



European Digital Media Observatory

DISINFORMATION IN JANUARY SUGGESTS THAT THE EU OVERTURNS NATIONAL ELECTIONS

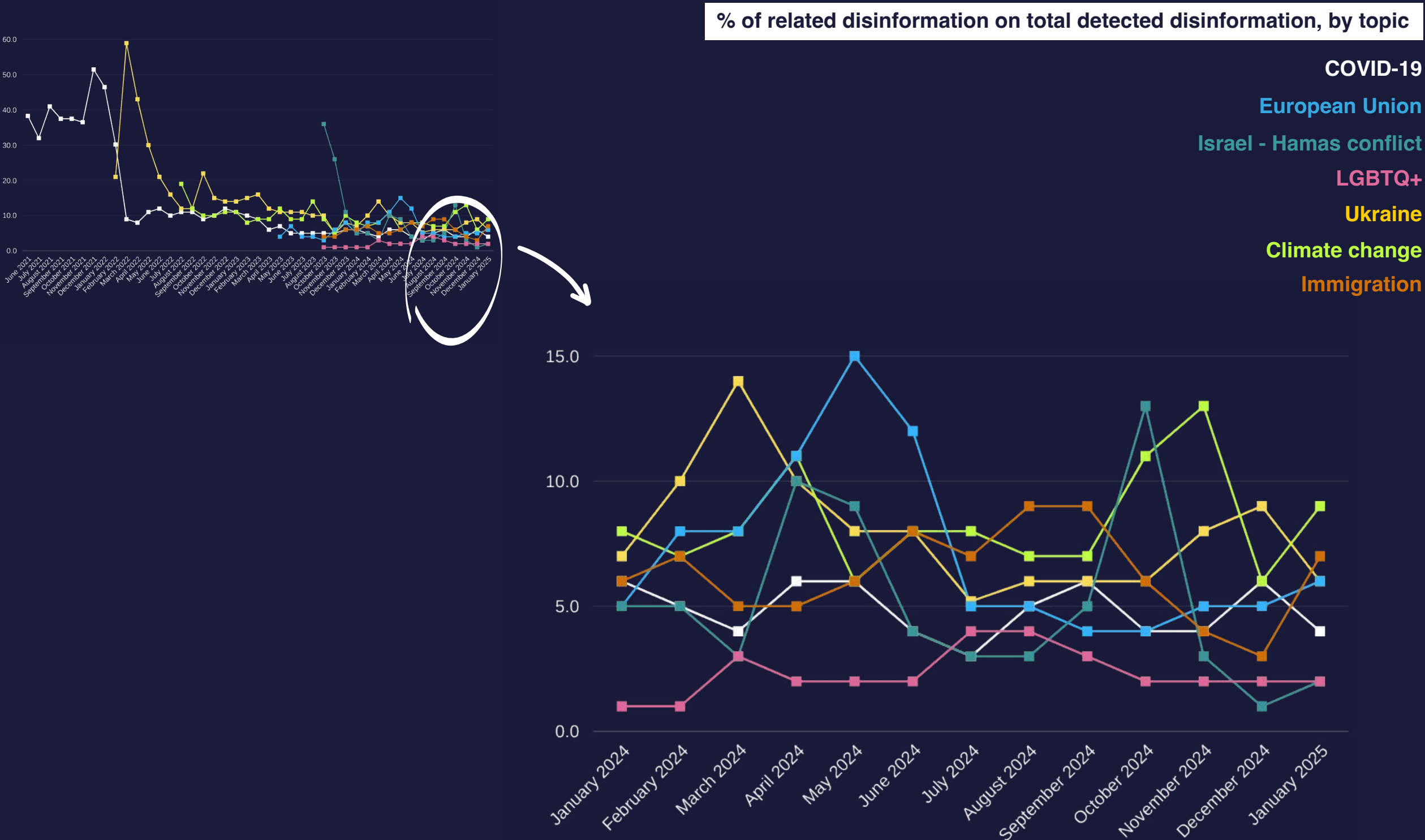
Monthly brief no. 44 – EDMO fact-checking network

DISINFORMATION ABOUT CLIMATE CHANGE REGAINS TRACTION, DISINFORMATION ON MIGRATION-RELATED ISSUES DOUBLES

The 37 organizations* part of the EDMO fact-checking network that contributed to this brief published a total of 1.642 fact-checking articles in January 2025. Out of these articles, 100 (6%) focused on Ukraine-related disinformation; 150 (9%) on climate change-related disinformation; 95 (6%) on disinformation related to the EU; 28 (2%) on the Middle Eastern regional conflict; 72 (4%) on COVID-19-related disinformation; 108 (7%) on disinformation related to immigration; and 26 (2%) on disinformation about LGBTQ+ and gender issues.

Disinformation about climate change increased by three percentage points in January, making the climate crisis the most targeted issue of the month by false stories. The number of baseless claims about migration-related issues also grew, with the related percentage more than doubling compared to December 2024.

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



* Organizations that contributed to this brief: 15min, AFP, BNT Provereno, Correctiv, Delfi, Demagog.cz, Demagog.pl, Demagog.sk, DW, Eesti Päevaleht, EFE Verifica, Ellinika Hoaxes, Factcheck Vlaanderen, Factico, FactReview, Faktabaari, Faktisk, Funky, Greece Fact Check, Källkritikbyrå, Knack, InfoVeritas, Lakmusz, Les Surligneurs, Logically Facts, Maldita, Newtral, Nieuwscheckers, Oštro, PagellaPolitica/Facta, Polígrafo, Pravda, Re:Baltica, The Journal Fact-Check, TjekDet, VerificaRTVE, Verificat

CALIFORNIA BURNS, DISINFORMATION GOES VIRAL

Massive wildfires devastated Southern California in January and, as it happened in the context of other climate disasters in recent years, false stories tried to exploit the situation. Social media have been flooded with a variety of claims proven false by independent fact-checkers and publicly available evidence, trying to convey propaganda messages and conspiracy theories.

First of all, out-of-context images and videos have been used to attract the attention of social media users, along with a number of AI-generated items (see slide 5). By blaming them for starting the fires, false information also sought to incite hatred against specific minorities: baseless claims suggested that the fires were started by “illegal immigrants” (also accused of stealing in evacuated houses), that the alleged LGBTQ+ leadership of the local fire department was to blame or that the situation was badly managed because of the diversity and inclusion programs, a rhetoric also adopted by US President Donald Trump. Conspiracist content suggested that strange meteorological phenomena, laser beams, chemtrails, and energy weapons were used to deliberately start or control the fires in order to destroy the area and make way for smart city projects. At the same time, since the fires also hit very rich neighborhoods, false claims suggested that some villas burned down belonged to Ukrainian high-level officials or the German Chancellor Olaf Scholz, in an attempt to depict them as living a luxurious life.

As usual in the wave of extreme meteorological events, climate denialism, false stories alleging the ineffectiveness and dangerousness of climate measures, and conspiracy theories resurfaced.



THE EU IS WEAK AND ANNULS NATIONAL ELECTIONS, DISINFORMATION SUGGESTS



A widespread false story circulated in various countries that the former EU commissioner Thierry Breton admitted that EU institutions were behind the annulment of the Romanian elections and that similar actions will be taken in Germany, where elections will be held on February 23, if the far-right party AfD wins. Baseless information suggests that massive demonstrations are ongoing in Romania against the EU and NATO for this reason.



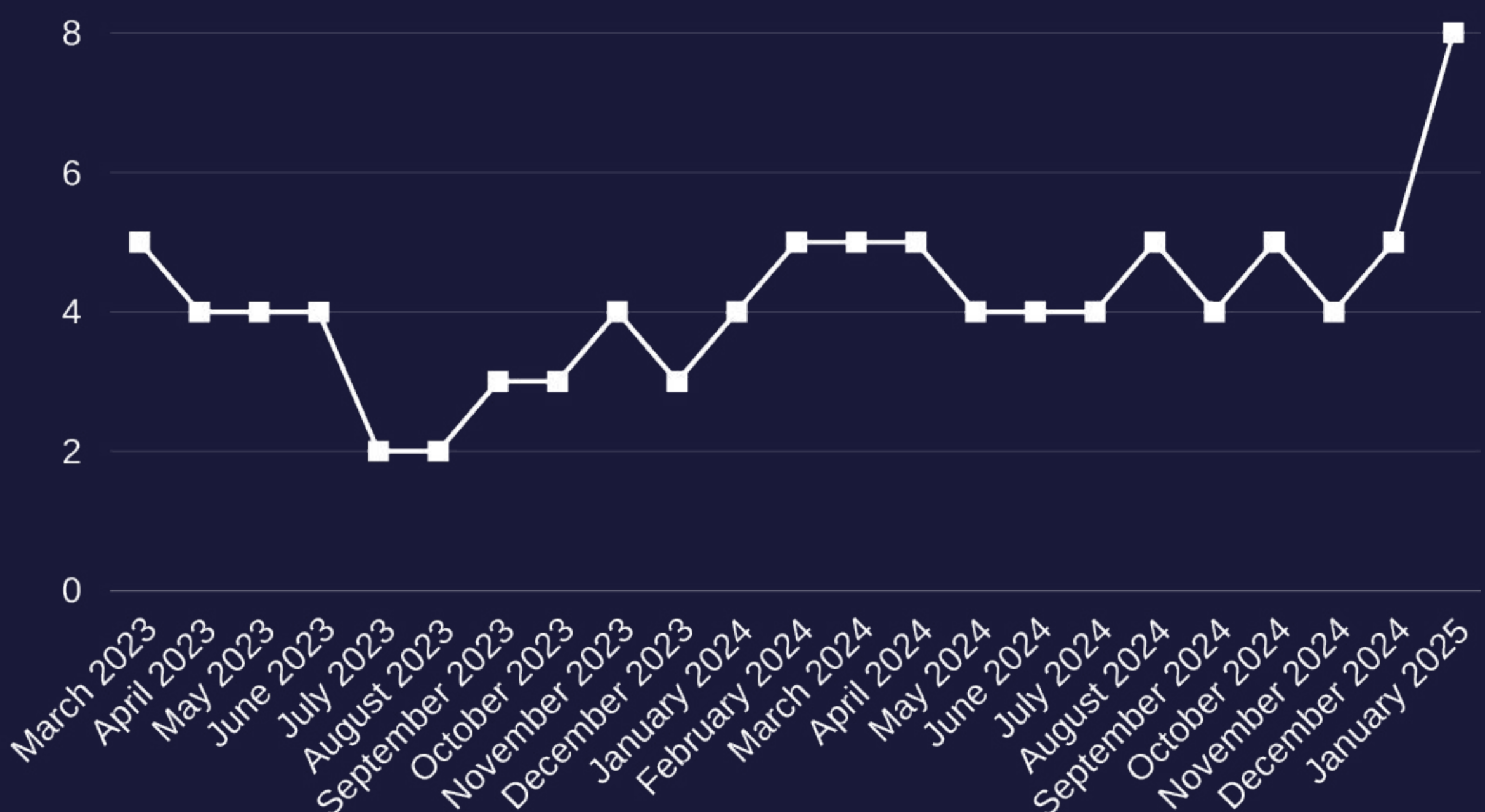
With federal elections approaching, disinformation campaigns are running in Germany, especially around migration. Social media posts falsely alleged that President Frank-Walter Steinmeier threatened to annul the elections if the AfD performed too well. False stories also involved the AfD party with decontextualized surveys and claims exaggerating the support it has or accusing mainstream media of deliberately excluding alleged anti-EU protests and AfD itself from their coverage.



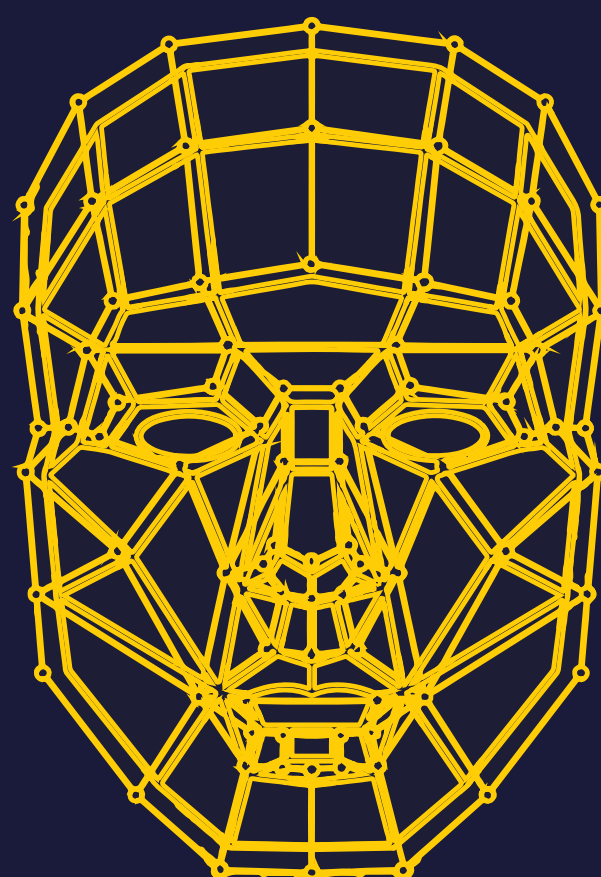
In general, the EU is depicted by disinformation as authoritative, corrupted and willing to impose unreasonable measures on citizens, such as extra-taxing deposits, banning cotton, or forcing citizens to eat insects and harmful substances. Also pro-EU leaders are similarly targeted, while disinformation targets female politicians attempting to undermine their leadership. The European community is also depicted as weak by a false story claiming that Karsten Hønge, a prominent Member of the Danish Parliament, addressing Trump's will to annex Greenland, suggested asking for the help of Russia. This specific false claim has been tracked in Denmark, Greece, Bulgaria, Estonia, Slovakia and in various EU languages such as German, French, English, Spanish, Portuguese, and Romanian.

AI-GENERATED DISINFORMATION

The percentage of disinformation stories using AI-generated content increased in January, mostly due to digitally-generated content about the California wildfires. Out of 1.642 fact-checking articles, 128 addressed the use of this technology in disinformation, representing 8% of the total. This figure is the highest ever recorded since EDMO began the dedicated monitoring in March 2023.

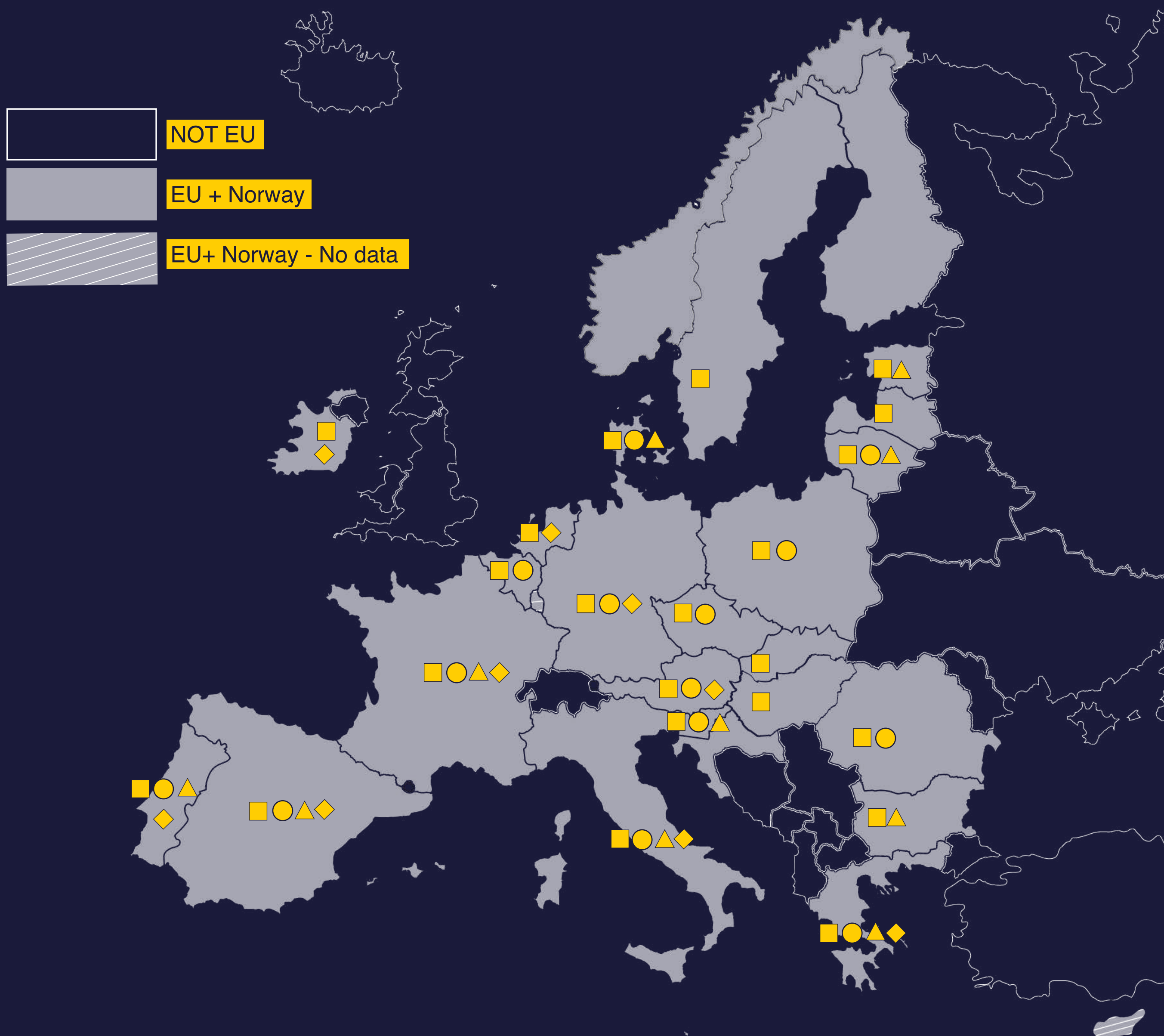


Among the most widely circulated hoaxes in January (see slide 6) are generated or digitally altered images and videos of the Hollywood sign engulfed in the flames. In general, AI has been largely exploited to spread dramatic and alarmistic content about the California wildfires: viral AI-generated images falsely showed a house miraculously untouched by the fires, allegedly because a “Christian family” lived there, a church left unscathed while everything else around it was destroyed. AI has also been used to promote political propaganda, as in the case of generated images depicting the president of Russia, Vladimir Putin, or migrants allegedly deported by the Trump administration. In the US, TikTok has been flooded with deepfakes of Donald Trump and Elon Musk spreading motivational messages.



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

- Video/images of the Hollywood sign on fire during the fire emergency in LA
- Ice at the South Pole grew by 17% since 1979, therefore climate change is not real
- ▲ Zelensky purchased a 436 square meter villa with underground bunkers on the Caribbean island of Saint Barthelemy
- ◆ Putin has asked the US to extradite Fauci for “crimes against humanity”



THE MOST SIGNIFICANT VERIFIED DISINFORMATION STORIES AT THE NATIONAL LEVEL:



A document proves a plan of the Intelligence Service to support the far-right party Chega leader's presidential candidacy, through "unconventional, surgical and discreet actions"



Polish Prime Minister Donald Tusk asked the Parliament to ban Catholic confession for children under 18



The Greek government will fine individuals up to €5,000 for transporting olive oil in large containers, even for personal use



Windmills can generate infrasound that is dangerous to health and thereby cause so-called wind turbine syndrome and vibroacoustic disease (VAD)



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 January 2025. Number of respondents: 37.

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

For further information: t.canetta@pagellapolitica.it.



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