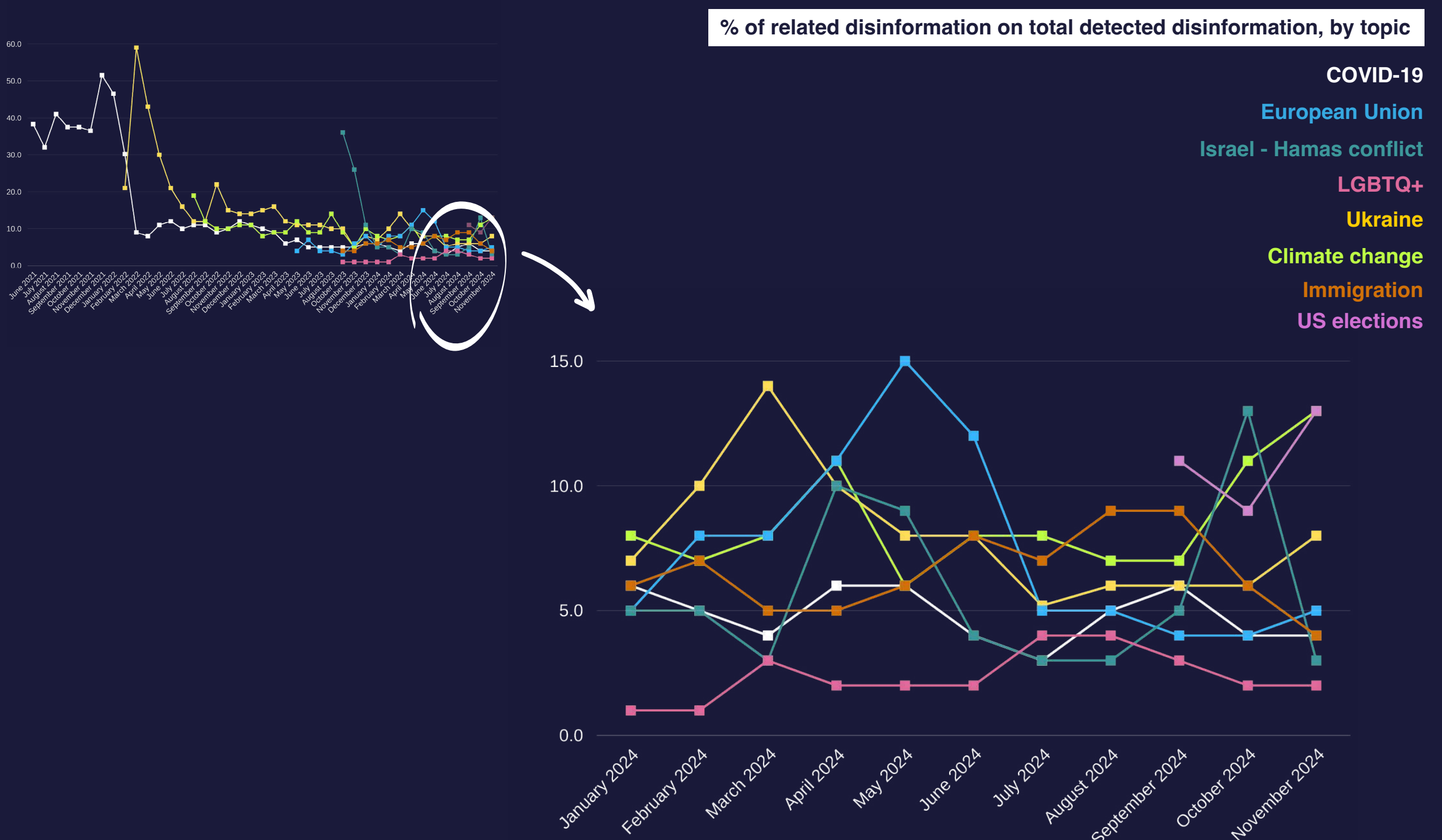
Monthly brief no. 42 – EDMO fact-checking network

DISINFORMATION ABOUT CLIMATE CHANGE AND US ELECTIONS RISES, WHILE DISINFORMATION ABOUT MIDDLE EAST PLUMMETS

The 34 organizations* part of the EDMO fact-checking network that contributed to this brief published a total of 1.781 fact-checking articles in November 2024. Out of these articles, 139 (8%) focused on Ukraine-related disinformation; 230 (13%) on climate change-related disinformation; 83 (5%) on disinformation related to the EU; 53 (3%) on the Middle Eastern regional conflict; 69 (4%) on COVID-19-related disinformation; 68 (4%) on disinformation related to immigration; and 41 (2%) on disinformation about LGBTQ+ and gender issues. Articles on disinformation related to the US presidential election were 229 out of 1.781, which is 13% of the total.

The main disinformation phenomenon in November was the catastrophic floods that hit southern Spain, partly contributing to the increase in climate-related disinformation that almost doubled in two months, passing from 7% in September to 13% in November. Disinformation on the US presidential elections also increased slightly, as did the percentage of false stories about the war in Ukraine and the EU.

Disinformation about the war in the Middle East, which was the most targeted topic by false stories in October, dropped to 3% from 13% in October. 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: 15min, AFP, APA, Correctiv, Delfi, Demagog.cz, Demagog.pl, Demagog.sk, DPA, Eesti Päevaleht, EFE Verifica, Ellinika Hoaxes, Fact Check Cyprus, Factcheck Vlaanderen, Fatico, FactReview, Faktisk, Funky, Greece Fact Check, Källkritikbyrå, InfoVeritas, Lakmusz, Logically Facts, Maldita, Newtral, Oštro, PagellaPolitica/Facta, Polígrafo, Pravda, Re:Baltica, The Journal Fact-Check, TjekDet, VerificaRTVE, Verificat

DISINFORMATION ABOUT THE DEVASTATING FLOODS IN SPAIN

The disinformation narratives about the catastrophic flash floods that hit southern Spain at the end of October, which were already signaled as circulating in Spain in the last brief, have expanded their circulation and relevance to the entire EU. In particular, false stories that the storm was man-made through alleged geoengineering techniques or deliberately caused by the destruction of the dams in the region of Valencia were tracked by the EDMO network in the vast majority of EU countries (see slide 7).

These conspiracies suggest that the wave of destruction and death brought to the Spanish region was intentionally caused through antennas, mysterious ships allegedly preparing the storm with HAARP technologies, planes spraying the atmosphere for days, and the demolition of the dams promoted by the national government and the EU. The EU parliament was also accused of denying a minute of silence for the victims. In other cases, these false stories were linked to supposed “meteorological attacks”, punishment for criticizing Israel, or plans to redesign cities, while alarmist claims on the death tolls, once officially disproved, turned on conspiracies that the authorities aim to hide the real number of casualties.



More realistic false stories also tried to blame institutions, political or scientific, for the catastrophe alleging their incompetence. Although the local government has actually been accused of not being timely in its responses to the crisis, demonstrably false claims accused the Spanish meteorological agency of not understanding the severity of the phenomenon while state agencies in neighboring countries allegedly did (this specific false statement also appeared on newspapers) and the national Government of not having an idea of how to respond to the emergency. The Red Cross and other humanitarian organizations were targeted by false statements accusing them of hindering the arrival of aides to the hiten territories or distracting them to migrants, who were allegedly profiting from the disaster. Such baseless claims gained millions of views on TikTok without the social media taking action.

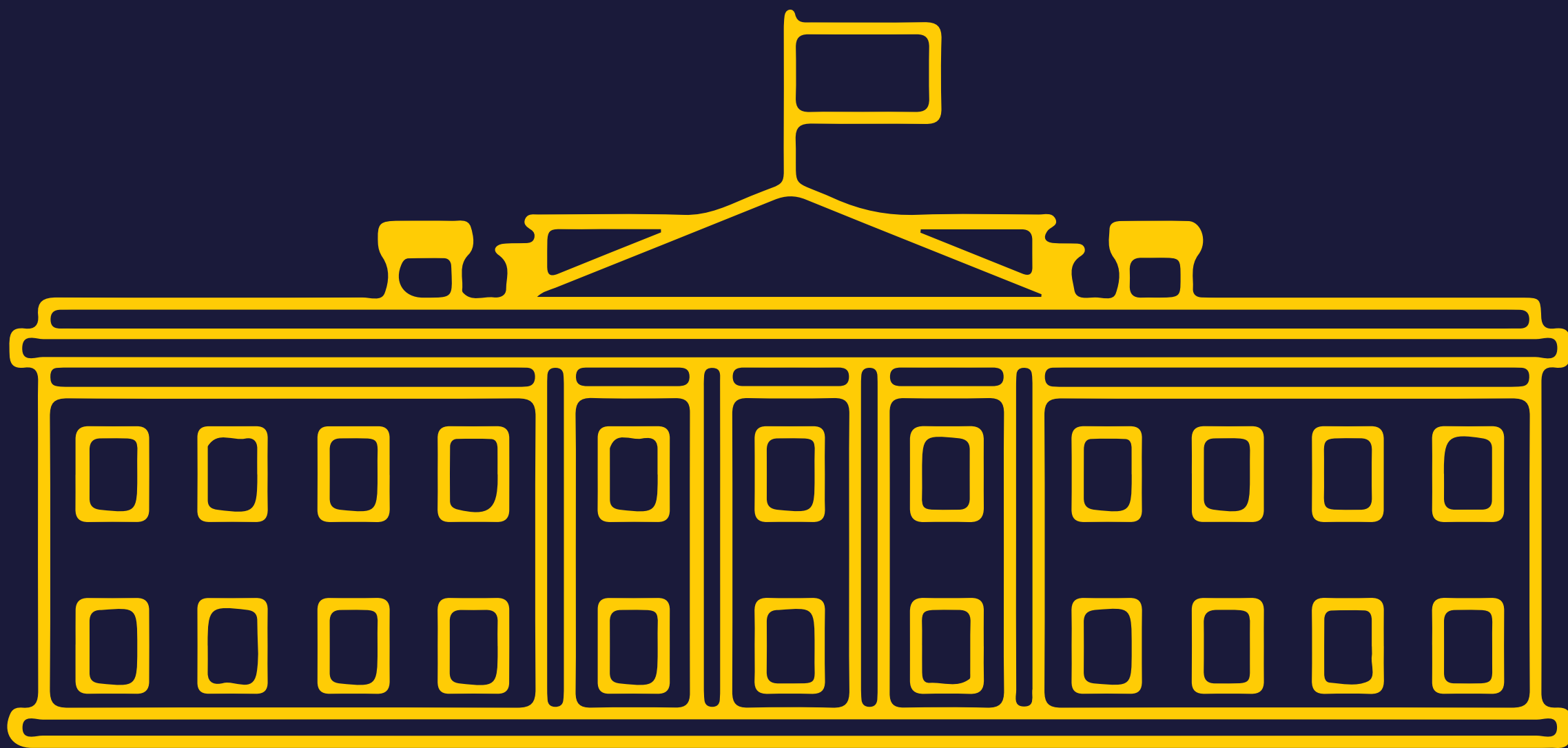
The attention generated from the situation in Spain has been exploited also to revive the usual denialism and a diverse selection of conspiracies about weather manipulation or false stories claiming the ineffectiveness and absurdity of climate actions, or that more and more countries are withdrawing support for common climate goals.



DISINFORMATION ON THE US PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION

Despite the republican candidate, Donald Trump, clearly winning the US presidential elections, false news in the European infosphere suggested that Democrats cheated and carried electoral fraud, winning only in States where no ID was required for voting. Disinformation also suggested that Trump's victory had immediate results on ongoing conflicts.

During the 2024 US election campaign, disinformation focused on delegitimizing the public image of candidates (especially Democratic ones), while in the last weeks before the vote the baseless claims suggesting election rigging multiplied. Since the results of the vote were clear-cut, and the ones responsible for most of the falsehoods circulated on this matter were the winners this time, the allegations of fraud had less impact than in 2020, but their circulation didn't stop, as driven by the inertia of the hammering disinformation campaigns of the past years.



FALSE STORIES FEARMONGERING THE ESCALATION OF THE WAR IN UKRAINE

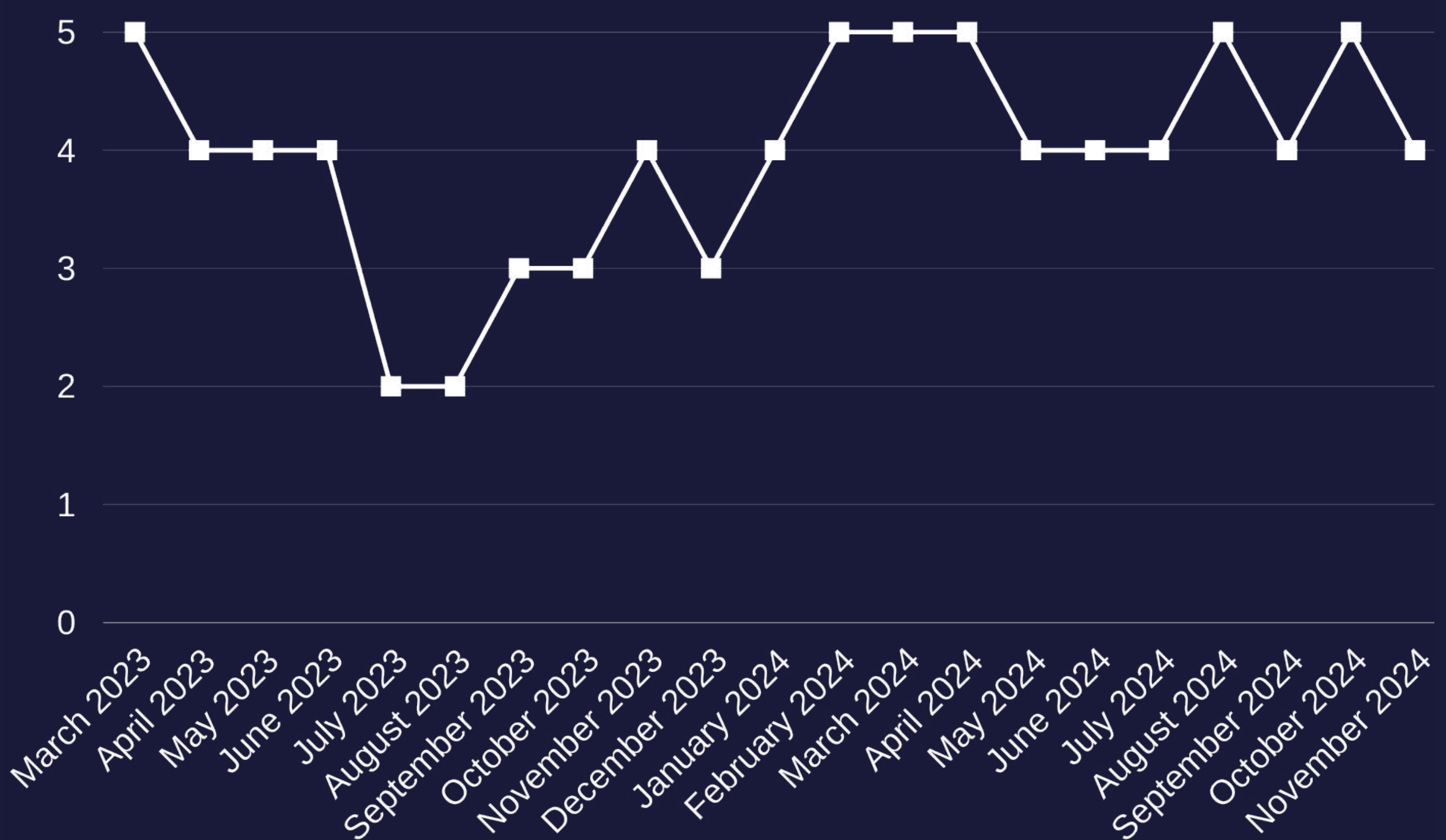
After the decision of the US administration to allow Ukraine to use its long-range missiles against military targets in Russian territory, a variety of false stories suggesting the escalation of the conflict and a looming global war popped up in several EU countries. Baseless claims alleged that Russian television threatened European and Ukrainian cities with nuclear attacks, that Germany closed its airspace, that Trump warned of an ongoing World War III, while US embassies allegedly fled Lithuania, which false stories suggest is preparing for the war. A false map of supposed Russian targets in European Nato bases was tracked in many EU countries (see slide 7).

NATO itself was accused by disinformation of planning preemptive strikes against Russia, while soldiers from the US and the UK would be already dying on Ukrainian soil. In general, false stories paint a heated scenario, with war threats also between the US and China, while the EU allegedly cheers the escalation. Russian propaganda continues to circulate, often re-shared by European politicians.

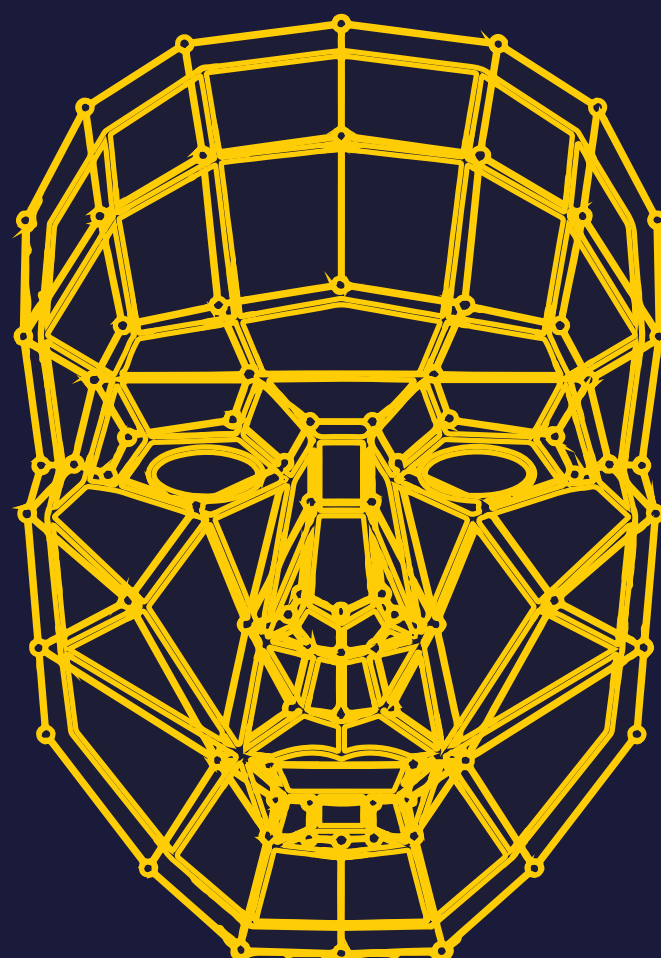


AI-GENERATED DISINFORMATION

The percentage of disinformation stories using AI-generated content slightly decreased in November. Out of 1.781 fact-checking articles, 66 addressed the use of this technology in disinformation, representing 4% of the total while in October it was 5%.

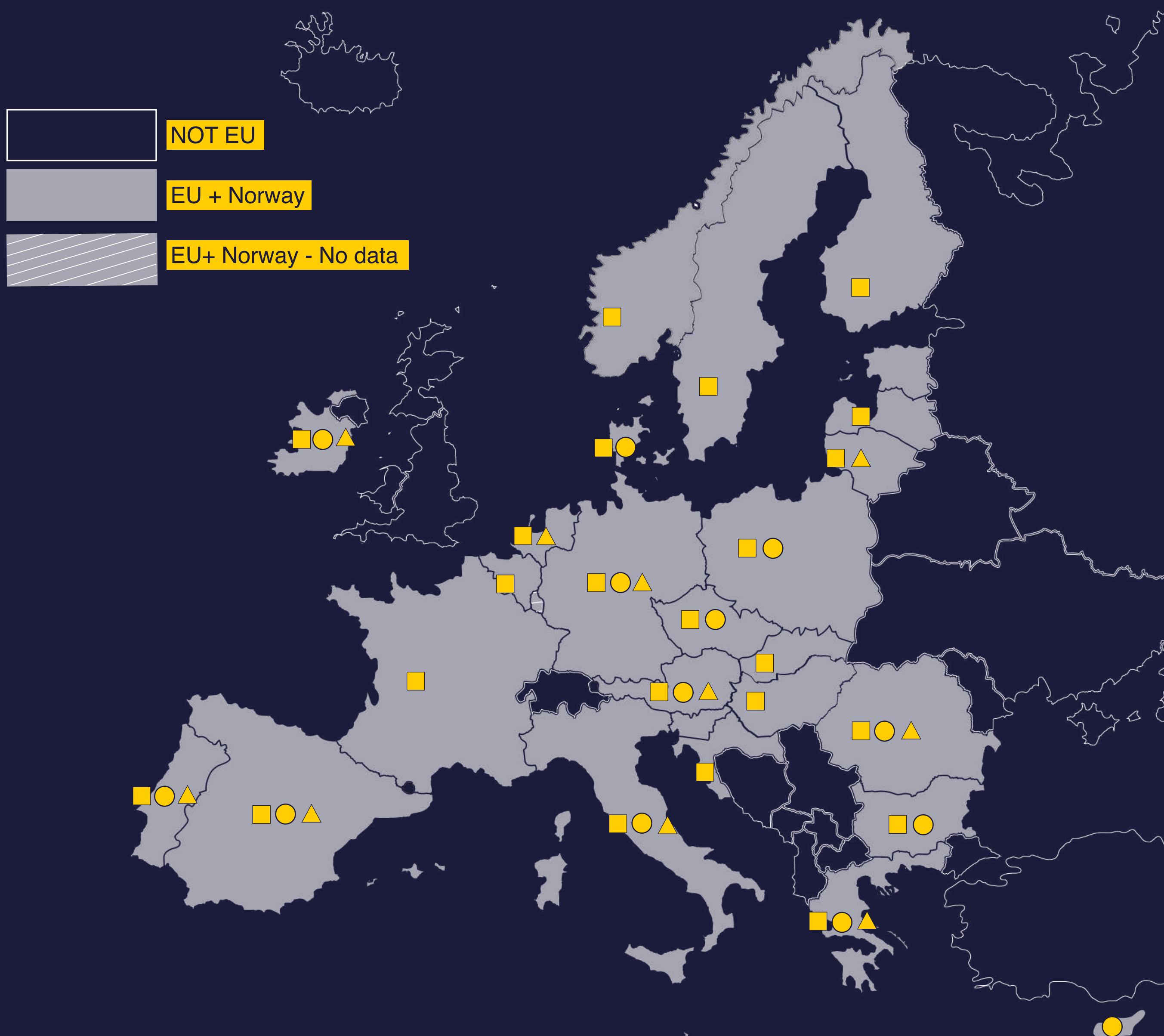


False stories of this kind mostly involved AI-generated images, such as an alleged photo showing the American boxer Myke Tyson with a Palestinian flag on his shoulders or, after she expressed her support for the Democratic cause, the singer Jennifer Lopez in promiscuous situations with sexual offenders. Other cases concerned minor issues, such as engaging content, perfectly preserved medieval houses, or the rescue of polar bears.



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

- Conspiracy theories about the floods in Spain caused by the demolition of dams and reservoirs, HAARP or cloud seeding
- The Kremlin published a map of the Nato installations in Europe that Russia intends to attack
- ▲ Elon Musk offered 3 billion to buy the CNN



THE MOST SIGNIFICANT VERIFIED DISINFORMATION STORIES AT THE NATIONAL LEVEL:



Italy is leaving the European Union



The cargo plane crashed near the Vilnius airport was loaded with ammunition



According to the head of the Latvian Lutheran Church, “abortion after birth” is being discussed in US Democratic states



Dogs have been banned from “green spaces” in Portugal “because immigrants are afraid”



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 November 2024. Number of respondents: 34.

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