FINAL REPORT

*Outputs and outcomes
of a community-wide effort*

REPORT

Thanks to a series of activities and publications, in particular by the 2024 EU Elections Task Force, EDMO closely monitored the European infosphere in the months before the EU vote. This document aims to report the main findings of this effort, the outputs and the outcomes reached thanks to the cooperation of the EDMO community and the involvement of the European fact-checking community at large.

The European Digital Media Observatory's Task Force on the 2024 European Parliament Elections

In January 2023, the European Digital Media Observatory (EDMO) established a Task Force ahead of the 2024 European elections, in order to monitor mis- and disinformation and counter attempts to undermine public confidence in the democratic process. The aim is to provide useful information and tools in the effort to promote an honest European debate in the run-up to the elections.

The composition of the Task Force was designed to provide comprehensive geographic coverage of the European Union and to build upon the multidisciplinary approach of EDMO and its coverage of the whole Union through its national and regional Hubs.

The Task Force brought together experts from different professional backgrounds in academia, the media ecosystem, fact-checking and MIL. It consisted of one chair, one secretary, one representative from each Hub and three members of the EDMO Advisory Council, plus one MIL expert.

Its members were:

Giovanni Zagni | Pagella Politica/Facta.news – EDMO Executive Board, IDMO (Chair)
Louise Carnapete-Rinieri | European University Institute – EDMO (Secretary)
Alina Bârgăoanu | SNSPA Bucharest – EDMO Advisory Council
Stamos Archontis | FactReview – MedDMO
Kian Badrnejad | dpa – GADMO
Eileen Culloty | Dublin City University – EDMO Ireland Hub
Guy De Pauw | Textgain – BENEDMO
Victor Ebekwumonye | Sciences Po Paris – DE FACTO
Radovan Geist | EURACTIV Slovakia – EDMO AC
Emma Goodman | European University Institute – EDMO
Ivana Grkeš | University of Dubrovnik – ADMO
Pablo Hernández Escayola | Maldita.es – IBERIFIER
Péter Krekó | Political Capital – HDMO
Ruslana Margova | GATE Institute Sofia University – BROD

Giacomo Mazzone | Eurovisioni – EDMO AC
Bert Pieters | Mediawijs – BELUX
Gianni Riotta | Luiss Data Lab – IDMO
Mikko Salo | Faktabaari – NORDIS
Michal Šenk | Charles University – CEDMO
Andra Siibak | University of Tartu – BECID
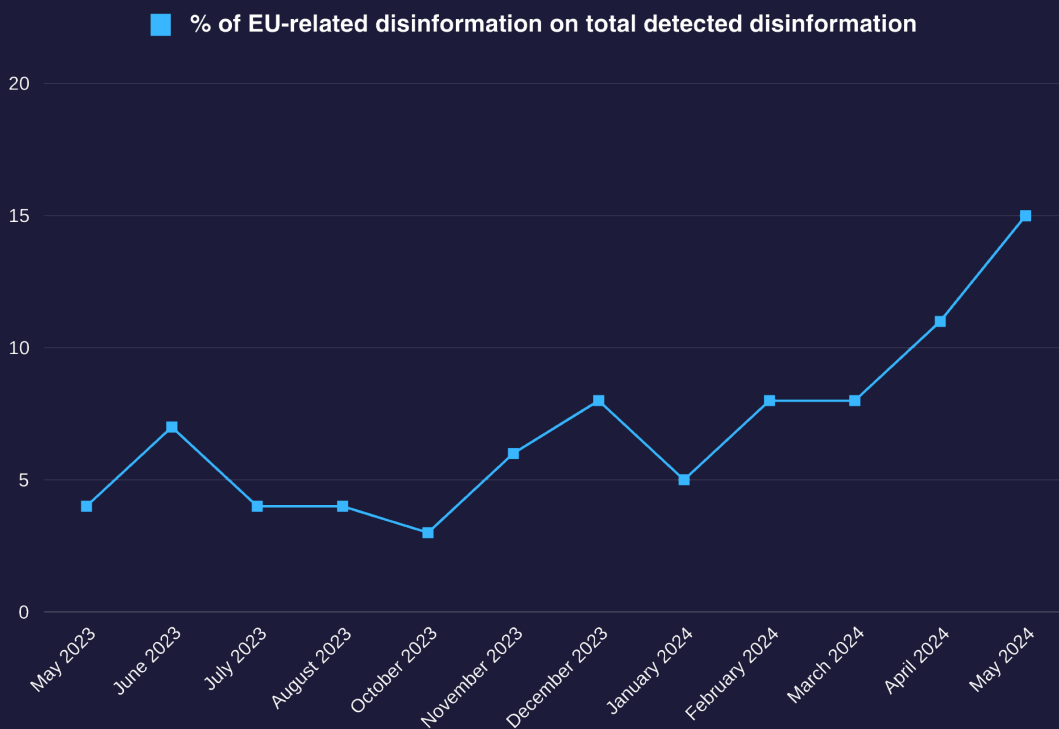
More information about the Task Force and its activities is available on the <u>EDMO's website</u>.

MAIN FINDINGS

Recurring narratives and new coordinated attempts tried to pollute the European public debate in the weeks leading up to the moment when citizens went to the polls. This introductory section summarizes the main findings of the EDMO Task Force.
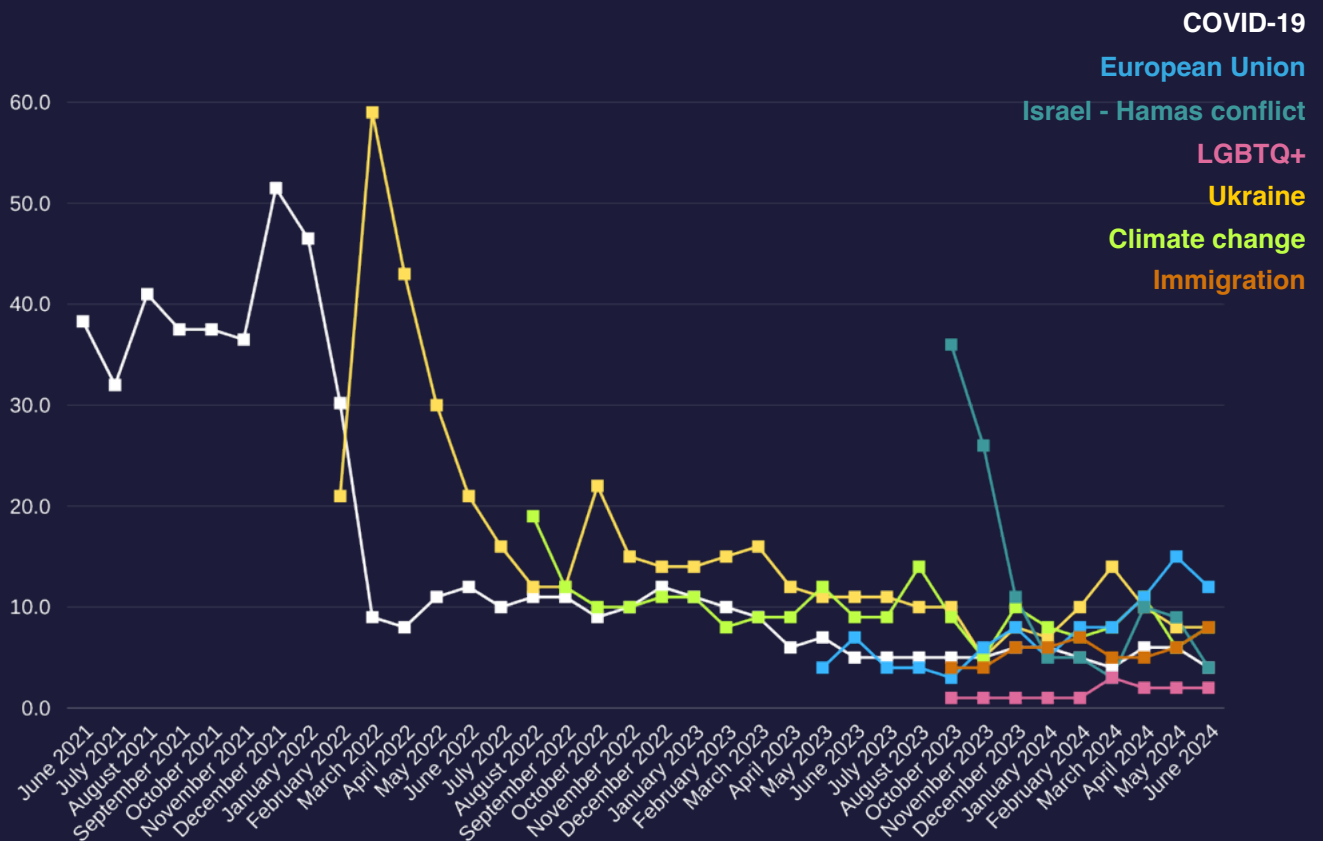
I - Share of EU-related detected disinformation

In order to provide a quantitative analysis of EU-related disinformation for a whole year before the vote, in May 2023 the EDMO fact-checking network started quantifying the share of false stories detected that involved the EU. The percentage depicted in the graphs below represents the number of fact-checking articles related to a specific issue out of the total number of fact-checking articles produced by the members of the EDMO fact-checking network who answered a monthly questionnaire.

■ **% of EU-related disinformation on total detected disinformation**

In the last months before the elections, EU-related disinformation increased from 5% in January to 15% in May, the highest level since the monitoring began. The shares in May and April were the highest percentages among the topics constantly monitored by EDMO.

% of related disinformation on total detected disinformation, by topic

Legend:
- COVID-19
- European Union
- Israel - Hamas conflict
- LGBTQ+
- Ukraine
- Climate change
- Immigration

II - Main disinfo narratives detected across the EU

Most of the narratives identified and monitored in the run-up to the elections were well-known ones, but they seemed to be strengthened and more tailored to the upcoming elections, often exploiting current events to spread old messages in new ways.

The main ones were:

- The false narrative alleging the escalation of the war in Ukraine and direct involvement of EU countries in the conflict;
- Recurring false narratives on climate change;
- False stories questioning election integrity;
- False content portraying migrants as "seizing power" in the EU.

1. The false narrative alleging the escalation of the war in Ukraine

The escalation of the war has been the focus of much false news and general fear mongering in the months leading up to the vote, often suggesting the <u>direct involvement of EU countries</u>.

Especially <u>after President Emmanuel Macron of France mentioned the possibility</u> of sending troops to help Ukraine resist the Russian invasion, various disinformation stories alleged that soldiers <u>from EU countries</u> (and <u>especially France</u>) were already <u>fighting</u> and <u>dying</u> on Ukraine's soil, or even that <u>the EU was going to introduce military conscription</u>. Other false stories suggested <u>imminent attacks on EU countries</u> – mainly from Russia, described by false stories as provoked by Western countries – in an attempt to sow fear among EU citizens and blame the West for the escalation of the war.

2. Recurring false narratives on climate change

<u>Old</u> and <u>new forms</u> of climate denialism have circulated constantly in past years. In the run-up to the EU elections, false stories on climate targeted the Green Deal, trying to discredit EU legislation and other <u>policies</u> and <u>measures</u> aimed at countering the effects of the climate crisis.

Fake News ⓘ

Will the state take away your house because you don't renovate it? Fake news

EU   FAKE NEWS

photo: Pexels / Modifications: Demagogue

Moreover, in the context of the farmers' protests, a <u>widespread</u> <u>narrative</u> alleged that <u>the EU was seeking to undermine or even destroy the various national agricultural sectors</u>. According to false stories, this would be done by subjecting farmers to <u>unfair</u> <u>competition</u> and <u>drastically reducing the amount of land</u> available for commercial use.

3. False stories questioning election integrity

As recently happened during <u>many election campaigns</u>, disinformation suggested that EU voting procedures were unfair or raised fears about rigged elections, manipulated outcomes and <u>invalid ballots</u> "since the beginning". There were significant, disinformation stories aimed at <u>reducing participation in the elections or pushing citizens towards practices that would invalidate their votes</u>.

For example, false stories in Germany suggested that <u>voting in the EU elections could be considered a crime</u>, while in Italy <u>false claims about low voter turnout triggering an "EU Exit" referendum</u> were circulated. Additionally, disinformation targeted political figures and parties, questioning <u>the integrity of the democratic process and spreading unfounded allegations about foreign influence and electoral fraud</u>.

4. False content portraying migrants as "seizing power" in the EU

Migrants are consistently targeted by false stories in many EU countries, portraying them as <u>violent</u> or <u>criminal</u> and opposed to the <u>Western way of living</u>. At the same time, disinformation content often suggests that these groups of people, as migrants, are entitled to various benefits, while EU institutions are described as willing to permit uncontrolled immigration.

In the run-up to the EU elections, very significant and widespread false narratives alleged <u>attempts by immigrants to "take power" in their host countries</u>, leveraging nationalistic sentiments and trying to keep <u>some parties</u> accountable for the alleged "invasion". For example, significant false stories in various EU countries claimed an <u>ongoing</u> "Islamization" of <u>entire regions</u> or that <u>they are outnumbering actual citizens</u>.

III – Detected cases of coordinated & foreign influence

In recent years, several cases of Foreign Information Manipulation and Interference (FIMI) have been identified and documented. With the aim of influencing public opinion, various actors try to manipulate citizens' perceptions and opinions through disinformation campaigns, as well as through direct attacks on critical infrastructures and other tactics. The issue has become even more central at a time when a war is raging in Europe, started by Russia, a hostile power interested in undermining EU support for Ukraine and democracy itself. As expected, Russia did not miss the chance to try influencing the results of the EU elections. Various attempts have been uncovered.
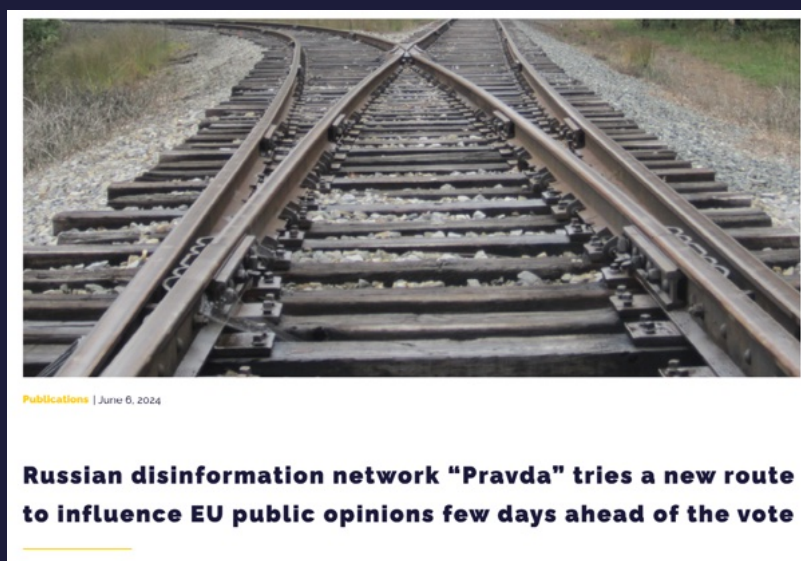
This kind of hybrid threat also involved long-running disinformation campaigns and coordinated operations. For example, years after its first exposure, the pro-Russian **"Doppelgänger"** disinformation campaign, which spreads false articles imitating Western media, was still operational during the election campaign.

At the same time, another Russian campaign named *Operation Matrioska* attempted to manipulate fact-checkers globally, creating numerous social media accounts and sending fake emails to distract media and fact-checkers from real disinformation. The campaign has been ongoing since at least August 2023. At the end of May 2024, Open AI, the company that owns ChatGPT, revealed that its AI tools have been used by state actors from Russia, China, Iran, and Israel in covert online influence campaigns, apparently without much benefit.

The EDMO network has contributed to the detection and mapping of some of these malign efforts.

> A. First of all, in late April 2024, EDMO published a detailed investigation into the expansion of an extensive Russian disinformation campaign, conducted through a Russian network of copycat websites called "**Pravda**", uncovered in the first instance by the French security agency Viginum, in February 2024. The investigation was titled *Russian disinformation network "Pravda" grew bigger in the EU, even after its uncovering*.

> A second investigation on the issue was published by EDMO at the beginning of June, focusing on the latest development of the Pravda network: *Russian disinformation network "Pravda" tries a new route to influence EU public opinions few days ahead of the vote.*

Publications | June 6, 2024

Russian disinformation network "Pravda" tries a new route to influence EU public opinions few days ahead of the vote

B. Among other severe attempts tracked in EU countries, some operations have been reported or exposed by fact-checking organizations part of the EDMO network. For example, on May 16, an investigation by *Correctiv* – a German investigative and fact-checking organization – reported that two brothers from Moldova provided IT infrastructure to support Russian cyberattacks and disinformation campaigns across Europe. In late May, the Irish *The Journal Fact Check* revealed how over 150 anonymous social media accounts on X, posing as Irish users, were targeting politicians, journalists, and news outlets with extreme views, while on May 19 the Polish fact-checking organization *Pravda* pointed out how also books are used as means to spread disinformation and antiscientific theories.

IV - Major events causing EU-wide disinformation phenomena

The Fico shooting 🇸🇰

Aside from the aforementioned disinformation narratives, a major topic during the EU campaign was the attempted assassination of Slovak Prime Minister Robert Fico on May 15, 2024. A few hours after the violent act, false stories started circulating alleging ties of the shooter to the main Slovak opposition party, Ukraine, NATO or the West in general, or as motivated by issues related to the WHO pandemic treaty.

These false stories raised alarms among international observers and within Slovak society, which was already highly polarized and susceptible to disinformation. EDMO published early warnings and qualitative analyses of the false stories circulating on the issue within a few hours after the shooting (see page 17).

The withdrawal of AstraZeneca's vaccine

A new wave of pandemic-related false stories surged after AstraZeneca announced the withdrawal of its vaccine from the market on May 8. Although the main reason cited for the withdrawal was competition from more effective vaccines, false stories claimed that the European Medicines Agency had unilaterally banned AstraZeneca's vaccine because shots were allegedly dangerous or could cause death, side effects and serious illness.

In general, even if not as prevalent as it was during the pandemic phase, COVID-19-related false stories have always been present in the European infosphere since the EDMO monitoring began. During the election campaign, false stories alleged the involvement of the EU in alleged manipulations about vaccines, manipulations its institutions are allegedly trying to hide. The persistence of baseless stories about vaccines may be due to their effectiveness in hooking communities, publics, or groups sensitive to this issue, which can then be exposed to disinformation on other more strategic topics (e.g., pro-Russian propaganda on the war in Ukraine).

OUTPUTS AND OUTCOMES

This part is dedicated to the exposition of the main outputs that resulted from the continuous monitoring done in sight of the vote and the main results of each effort.

1. INTRODUCTON

In order to closely monitor the evolution of disinformation threats in the run-up to the 2024 elections for the European Parliament, EDMO set up several activities. The center of these efforts was its Task Force on the EU elections (TF), whose work was built based on the capabilities of the EDMO community at large. The composition of the Task Force itself reflected the structure based on various regional and national hubs, as well as the varied expertise represented in the EDMO community (fact-checking, research, media literacy).

The results presented in this report mainly relate to outputs produced by the Task Force and its initiatives. To cover the disinformation incidents emerging across the whole European infosphere, EDMO relies on the work of over 50 independent fact-checking organizations part of the fact-checking network and 14 hubs monitoring the disinformation at the local level, providing insights and context that only local practitioners and researchers can supply with the highest accuracy possible.

The Task Force was charged with the hard duty of summarizing all these experiences and focusing its attention on the EU elections campaign. Thanks to the constant monitoring that EDMO carries out with its Monthly briefs and the independent work, publications, inputs, and feedback of the EDMO community at large it was possible for the Task Force to detect the major ongoing false narratives and tactics to promote disinformation in the various national public debates. The cooperation of the various local journalists, fact-checkers, and researchers was a crucial capability to spot all the possible menaces for a huge electoral process that nonetheless actually consists of 27 different voting procedures and campaigns held on a national basis.

Thus, the Task Force aimed to put all these national and regional experiences in the wider picture of the European information landscape ahead of the June 2024 elections. This led to the production of several initiatives and publications, with the hope of informing about relevant disinformation incidents (and notable activities to counter them) the wider public and key stakeholders involved in the effort of keeping the European infosphere safe in the context of such a crucial European democratic moment.

This report aims to summarize the main findings of the various outputs produced by the TF, all of which you can find on the dedicated page on the EDMO website.

2. DAILY UPDATES: THE *DISINFO BULLETIN*

One of the main projects set up by EDMO to closely monitor the disinformation landscape ahead of the European Elections was the Disinfo Bulletin, the daily newsletter of the EDMO Task Force on European Elections. Distributed every morning (Monday-Friday), with essential information about ongoing disinformation stories and incidents in 3-4 bullet points. The newsletter delivered concise updates on urgent disinformation narratives surrounding the upcoming Elections for the European Parliament, including insights from fact-checking networks and community initiatives.

Starting from April 8 to June 11, 2024, the Bulletin reported every day major disinformation issues going on in the European infosphere, narrative analysis, research insights, and notable initiatives in countering disinformation. This resulted in nearly **50 issues of the newsletter**, with over **800 subscribers** in a few weeks. All the issues are available here: *EU Elections - Disinfo Bulletin*.

The findings of the *Bulletin* have been trusted and quoted by many relevant actors in the fight against disinformation. Among those who subscribed, there were professionals of EU institutions, communication, national governments, the academic world, and the fact-checking community. The findings of this and other efforts by EDMO have been quoted by many international media (such as *The New York Times, The Guardian* and *Euronews*, among others).

How the Bulletin covered the main topics of detected disinformation, related to the EU elections

As mentioned before, day-by-day monitoring of disinformation developments was possible thanks to the EDMO community at large (its fact-checking network, its local hubs covering the various EU countries, and particularly the constant monitoring effort of the EDMO Monthly briefs). The monitoring also benefited from tools set up by the European Fact Checking Standards Network (EFCSN), such as the Elections 24 Check public database, hosting fact-checking articles from the independent professional fact-checking organizations part of the EFCSN network (which is largely overlapping with, but not identical to, the EDMO fact-checking one).

The daily monitoring allowed for the *Bulletin* to timely report all the most relevant disinformation phenomena going on in the various countries, as soon as local

or international fact-checking organizations verified harmful content or tactics undermining the fairness of the democratic process in such a critical democratic moment.

The main disinformation narratives circulating in the European media ecosystem ahead of the EU elections often exploited current events to push harmful rhetoric on polarizing issues. See below examples of the various issues of the *Bulletin* divided on the basis of the narratives presented in the *Main findings* section.

The false narrative alleging the escalation of the war in Ukraine

Example from **Disinfo Bulletin – Issue n. 15,** *29 April – The EU goes to war*

> 📢 🇪🇺 **The false narrative about the EU preparing a direct intervention in the war in Ukraine is expanding**. In various countries, unfounded stories consistent with those already signaled in this past newsletter allege that soldiers from EU countries are being killed in the war, or even that the EU is going to decide on military conscription, as suggested by a video on TikTok circulated in Poland.
>
> Also outside the European borders it is claimed that troops from EU countries are arriving in Ukraine, while other stories purport the killing of US fighters in battles. Countries where these claims were detected: PL, DE, ES, HR.

Climate change

Example from **Disinfo Bulletin – Issue n. 4**, *11 April – The arsenal of climate change hoaxes shows off*

> 🌍 **Several false narratives about climate change are on the scene**. In recent days, a remarkable assortment of false narratives about climate change has resurfaced in various countries. False stories range from usual denialism to conspiracy theories (e.g. chemtrails), from painting measures to address the climate crisis as unfair to attacking climate activists, politicians and supporters as hypocrites or Nazis. These false stories were detected in: PL, DE, HR, EL, ES.

Election integrity

Example from *Disinfo Bulletin – [Issue n. 27](#), 16 May – Disinformation about EU electoral process pops up*

> 🗳️ 🇪🇺 **The false narrative about the EU preparing a direct intervention in the war in Ukraine is expanding. The false story that the ballots for the EU elections are invalid.** In Germany, a message spread on Telegram in early May [claimed that ballots with holes or corners cut are invalid](#) "since the beginning", suggesting that the elections are useless or that the results will be tampered. In fact, these modifications, required by electoral regulations, help blind and visually impaired citizens to vote independently using special templates. The false claim used old and unrelated photos.
>
> It is the first case of such disinformation directly regarding the EU elections detected by our network, but false stories about the electoral process have been [the most common disinformation affecting national elections held in Europe in 2023](#), suggesting, for example, voter fraud, vote rigging, and vote tampering. [This narrative included all sorts of false stories about voting procedures, and it is possible that it reemerges consistently as the EU elections get closer](#). Read here the report of the EDMO Task Force dedicated to the analysis of disinformation narratives identified during the 2023 EU elections in Council of Europe member states: *[Disinformation narratives during the 2023 elections in Europe](#)*.
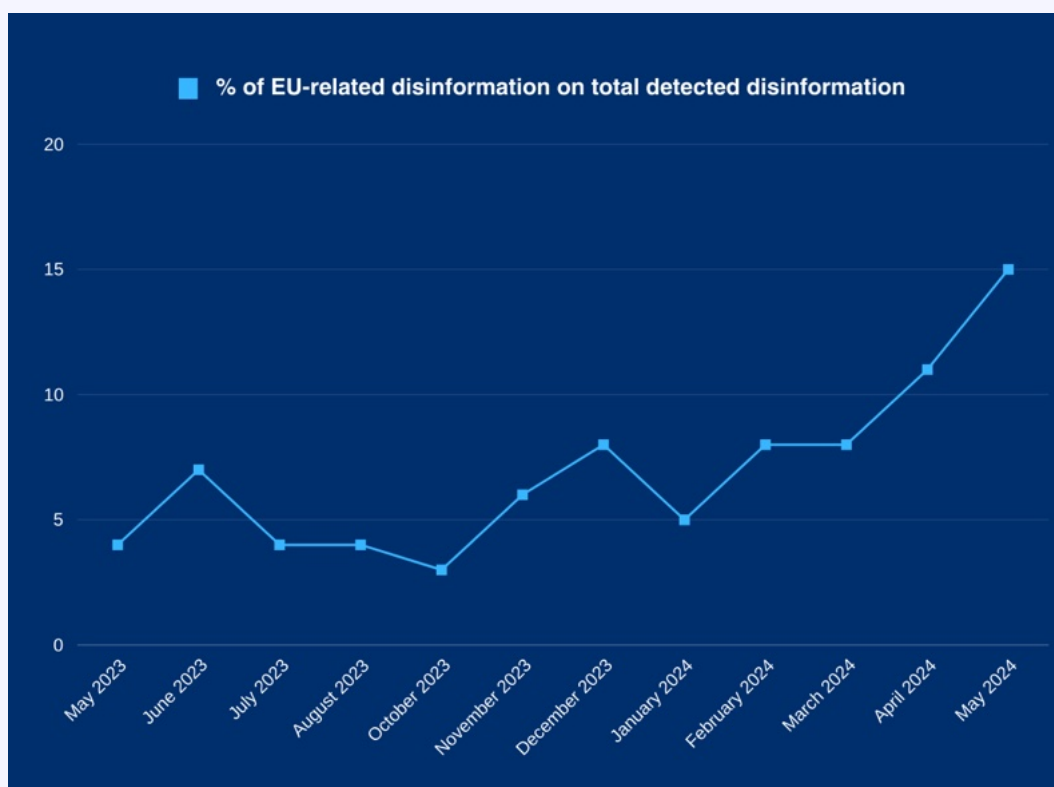
Example from *Disinfo Bulletin – [Issue n. 42](#), 6 June – Disinformation wants EU citizens not to vote*

> 🗳️ **The false claim that low voter turnout triggers the "EU Exit" referendum.** In Italy, a false claim is going around on Facebook and TikTok, suggesting that [the basic laws of the Union mandate a referendum for an immediate exit from the EU in case of low voter turnout in the European elections](#). This is untrue: no European treaty contains such a provision. The false claim urges people not to vote in the upcoming elections on June 8-9 in Italy.
>
> This is in line with the false stories flagged in [previous issues of this Bulletin](#), circulating in Germany and Spain and [encouraging citizens to engage in practices that would invalidate their votes](#). In this case, the false content about the electoral process directly promotes abstentionism by leveraging nationalistic sentiments.

The EU

As already mentioned, according to the findings of the EDMO monthly briefs[1], EU-related disinformation grew significantly in the 5 months prior to the elections, from 5% of the total detected disinformation in January 2024 to 15% in May 2024.

% of EU-related disinformation on total detected disinformation

As already mentioned, according to the findings of the EDMO monthly briefs, EU-related disinformation grew significantly in the 5 months prior to the elections, from 5% of the total detected disinformation in January 2024 to 15% in May 2024.

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[1] The Monthly Briefs analyze the prevalence and quality of the most relevant disinformation narratives detected each month, thanks to the contribution of a number of fact-checking organizations that are part of the EDMO network. Data is collected through a survey that helps to gather numbers and materials that are then used to produce figures, graphs, and qualitative analyses of the most prominent disinformation trends.

Example from *Disinfo Bulletin – Issue n. 23, 10 May – The EU on target.*
Special edition

🇪🇺 🗳️ Special edition! What kind of disinformation is targeting the EU one month before the vote?
Disinformation about the EU has been constantly monitored by EDMO since May 2023, when it started its dedicated monitoring efforts in its monthly briefs. As often highlighted, the main false narrative targeting the EU describes its institutions as authoritarian or corrupt, aiming to impose dangerous measures or unreasonable bureaucratic burdens on citizens' lives. But what kind of false narratives are targeting the EU a few weeks before the European Parliament elections of June 6-9?

In recent weeks, several false claims have spread unfounded or misleading information about European policies. In fact, except for trivial conspiracies, the most insidious false messages about the EU try to exaggerate the actual scope or distort the true objectives of its laws. The false claims range from highly defamatory ones – such as that the European Digital Identity Wallet is a tool imposed to control bank deposits or that the approval of edible insects for human consumption is a way to force citizens to eat food containing insects – to less serious but equally significant false stories. For example, the EU supposedly plans to severely restrict cash payments or ban air in potato chip packages.

🏷️ 🌍 In this context, one of the key issues targeted by disinformers is the legislation aimed at reducing the effects of climate change. The Green Deal legislation has been a major target of disinformation for a very long time, with false narratives recently leveraging anti-EU sentiment surrounding the farmers' protests. The most insidious false stories seek to instill fear about crucial issues in people's lives. For example, falsely claiming that the EU wants to ban agriculture or that it will allow the member states to expropriate private homes and cars (or ban their repair), if they do not meet certain criteria. This kind of rhetoric is also being used by some politicians and in political manifestos in the run-up to EU elections.

At the same time, EU institutions are also claimed to blackmail member states to force some decisions, and in case of huge investments – such as NextGenerationEU – false claims allege they are hiding frauds for citizens. In Poland, for example, it was recently claimed that the money the country received for the recovery plan must be paid back at inflated exchange rates. Other false stories affect civil rights, while recently the false story has repeatedly emerged that the EU is planning to reintroduce the death penalty.

Migration

Example from *Disinfo Bulletin – Issue n. 19, 6 May – Power to the migrants*

🚶 **The false narrative that migrants want to take power**. Aside from the recirculation of false narratives that portray migrants as violent or criminal or opposed to Western values – a well-known rhetoric used by disinformers – some false stories suggest an ongoing attempt by migrants to take power, even through violence. In Spain, in particular, false stories about migrants taking over the political sphere claim that in some cities the number of migrants is already so high that they are the majority and can elect mayors, while in the context of the upcoming Catalan elections, false stories depict an alleged political willingness to Islamize the region.

Such claims are similar to others recently circulated by X accounts known for spreading disinformation, claiming the "Islamization" of London after Sadiq Khan's re-election as mayor of the city. For example, recirculating old and unrelated videos previously used to spread disinformation about the conflict between Israel and Hamas.

Example from *Disinfo Bulletin – Issue n. 21, 8 May – The Islamic Emirate of Catalonia*

🕌 🇪🇸 **The creation of the Catalan Islamic Emirate**. With the Catalan elections scheduled for May 12, immigration is one of the main topics of political debate in the region, according to local fact-checking organizations. As reported previously in this newsletter, disinformation about the alleged willingness to Islamize the region is polluting social media and the public discourse. In this context, a political party, as part of its campaign, put up some road signs at the entrance of different cities, saying "Welcome to the Islamic Emirate of Catalonia" or "No to Islamization". Photos of these posters then circulated on social media, with users claiming that the signs were put there by migrant communities in the region, in an attempt to create an Islamic Emirate and reclaim the sovereignty of these cities.
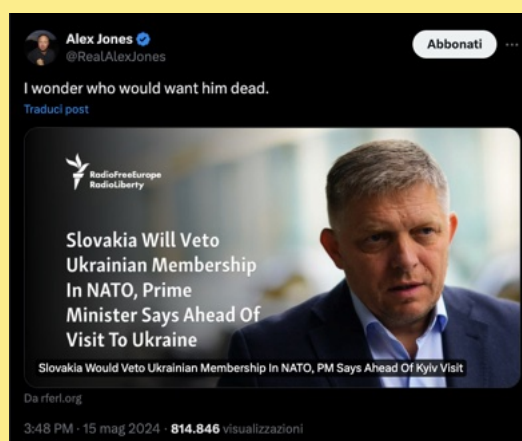
At the same time, other false claims are circulating about alleged initiatives in other countries to counter the alleged Islamization. For example, the false stories that Switzerland is considering banning Islam in the country or that people are fleeing London after the re-election of Sadiqu Khan as mayor of the city.

The Fico shooting

Example from *Disinfo Bulletin – [Issue n. 28](), 17 May – Disinformation about Fico shooting breaks out*

🇸🇰 **The May 15 assassination attempt on Slovak PM Robert Fico has already created a storm of dangerous, false narratives**. One of the first to circulate was a [fake](#) [image](#) of the shooter portrayed as interacting with Martin Šime ka, journalist and father of the co-founder of Slovakia's main opposition party. This was quickly exposed as false information and flagged as such by Meta. But another debunked false story has already emerged in the country, [claiming that the main opposition party endorses the violent act](#), instead of condemning it. However, these are not the only unfounded claims circulating about the tragic event.

In other EU countries – [aside from the false story alleging his death](#) – fact-checking organizations are reporting a surge of anti-vaccines, anti-Ukrainian, and anti-Semitic conspiracy theories about the attempted assassination. Some unproven claims allege that [Ukrainian intelligence services are behind the shooting](#), while others suggest [motives tied to the WHO pandemic treaty or to George Soros](#). Alex Jones, a [well-known](#) [conspiracist](#), shared a post on X soon after the shooting suggesting that NATO wants Fico's death, another of the [false narratives circulating on social media](#).

Accounts dedicated to debunking disinformation [have issued alerts](#) regarding the potential impact of the dissemination of such disinformation on the [already bitterly divided](#) Slovak political landscape. The [Slovak interior minister](#), Matus Sutaj Estok, stated: "We are on the doorstep of a civil war. The assassination attempt on the prime minister is a confirmation of that", adding "Many of you sowed hatred, and it turned into a storm", addressing [the media](#) and "[hate-mongers](#)" on social media.

3. WEEKLY INSIGHTS AND EARLY WARNINGS

In a synergic effort with the *Disinfo Bulletin*, another format provided schematic summaries of the main disinformation narratives common in various EU countries, on a weekly basis. Building on the previous experience of the *Periodic Insights and Early Warnings* produced after the outbreak of the war in Ukraine, the EDMO Weekly Insights and Early Warnings provided short analyses of the disinformation narratives that emerged in the EU election campaign which were widespread in many EU countries.

Following the insights from the daily *Bulletin* and other sources, EDMO produced 9 issues of this format in the **9 weeks before the EU vote, analyzing 22 false narratives detected in various countries**. The format also included short textual **early warnings** about news and events potentially triggering disinformation in the run-up to the EU elections, which resulted in **27 early warnings** about major events ahead of the vote. These assessments often succeeded in anticipating the development of disinformation narratives, as in the case of the foreseen amplification of the false narrative suggesting the direct involvement of EU countries in ground operations in Ukraine after the approval from the US Senate of a new military aid package to the invaded nation.

Early warnings tried to foresee disinformation trends before they actually emerged. This is possible because disinformation follows information, most of the time. False stories often focus on the big stories of the news cycle, so if social media or traditional media are covering certain topics extensively, it is very likely that disinformation narratives about those topics will emerge. Moreover, these warnings are based on the observation of past disinformation phenomena.

Disinformation narratives and techniques tend to be repetitive: so, depending on how disinformation has tried to exploit certain news events in the past, it is possible to say how it is reasonable to expect that false stories will try to exploit major events as a hook to convey new or usual disinformation narratives. Providing insights and early warnings allows journalists, media literacy practitioners and others to anticipate and pre-bunk disinformation possibly before people see it.

See a few examples below:

Example from *Weekly Insights and Early Warnings* – Issue n.1

EARLY WARNINGS: WHAT TO EXPECT?

① The European Parliament approved the new Migration and Asylum Pact on 10 April 2024. This is most likely to spark further disinformation on EU migration policies and migrants, such as: the EU is provoking an ethnic substitution by migrant invaders, the Islamisation of the EU will increase, Member States are losing sovereignty, and they will be forced to relocate migrants.

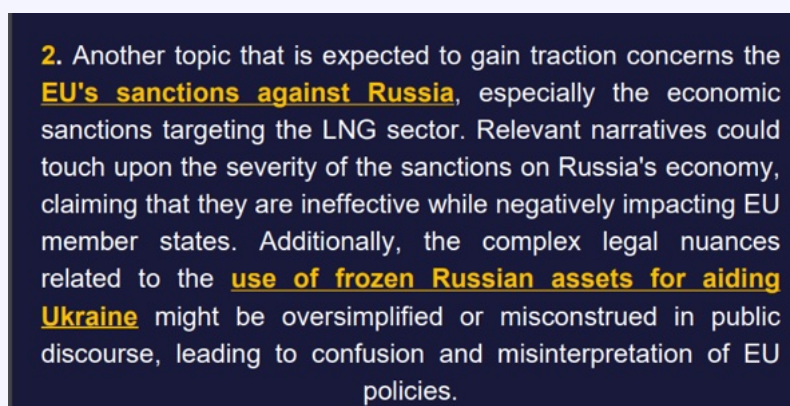→ *Read the press release from the European Parliament here.*

Example from *Weekly Insights and Early Warnings* – Issue n.4

3. The **68th edition of the Eurovision Contest** is taking place in Sweden on 7-11 May 2024, and related disinformation, in particular connected to the participation of Israel, might grow. The European Broadcasting Union (EBU) has already published a statement on the abuse and harassment of competing artists, which has been targeted by social media campaigns. Like last year, cyberattacks and other hostile actions from external actors like Russia can be expected.

→ *Read the statement of the EBU here.*

Example from *Weekly Insights and Early Warnings* – Issue n.5

2. Another topic that is expected to gain traction concerns the **EU's sanctions against Russia**, especially the economic sanctions targeting the LNG sector. Relevant narratives could touch upon the severity of the sanctions on Russia's economy, claiming that they are ineffective while negatively impacting EU member states. Additionally, the complex legal nuances related to the **use of frozen Russian assets for aiding Ukraine** might be oversimplified or misconstrued in public discourse, leading to confusion and misinterpretation of EU policies.

Example from *Weekly Insights and Early Warnings* – Issue n.9

> **2.** It is possible that **disinformation targeting the elections process** will intensify to depict the 2024 European Parliament elections as rigged and illegitimate. False content can also encourage a low turnout or confuse EU citizens to submit invalid ballots by spreading wrong vote guidelines.

The TF believes that these evaluations are instrumental in preparing for and countering disinformation efforts, leveraging the analysis of past phenomena to predict how major events might be exploited to spread false stories. The effectiveness of many of these early warnings underscores the importance of proactive monitoring and analysis in safeguarding the integrity of the electoral process and keeping citizens and observers aware of the false narratives that could circulate even before they actually spread, exploiting the fact that disinformation is often predictable.

4. PUBLIC REPORTING

The EDMO Task Force on the EU elections was established in January 2023. Thus, its work began several months before the election campaigns started. During the preliminary work, the Task Force carried out various monitoring and evaluations of the health of the European infosphere ahead of the elections, which resulted in the publication of various reports and analyses on disinformation in general or specific techniques and narratives.

First report - Disinformation narratives during the 2023 elections in Europe (two eds.)

The first output of the TF was a report on *Disinformation narratives during the 2023 elections in Europe*, originally published in November 2023 while a second and revised edition was published in March 2024.

In its final version, the report analyzed over **1,000 fact-checking articles** published in the context of thirteen elections in twelve different European countries. Its purpose is to provide a general overview of the disinformation narratives detected during national elections that took place in 2023 in multiple EU countries and in some member States of the Council of Europe, based on available fact-checking articles.
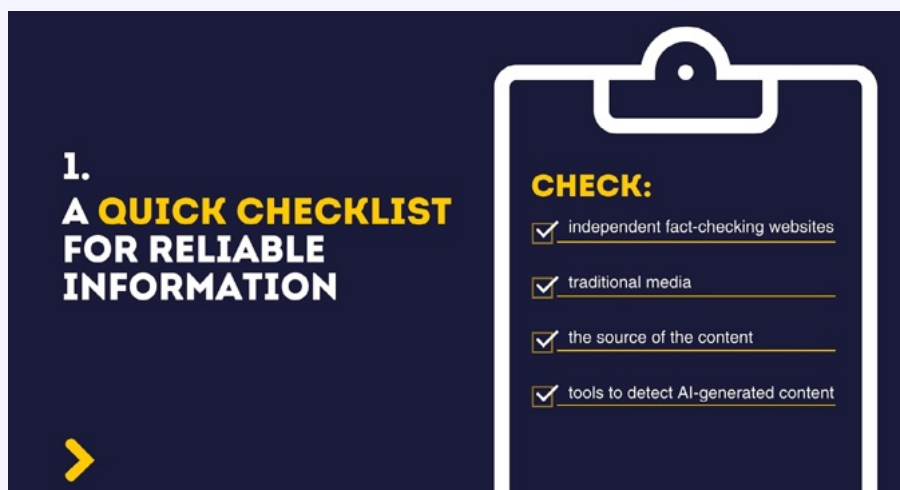
This analysis revealed widespread disinformation during the election campaigns in all the considered countries, particularly about the electoral process, with false narratives often aimed at delegitimizing elections through unfounded claims of voter fraud and unfair practices. Each country also showed unique disinformation trends, influenced by national contexts and current global events. Key themes include the war in Ukraine, the economy, climate change and social issues (for example, gender themes, religion and immigration).

Prebunking AI-generated disinformation ahead of EU elections

Before the beginning of the election campaign, another analysis by the TF was dedicated to evaluating the risks posed by AI-generated disinformation ahead of the June vote. EDMO published an article about the state of the art in the production of false and misleading content using AI tools.

The article stated that AI-generated disinformation, especially audio, poses significant risks due to its ability to create convincing fake content, citing recent examples of AI-generated audio that circulated in Slovakia before the 2023 elections and fake robocalls in New Hampshire. These audios are difficult for average users to detect and can spread quickly, complicating timely debunking. Although the other disinformation techniques using AI could enhance the production of a high volume of disinformation quickly and cheaply, they seem to be less worrying because their current capabilities seem to not allow the production of hyperrealistic content yet. Read the full text here: *Prebunking AI-generated disinformation ahead of EU elections*.

This analysis also originated a short guide containing *Tips for users to detect AI-generated content.*

Preliminary Risk Assessment ahead of the 2024 European elections

Before the beginning of the election campaign, another analysis by the TF was Approaching election days another effort was to study the European media environment and its vulnerabilities likely to be exploited by bad actors. This resulted in a *Preliminary Risk Assessment Report* aimed at analyzing the interconnected landscape of systemic vulnerabilities and specific electoral risks. Together with the pervasive challenge of disinformation, these risks posed significant threats to electoral integrity and public discourse across the European Union. The full report can be found here: *Systemic vulnerabilities, MIL, disinformation threats: Preliminary Risk Assessment ahead of the 2024 European elections*.

The report highlighted the critical nature of these challenges in shaping public opinion, voter behavior and, ultimately, the democratic discourse across Europe. Based on existing research, documents and operative frameworks, as well as the evaluations of the EDMO Task Force on European Elections, the findings spotlighted the risks related to the structural weaknesses within the media ecosystem, non-compliance with campaign regulations (especially online), specific risks related to the upcoming elections and the perils of dissemination of disinformation, through recurring narratives and new techniques. In addition, cyber threats to voting infrastructure pose a direct danger to the security and authenticity of election results, as well as a potential hook for disinformation campaigns aimed at suggesting election rigging.

Based on the assessments contained in the report, and drawing from similar analyses conducted by others, the following table summarizes an evaluation of the level of risk associated with each issue.

Specific Risk	Risk level
Common disinformation narratives about the EU elections	HIGH
Cyber threats and technological infrastructure	HIGH
Coordinated operations to amplify disinformation	HIGH
Disinformation techniques: AI-generated disinformation	MEDIUM-HIGH
Unfair conduct by political actors	MEDIUM-HIGH
Low MIL levels	MEDIUM
Declining trust in media	MEDIUM
Ineffectiveness of campaign rules, especially online	MEDIUM
Physical threats to candidates, activists, and other actors	MEDIUM
Lack of inclusion and accessibility	MEDIUM -LOW
Exogenous crises	LOW
Issues with counting/voting procedures	LOW

5. ENHANCED EDMO ACTIVITIES

At the same time, the EDMO fact-checking network continued its regular activities and publications. In particular, two of the main products descending from the continuous monitoring of disinformation threats are:

- **Monthly Fact-Checking Briefs** – Thanks to the contributions of the over 50 organizations within its fact-checking network, EDMO provides a brief overview of the major disinformation narratives circulating in the EU each month.

  Ahead of the June vote, EDMO published the Brief on disinformation detected in May on June 6, when voting started in the EU, to offer its insight about misinformation circulated in the weeks prior to the vote before citizens cast their ballots. This way, for example, it was possible to quickly inform the public about the surge of EU-related disinformation already

  Read all the issues here: EDMO Fact-Checking Briefs

- **Investigations** – Collaborative investigations are regularly produced as a result of joint analysis by members of the EDMO fact-checking network. These investigations provide insights on specific topics most targeted by disinformation.

  Read all the other investigations here: EDMO Investigations

6. RAPID RESPONSE SYSTEM, POOL OF EXPERTS AND MEDIA LITERACY CAMPAIGN

Three other initiatives are worth mentioning. One was aimed at communicating the presence of ongoing disinformation incidents to relevant stakeholders, one to quickly reach experts in case of major AI-generated disinformation incidents, while the third one was aimed at citizens and the general public.

The Rapid Response System – It is a tool to counter a limited number of exceptionally severe cases of disinformation (content and accounts) in a short period of time, notifying the ongoing incidents to EU institutions and Very Large Online Platforms (VLOPs) involved. It was created by the Working Group Elections of the Code of Practice on Disinformation Task Force, also thanks to the decisive role of an EDMO representative – who co-chaired the WG – in the negotiations. The EDMO Task Force on EU elections, which played a central role in this effort, used the mechanism (with various flags and notifications) and monitored it in the weeks leading up to the vote.

During the EU elections campaign, the Rapid Response System issued 18 notifications before the vote. These notifications were directed to various platforms: 7 to Meta, 6 to YouTube, and 5 to TikTok. The response rate was notably high, with feedback received for all 18 notifications. The feedback was provided in different formats: 9 were oral, 5 were written, and 4 were a combination of both oral and written responses.

As a result of the Rapid Response System's efforts, there were 12 instances of content or accounts being removed or banned, either partially or entirely. In three cases, the platforms determined that the content did not breach community

guidelines and thus took no action. Additionally, there were two instances where content was labeled to provide context to viewers, and one more case where both labeling and other measures were applied.

The RRS created for the EU elections performed well, even if it is true that no major disinformation incidents happened in the last days/hours before the vote. Given its limited scope, the RRS cannot be considered a solution to the widest issue of the constant circulation of disinformation in the long term: disinformation normally impacts public opinions through an endless hammering of the same narratives, conveyed by an infinite number of false content (statements, news, videos, images, etc.) that is not – taken individually – particularly relevant or exceptional.

Given the success of the experiment, Civil Society Organizations and platforms represented in the Working Group Elections, in agreement with the Commission, decided to keep it operational for the French election campaign.

Pool of AI experts

During the EDMO fact-checking conference in Brussels in May, it emerged that one of the most concerning scenarios foreseen by fact-checkers in the run-up to the elections was the appearance of AI-generated disinformation content – in particular audio, hard to verify promptly – in the last days and hours before the vote. There were troubling precedents of this kind, for example before the Slovak elections in September 2023.

A solution was discussed and implemented: the creation of a pool of AI experts to address potential AI-related disinformation, especially during critical periods such as the elections. EDMO immediately started creating a list of experts who have volunteered to help out during the election period from 3-10 June, and soon involved the EFCSN to expand it and operationalize it, preparing forms and modules for notifications and feedback.

Although it has not fortunately been needed in the context of the EU elections, its existence sets a useful precedent.

Since AI-generated content is often difficult to detect and label as such, the primary goal of creating the tool is to have a system that can be activated in case of major incidents. Bringing together a group of pundits from different countries and professional backgrounds allows fact-checkers to rely on a possible consensus among experts. This approach prevents reliance on just one or two sources, possibly from the same country, who are often at risk of becoming targets of delegitimization and harassment.

News | April 29, 2024

The **#BeElectionSmart campaign** was an initiative by EDMO and its local and regional hubs to support citizens in finding reliable election information and recognizing false or manipulative content in the run-up to the 2024 European Parliament Elections.

The media literacy campaign produced messages to be posted on the websites of EDMO Hubs and EDMO, and shared on social media. Each Monday from 29 April to 3 June 2024, a new message along with practical tips was published on the websites and social media accounts of all 14 EDMO Hubs, covering all EU member states. Find all the messages here: Be Election Smart Campaign.

The campaign received support from several tech platforms:
- X provided ad credits which were shared among all Hub X accounts to promote the campaign posts.
- Google shared the link to the main campaign page on its pre-bunking/ election resources page as well as in a Fighting Misinformation Online newsletter.
- Meta shared the campaign page link via a LinkedIn post.
- Microsoft featured the campaign on its Check.Recheck.Vote website for the EU elections (page since updated - https://news.microsoft.com/ai-deepfakes-elections/).

Initial figures on the campaign's reach show that the campaign webpages were visited 7,700 times, while social media posts with the messages were viewed approximately 125,000 times.

7. FINAL REMARKS,

BY TOMMASO CANETTA

After the voting procedures across the EU concluded without major threats and disinformation incidents, an op-ed was published on the EDMO website, written by the coordinator of the fact-checking activities Tommaso Canetta, with an overall assessment of the activities carried out to monitor disinformation during the EU elections. The text is reproduced here.

EU Elections 2024: The battle against disinformation was won, but the attrition war is far from over

The European elections 2024 concluded properly and peacefully. Voter turnout, according to preliminary data, should be around the same percentage as 2019 (the highest since the EU enlargement to 25 members). No major last-minute disinformation-related incidents have been detected, according to the monitoring carried out by the EDMO Taskforce On 2024 European Elections. This result should be seen as a source of pride for the whole European society and in particular for the community that monitors and counters disinformation.

Awareness around the issue of disinformation by the political and media environment, as well as by the general public – together with the readiness of institutions, platforms, fact-checkers, researchers and of everyone involved in the fight against disinformation – could have deterred malicious actors from any major attempt in the last few days and hours before the vote.

Looking ahead, this is very encouraging: if we light our gates, build towers and walls to defend them in case of an attack, instead of leaving them abandoned in the dark, bad actors are much less bold in their attempts to climb over them to pollute the European public discourse.

Sadly, good news stops here. Disinformation produced many negative consequences in the previous months and years, adulterating the perceptions of many persons. In the last months before the election, disinformation's growing pressure on many different topics – from the war in Ukraine to migrants, from climate change to the pandemic – was detected. In some cases foreign interference contributed to spreading false news and narratives, and almost always internal actors jumped on the

[same topics](#) fostering polarization and divisions.

If the EU, the Member States, the media and other stakeholders involved would have given the same attention and relevance to the fight against disinformation in the past five years, instead of the past few months, how different would the situation in Europe have been? How many EU citizens would have not built their opinions on a factually wrong basis?

These 2024 elections can be a very useful memento for the future: investing energies, resources and time in fighting disinformation pays off. It is possible to keep bad actors at bay. But it is not enough to do so only before an important election or during a severe crisis. The European information space must be kept clean and monitored all the time and there is still a lot to do to ensure one of democracy's cornerstones, the people's fundamental right to be correctly informed. Winning an important battle against disinformation, only to lose the attrition war would be unforgivably short-sighted.