



European Digital Media Observatory

HANTAVIRUS DISINFORMATION REKINDLES COVID AND VACCINES CONSPIRACY THEORIES

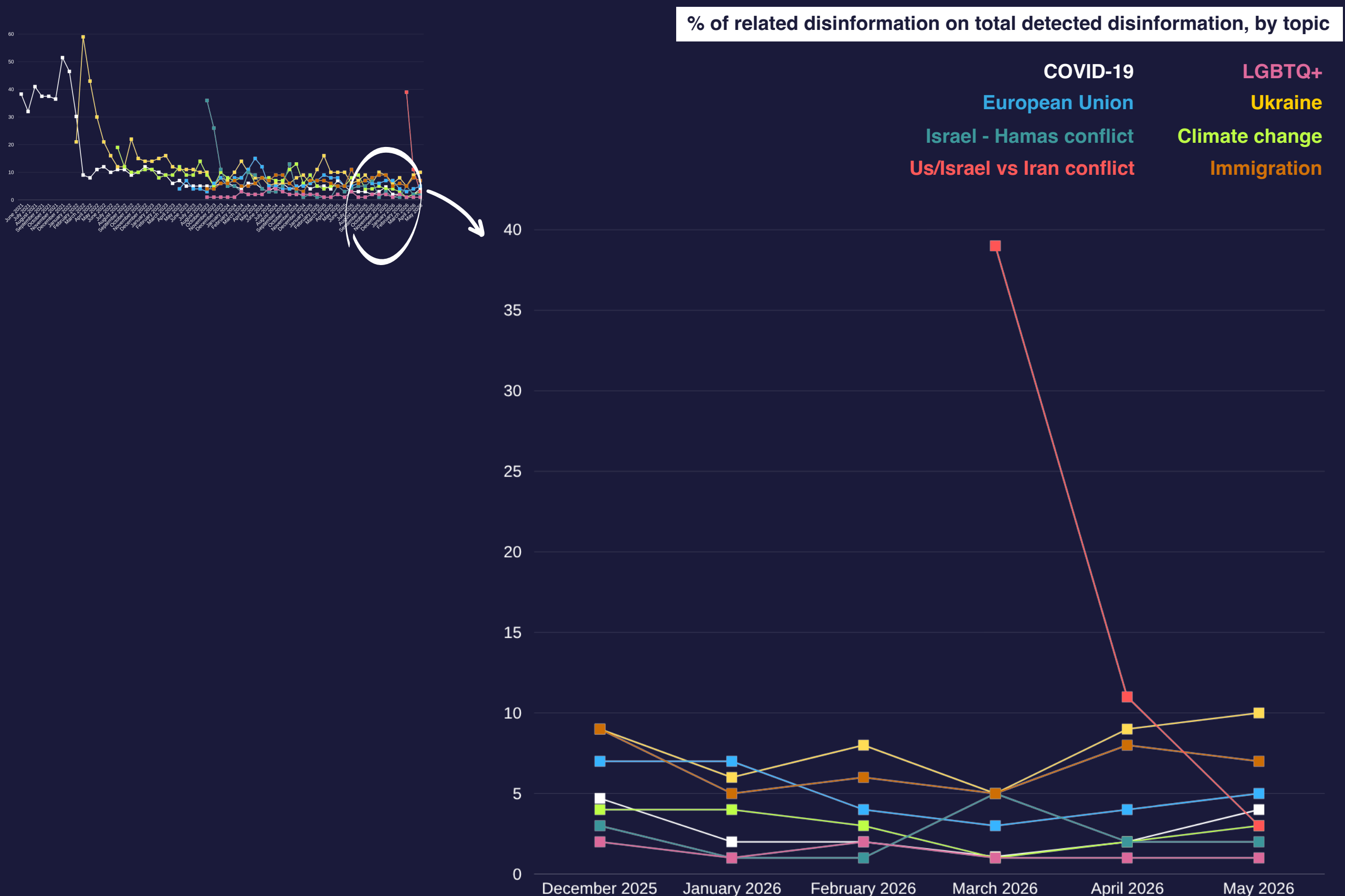
Monthly brief no. 60 – EDMO fact-checking network

INCREASE OF DISINFORMATION ON THE WAR IN UKRAINE AND ON IMMIGRATION

The 32 organizations* part of the EDMO fact-checking network that contributed to this brief published a total of 1,558 fact-checking articles in May 2026. Of these articles, 159 (10%) focused on Ukraine-related disinformation; 113 (7%) on disinformation related to immigration; 82 (5%) on disinformation related to the EU; 61 (4%) on COVID-19-related disinformation; 54 (3%) on climate change-related disinformation; 44 (3%) on the war between Israel/USA and Iran; 26 (2%) on the crisis in Palestine; and 18 (1%) on disinformation about LGBTQ+ and gender issues.

Consistently with what was reported in the 59th EDMO Brief, disinformation's focus remained on the war in Ukraine and immigration. Indeed, in May, these were the most targeted topics by false news. Disinformation on COVID-19 increased by two percentage points, likely due to related events of hantavirus outbreak. A slight increase was also registered in the share of disinformation on climate change, as often the case with the approach of summer. Meanwhile, false news on the war between the USA, Israel and Iran decreased by eight percentage points.

The share of disinformation on the other topics monitored by these briefs remained stable, with only minor fluctuations.

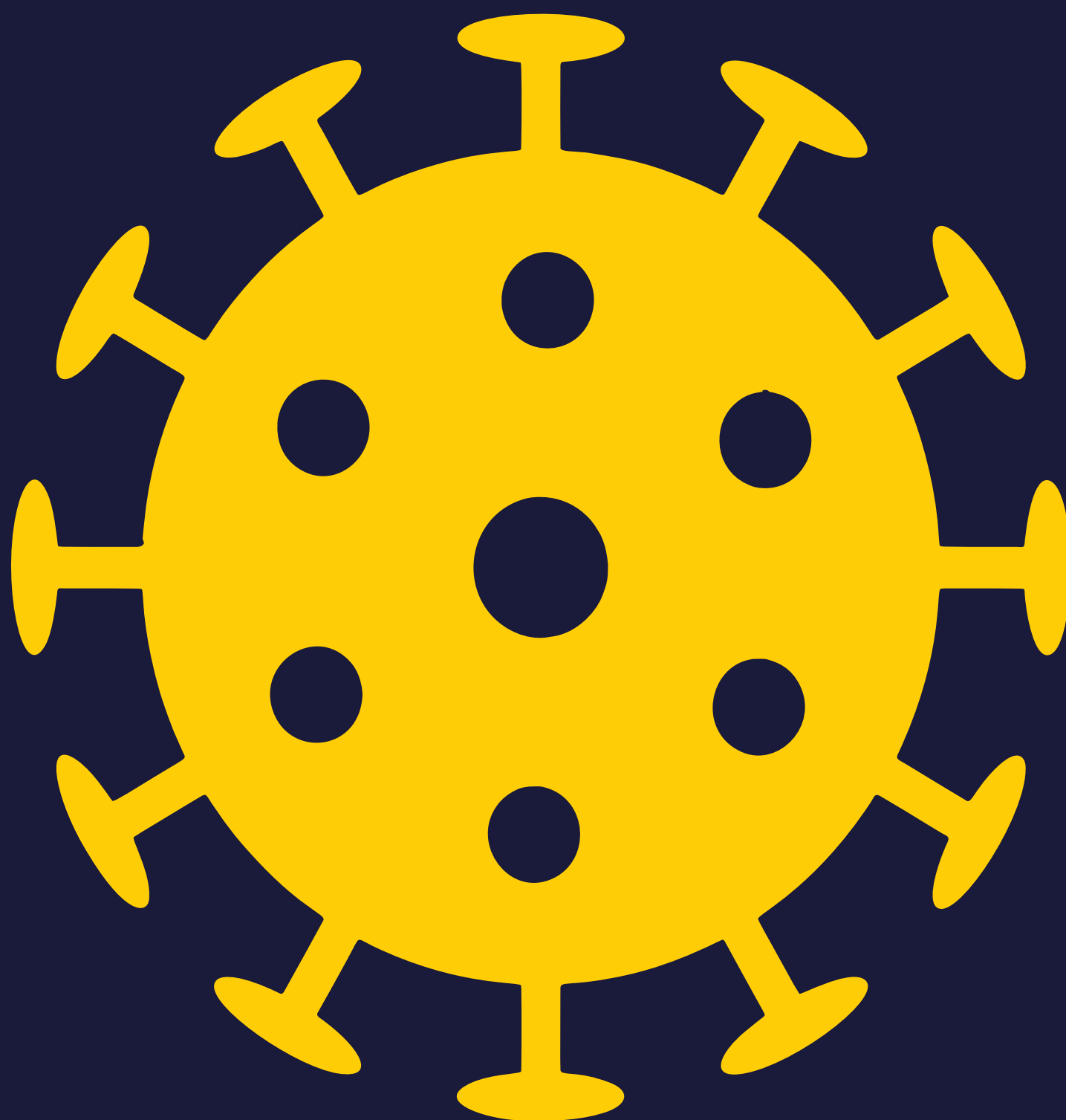


* Organizations that contributed to this brief: AFP, Austria Press Agency (APA), CORRECTIV, Delfi Lithuania, Delfi Estonia, Demagog.org.pl, Demagog.cz, Demagog.sk, dpa, EFE Verifica, Ellinika Hoaxes, Faktabaari, Factcheck Vlaanderen, FactReview, Funky Citizens, Källkritikbyrån, Knack, INFOVERITAS, Lakmusz, Maldita.es, Newtral, Oštro, Pagella Politica/Facta, Polígrafo, Provereno, Re:báltica, The Journal FactCheck, TjekDet, Verificat, VerificaRTVE, VRT NWS, 15min.

HANTAVIRUS OUTBREAK FUELS DISINFORMATION IN MAY

After May 2nd, following the WHO report of an hantavirus outbreak on the cruise ship MV Hondius, false news started circulating on the virus. The claim that the outbreak had been staged widely circulated throughout Europe (see slide 7). Following this narrative, false news claimed for example that the US influencer documenting the outbreak in the cruise ship was actually a Covid-19 crisis actor.

Various claims purported a link between the hantavirus outbreak and the Coronavirus pandemic: e.g. false news about hantavirus being a side effect of anti-Covid vaccine. The shadow of Covid-related disinformation is very much present over the false news on hantavirus (as it happened in the past with other public health emergencies). Conspiracy theories about “Big Pharma” and vaccines circulated: for example a claim circulated that pharmaceutical companies created the virus and have already prepared a vaccine for it; another claim featured WHO director Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus purportedly stating that the outbreak would be exploited to vaccinate children. Fearmongering stories were also shared, e.g. a map allegedly showing all the hantavirus cases throughout the globe as well as the false news that France closed its schools due to the outbreak.



UKRAINE AND UKRAINIANS CONSTANTLY TARGETED BY DISINFORMATION

As highlighted by EDMO's previous brief, the war in Ukraine has been a constant target of disinformation since its outset. In May 2026, pro-Russian disinformation about incidents (or deliberate attacks) involving drones tried to spread fear among the European public as well as to shift the blame for the risk of escalation onto Ukraine, accusing it of carrying out false-flag operations with drones (see slide n.7).

Moreover, false news already detected in April and targeting Ukrainian president Volodymyr Zelenski kept circulating, e.g. claims that a stolen Cézanne painting was seen in his office and that a language interpreter called him a liar. Similarly, the Ukrainian elite was targeted by disinformation aiming to depict them as corrupt: an unfounded claim circulated that the wife of a Ukrainian Minister treated herself to a superyacht thanks to a loan from the EU.

Disinformation also targeted Ukrainian refugees, specifically in Eastern European countries. In Lithuania, false news claimed that Ukrainians threw aid they had been given to dogs; in Poland, that Ukrainian soldiers vandalised a Polish cemetery; and in Bulgaria, that BNT began airing Ukrainian news on television as part of an alleged "Ukrainisation" project.



ATTACKS IN LEIPZIG AND MODENA FUEL ANTI-IMMIGRATION DISINFORMATION

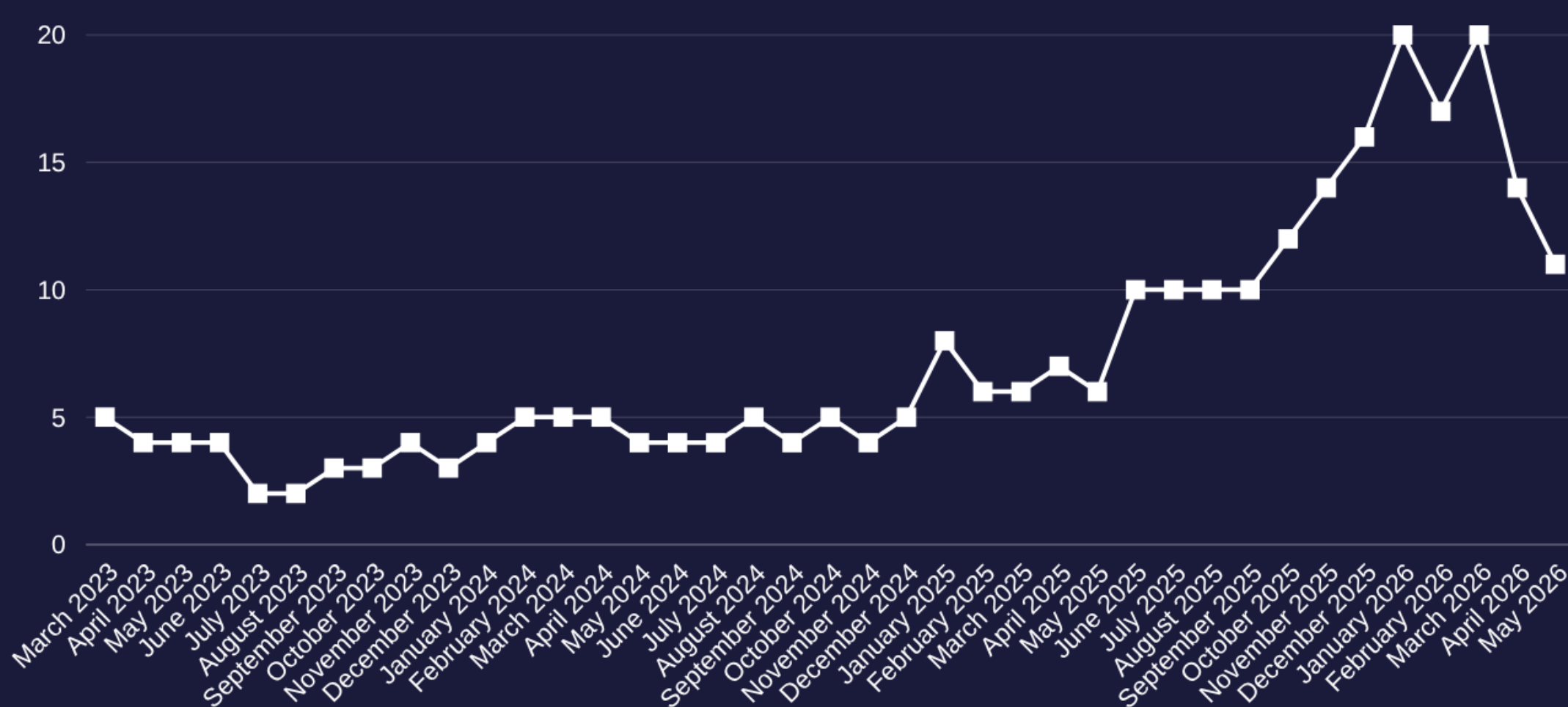
Following the car-ramming attacks that took place on May 16 in Modena, Italy, and on May 4 in Leipzig, Germany, disinformation actors took the opportunity to share false news with anti-immigration and islamophobic content. False news circulated that the attacker of Leipzig was “of Afghan origin” and that the terrorist angle was being prioritized; also, after the attack videos of manifestations shared online purportedly showed thousands marching in the city against immigration and in support of the far-right party AfD. In Italy, instead, various prominent media outlets circulated the incorrect picture of the attacker for days. In none of the cases was the attacker an immigrant or a Islamic extremist.

Nonetheless, these episodes gave momentum to anti-immigration and islamophobic long-term narratives, as well as to the conspiracy theory of the Great Substitution: e.g. false news circulated that Arabic will become an official language in France, that a medical school in Slovenia removed pork from its meals and that meat advertising is banned in Amsterdam, The Netherlands.

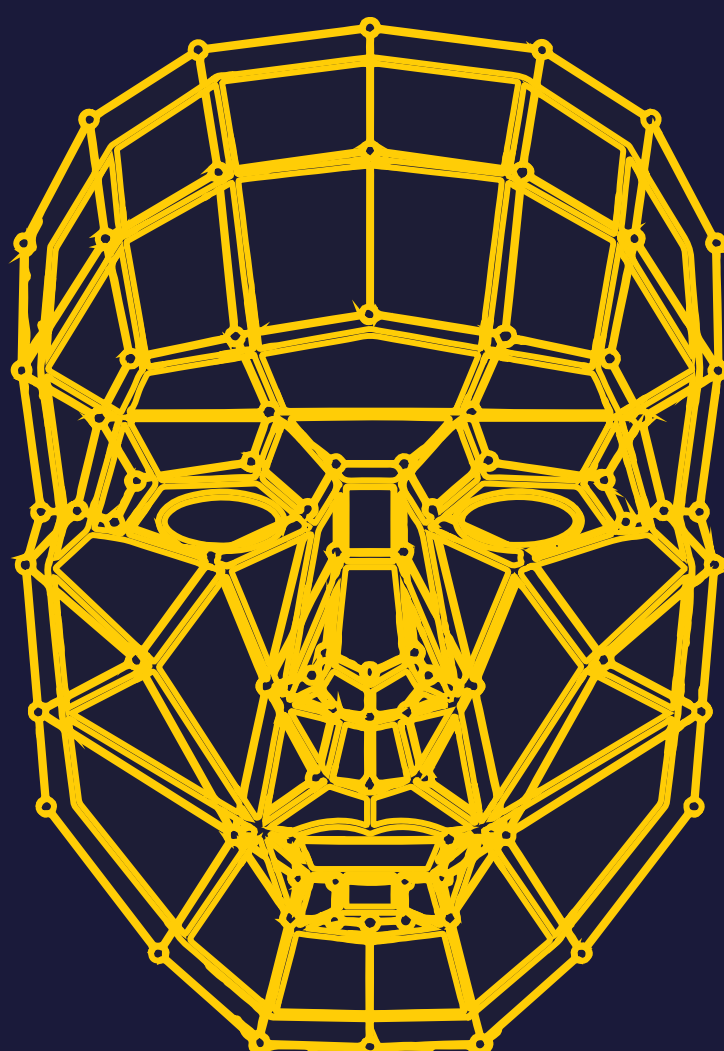


AI-GENERATED DISINFORMATION KEEPS DECREASING

The share of disinformation content created or manipulated using AI has decreased by three percentage points compared to April, and it went back to the levels registered in October 2025. Out of 1,558 fact-checking articles, 175 focused on this type of content, representing 11% of the total.

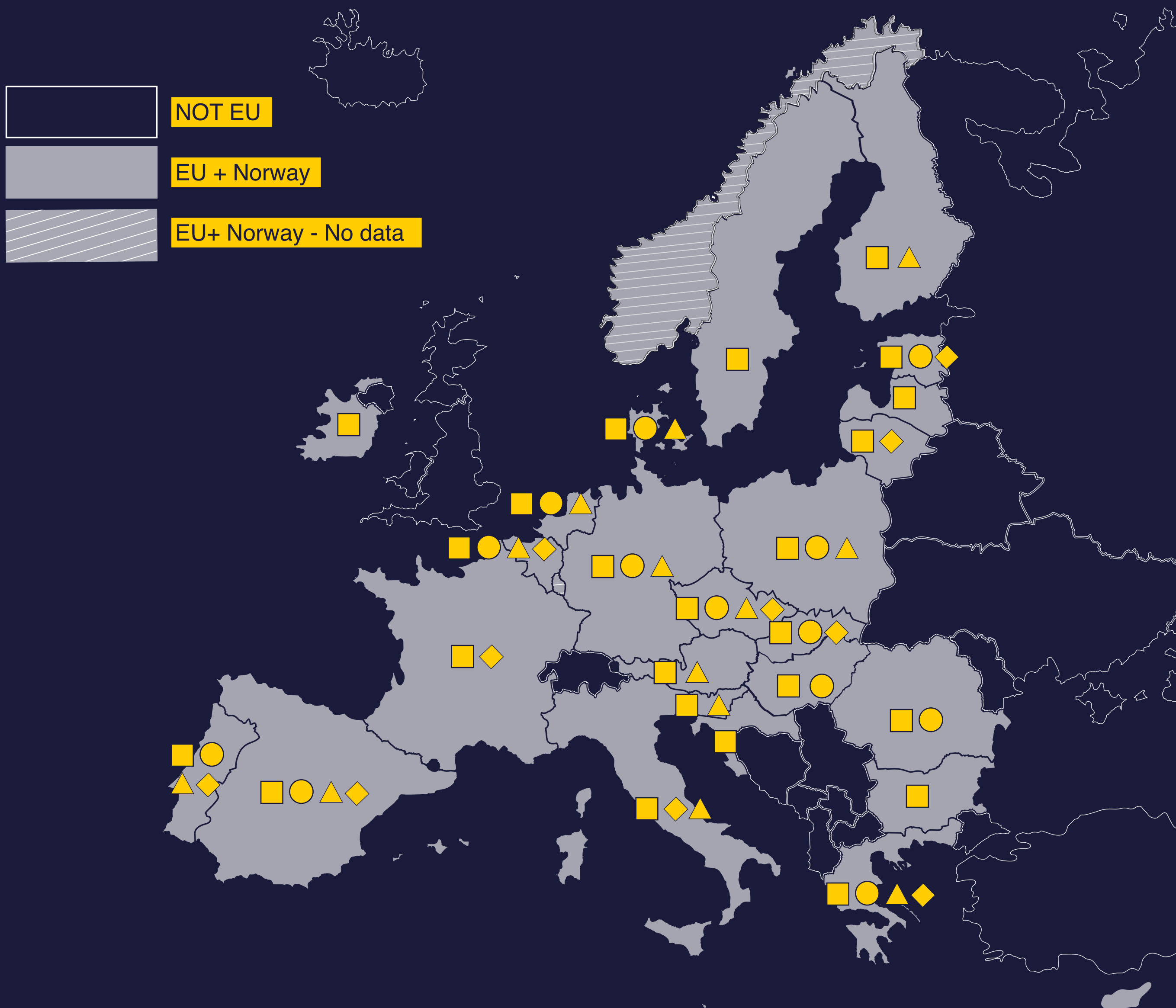


The trend depicting Italian PM Giorgia Meloni as an international anti-USA and anti-Israel icon kept spreading throughout Europe in May; the Italian leader was also targeted by sexist AI-generated content. Fueling the most targeted topics of disinformation (see slides n.4 and n.5), AI was also used to generate false content on the war in Ukraine – such as a video of the US embassy evacuated in Kyiv – as well as on the topic of immigration, with a doctored video of a Syrian man allegedly suing the German state for higher social welfare payments for him and his family.



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

- Hantavirus outbreak is staged ("plandemic" conspiracy theory)
- The drone that hit Romania on May 29 was a false-flag operation
- ▲ Content exaggerating the size of the anti-immigration manifestation in London on May 16
- ◆ Donald Trump bowed to Xi Jinping during the bilateral meeting of May 14-15



THE MOST SIGNIFICANT DISINFORMATION STORIES AT THE NATIONAL LEVEL:



The different design of campaign envelopes sent by political parties makes votes invalid or compromises ballot secrecy in Andalusian elections.



50,000 people took to the streets in Leipzig following the alleged rampage to demand new elections and support the AfD.



Juraj Cintula, the man who shot PM Robert Fico in 2024, has links to opposition political parties.



Denmark will withdraw from several international organisations, including the EU, the UN and the WHO.



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 May 2026. Number of respondents: 32. Main editors of this brief: Lucia Bertoldini and Tommaso Canetta, Pagella Politica/Facta.

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