



European Digital Media Observatory

MAGDEBURG'S ATTACK AND SYRIA REGIME CHANGE: ISLAMOPHOBIA STRIKES BACK AGAIN IN DECEMBER

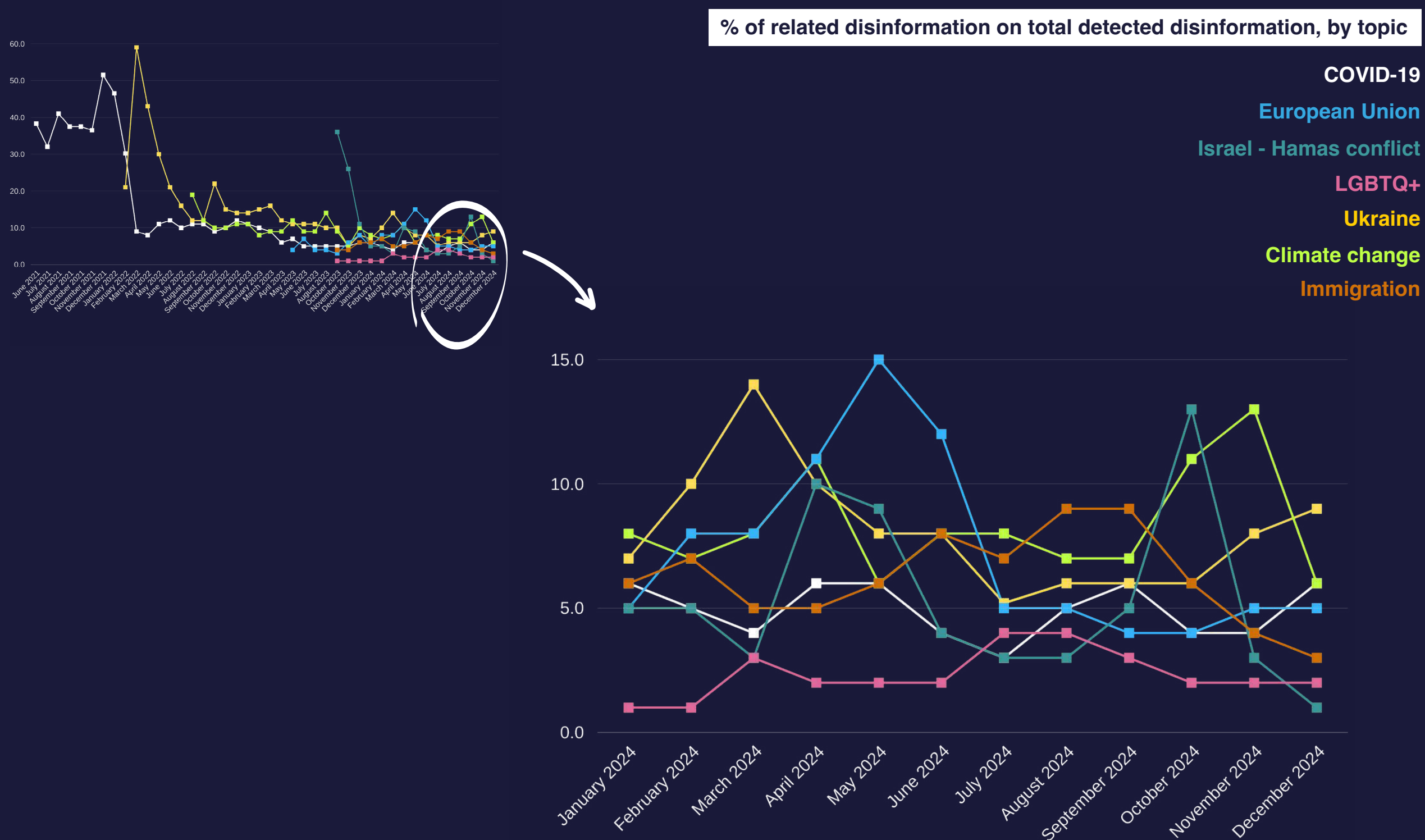
Monthly brief no. 43 – EDMO fact-checking network

DISINFORMATION ABOUT CLIMATE CHANGE HALVES, WHILE FALSE STORIES ABOUT UKRAINE AND COVID-19 INCREASE SLIGHTLY

The 31 organizations* part of the EDMO fact-checking network that contributed to this brief published a total of 1.481 fact-checking articles in December 2024. Out of these articles, 130 (9%) focused on Ukraine-related disinformation; 87 (6%) on climate change-related disinformation; 83 (5%) on disinformation related to the EU; 22 (1%) on the Middle Eastern regional conflict; 75 (6%) on COVID-19-related disinformation; 52 (3%) on disinformation related to immigration; and 35 (2%) on disinformation about LGBTQ+ and gender issues.

Disinformation on climate issues more than halved in December. The 13% recorded in November, largely due to false stories about the floods in Spain, fell to 6% in one month. The percentage of disinformation related to the conflict in the Middle East continued to decline, reaching its lowest level since the start of dedicated monitoring in October 2023.

The percentage of disinformation related to the war in Ukraine increased slightly, as did false stories on COVID-19-related issues. The shares of false information about the other constantly monitored topics remained almost stable.



* 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 FALL OF THE ASSAD REGIME IN SYRIA

In December, a number of false stories concerned Syria, where opposition forces overthrew President Bashar al-Assad's regime, seizing Damascus and prompting Assad to flee to Russia, ending over 50 years of Assad family rule. The surge of false news coincided with Syria being a prominent topic in European media outlets – a typical pattern where disinformation tends to follow widespread media coverage. Most of the false content circulated on social media in EU languages appeared to be clickbait, with various alleged photos and videos of Assad himself, freed prisoners, secret prisons, torture sites, and barbaric executions. The vast majority of these misleading claims used out-of-context images or videos, but in some cases AI was involved.

Other false stories sought to exaggerate the negative consequences of the change of power. For example, fear-mongering and spreading islamophobia about the arrival in the EU of masses of Syrian refugees willing to impose their culture, or claiming that political change led to worsening conditions for women in the country. However, at the moment, there is no concrete evidence that Russia, a key ally of Assad and the savior of his regime in 2015, has launched a hybrid warfare or disinformation campaign targeting the new Syrian authorities. This absence of activity may be tied to ongoing negotiations concerning Russian military bases in Syria and the broader future of Damascus-Moscow relations.



CHRISTMAS MARKETS AND ISLAMOPHOBIA, MASS SHOOTING AND TRANSPHOBIA



In the wake of the December 20, 2024, attack at the Magdeburg Christmas market, in Germany, which tragically claimed six lives, a wave of disinformation emerged, exploiting the incident to promote Islamophobic and anti-migrant narratives. Social media posts falsely claimed that the attack was orchestrated by ISIS or that the attacker shouted “Allahu Akbar” during the arrest, with a widely shared video supposedly proving it, but debunked as fabricated. The authorities found that the attacker was instead radicalized with extreme right propaganda. Similarly, an accident occurred at a Christmas market in Bordeaux, France, where an unprovoked fire broke out before the opening, has been exploited to claim online that it was set by “Islamic extremism”. Other false news tried to compare what happened in Germany with alleged Christmas markets in Hungary, which reportedly were completely safe, unlike German ones.

Beyond specific incidents, false stories reinforced broader anti-migrant sentiments and long-running false narratives depicting migrants as opposed to Western traditions (like Christmas) and democratic values. Decontextualized images were used to purport ongoing massive anti-government protests in Poland, allegedly resulting in very crowded rallies against migration and in defense of Christianity. This specific false story circulated in Germany, France, Spain, Lithuania, Greece, and other EU countries.



In the aftermath of the school shooting in Wisconsin on December 16, 2024, false content targeted the LGBTQ+ community, claiming that the perpetrator, a woman, was a transgender woman. This follows a now-familiar disinformation pattern: after mass shootings, false narratives often blame a secondary target. For example, in the US, following the New Orleans shooting on January 1, 2025, immigrants became the scapegoat. Similarly, in the UK last August, disinformation after a violent incident fueled riots against migrants.

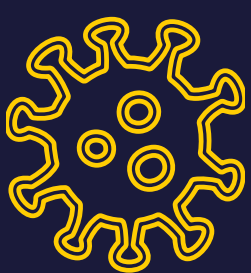
OTHER RELEVANT NARRATIVES



On December 6, the Romanian Supreme Court annulled the first round of the presidential election because, according to Romanian intelligence, Călin Georgescu, a barely known pro-Kremlin candidate, used to spreading conspiracies, violated Romanian electoral laws and gained an unexpected vote percentage thanks to Russian interference. The operation included cyber attacks on electronic voting infrastructure and disinformation campaigns on various platforms, especially TikTok. The situation has been exploited in other countries to claim that the annulment is part of a *coup d'état*, with Georgescu supporters allegedly being arrested massively, while in Romania political disinformation is viral and suggests that the country is entering the war in Ukraine or that citizens are endangered by NATO.



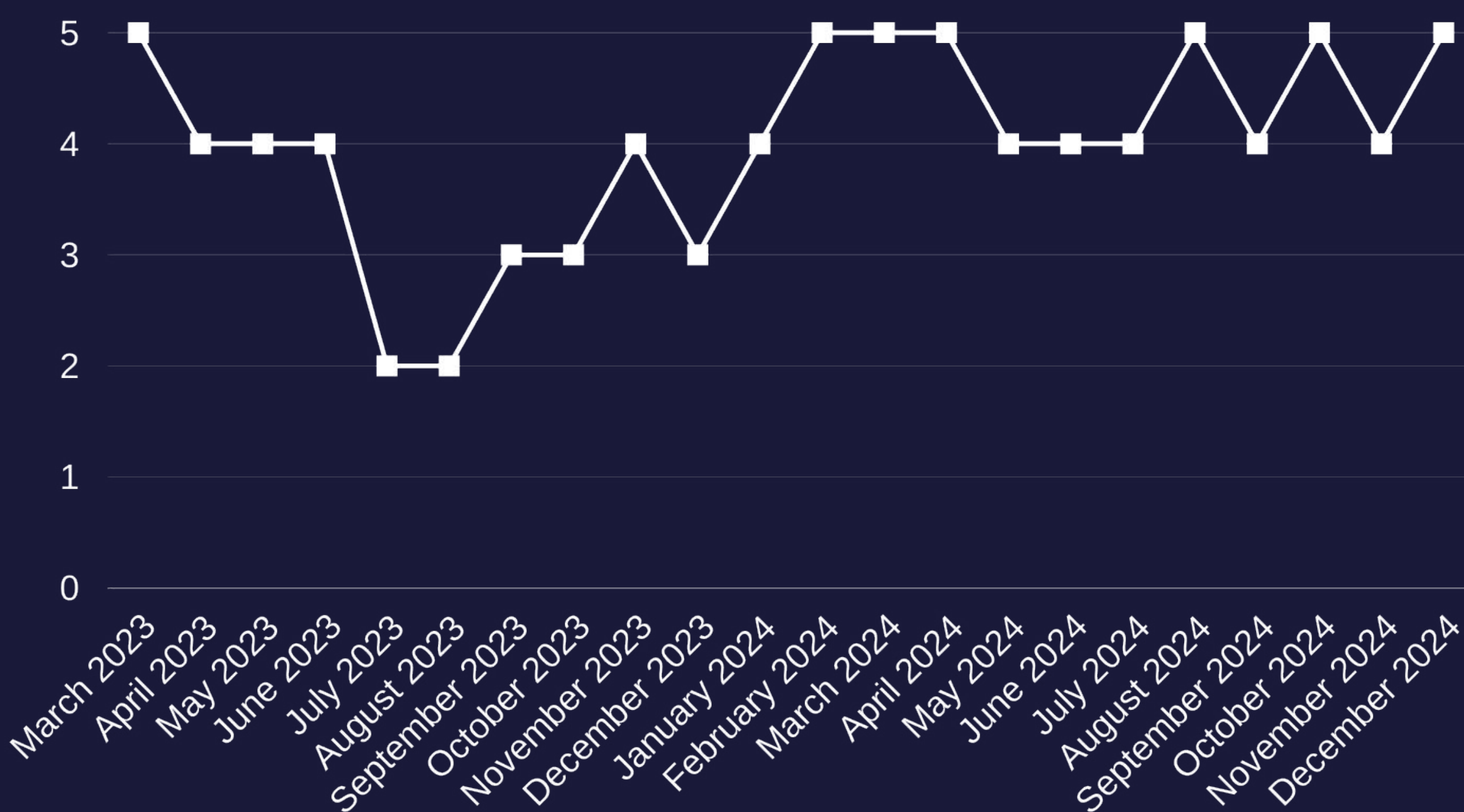
The false narratives circulated in November about an alleged imminent escalation of the war in Ukraine continued to spread in December, suggesting an approaching World War III and the Europeans' interest in broadening the magnitude of the conflict. This is accompanied by a multitude of well-known Russian propaganda messages, such as that Ukrainians are enriching themselves (see also slide 7), that the media coverage is imposed and biased, and that Ukraine is an authoritarian state.



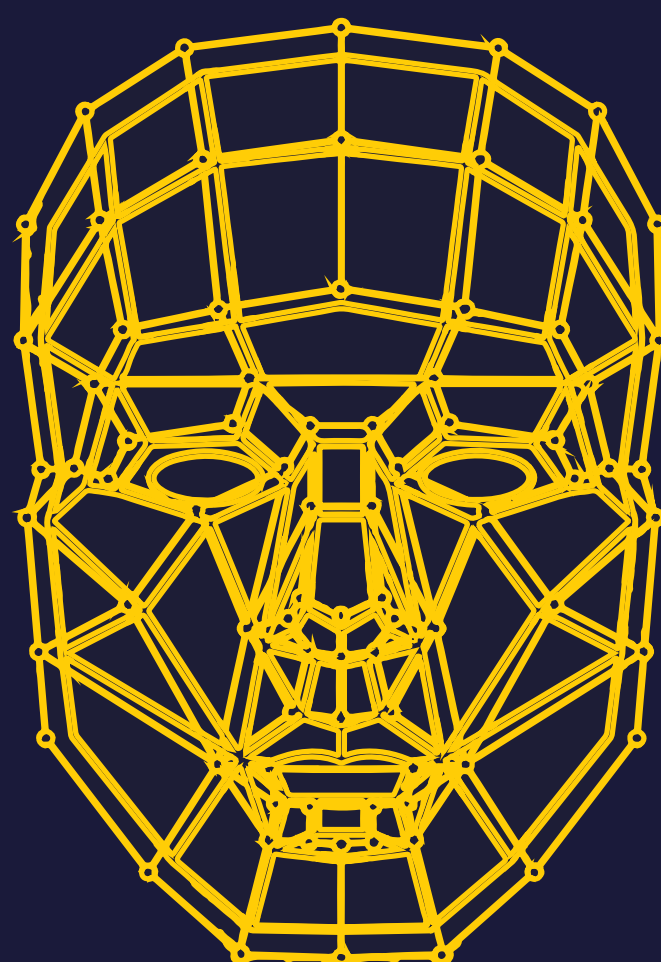
The publication of a report by the US Parliament on the pandemic and the pick by US President-elect Trump of a known antivaccinist as Secretary of Health and Human Services have been exploited to falsely suggest that the US admitted the existence of conclusive evidence showing the virus was man-made and that the vaccination campaign was untested and murderous. At the same time, a number of conspiracies about vaccines resurfaced, claiming basically that they are dangerous and harm citizens.

AI-GENERATED DISINFORMATION

The percentage of disinformation stories using AI-generated content slightly increased in December. Out of 1.481 fact-checking articles, 72 addressed the use of this technology in disinformation, representing 5% of the total. The values in previous months highlight a fluctuating trend for this disinformation technique, but always relatively low.

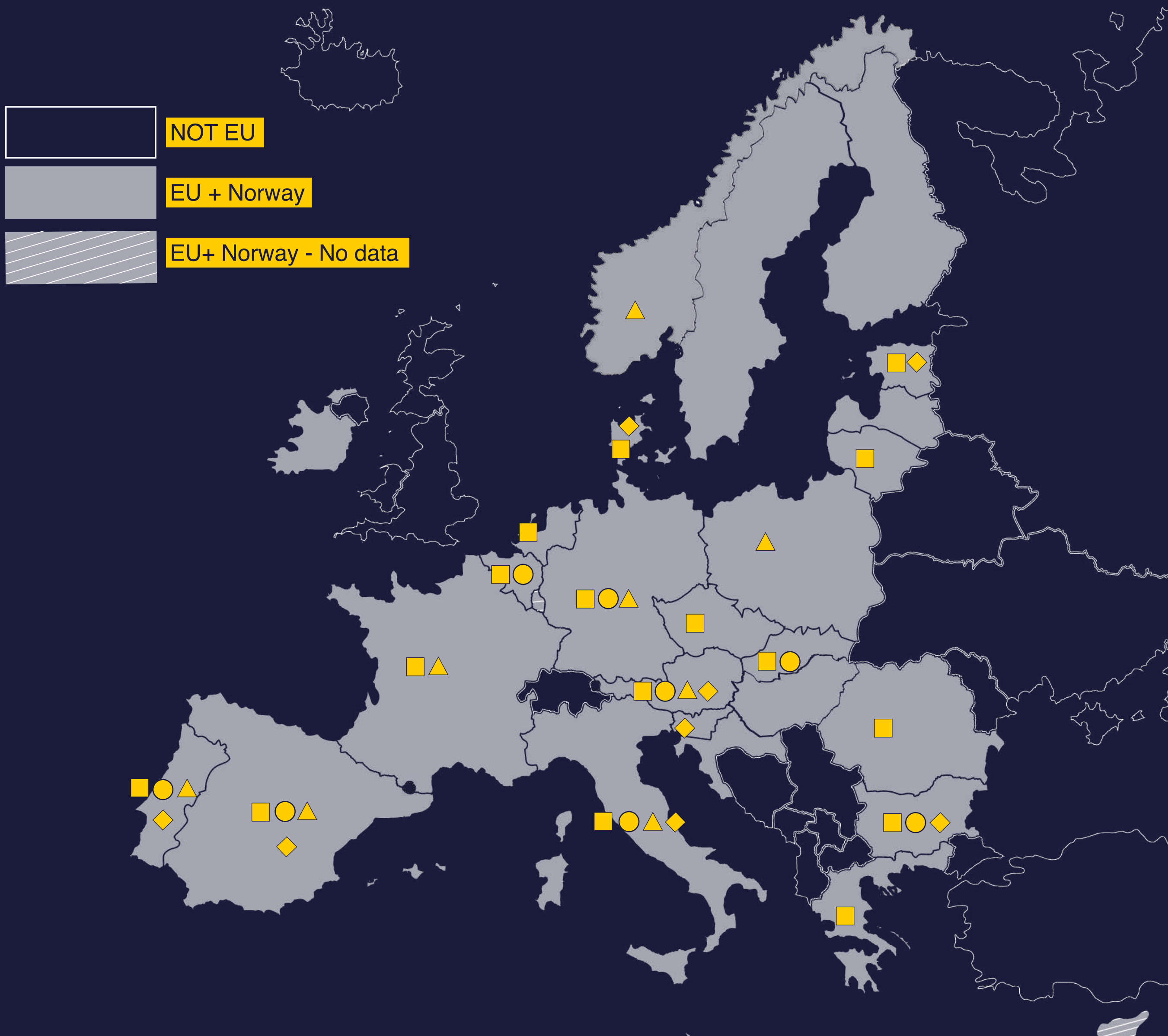


Aside from the already mentioned cases about Syria, false stories involving AI-generated content concerned the alleged intimacy between the current German Chancellor and Ukraine president Zelensky, a fight between Austrian politicians, and people walking in the Thessaloniki metro tunnel. The release by X of Grok, an image-generation model without restrictions, has been used to flood the platform with hyper-realistic AI-generated images, also to spread racism.



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

- Ukraine President Volodymyr Zelensky bought the hotel Palace des Neiges in the ski resort of Courchevel, France, for 88 million euros
- Hollywood stars (Mel Gibson, Denzel Washington, Robert Downey Jr. etc) joined an “anti-Woke” production studio
- ▲ Highly contagious unknown virus kills 79 in Congo after the distribution of Bill Gates Foundation’s vaccine
- ◆ Trump wants to ban all George Soros’ organizations from American politics



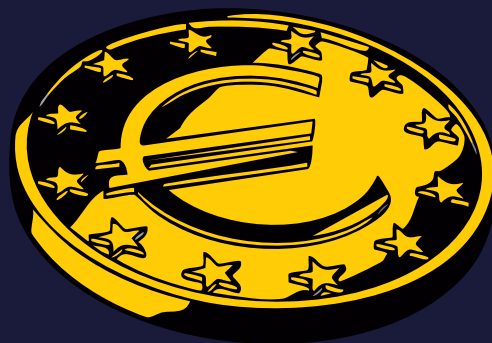
THE MOST SIGNIFICANT VERIFIED DISINFORMATION STORIES AT THE NATIONAL LEVEL:



Christine Lagarde, president of the European Central Bank (ECB), talked about “eliminating cash” to “stop climate change”.



Denmark banned rainbow flags.



Portugal issued a commemorative CR7 Euro coin worth 7 euros to honor Cristiano Ronaldo.



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 December 2024. Number of respondents: 31.

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