

# Disinformation narratives during the 2023 elections in Europe

**REPORT**

EDITED BY ENZO PANIZIO

2ND EDITION – MARCH 2024

# 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 and counter any attempts to condition and 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 is 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.

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

Its current members are:

**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

**Radovan Geist** | EURACTIV Slovakia – EDMO AC

**Giacomo Mazzone** | Eurovisioni – EDMO AC

**Ivana Grkeš** | University of Dubrovnik – ADMO

**Andra Siibak** | University of Tartu – BECID

**Bert Pieters** | Mediawijs – BELUX

**Guy De Pauw** | Textgain – BENEDMO

**Ruslana Margova** | GATE Institute Sofia University – BROD

**Michal Šenk** | Charles University – CEDMO

**Victor Ebekwumonye** | Sciences Po Paris – DE FACTO

**Eileen Culloty** | Dublin City University – EDMO Ireland Hub

**Kian Badrnejad** | dpa – GADMO

**Péter Krekó** | Political Capital – HDMO

**Pablo Hernández Escayola** | Maldita.es – IBERIFIER

**Gianni Riotta** | Luiss Data Lab – IDMO

**Stamos Archontis** | Ellinika Hoaxes – MedDMO

**Mikko Salo** | Faktabaari – NORDIS

**Emma Goodman** | European University Institute – EDMO

More information about the Task Force and its activities are available on the [EDMO's website](#).

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report analyzes over 1.000 fact-checking articles published in the context of thirteen elections in twelve different European countries. The analysis reveals 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, foreign influences and unfair practices.

Each country also shows 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). The pervasive nature of these narratives underscores their probable significant impact on democratic debates in Europe and highlights the critical need for robust fact-checking and awareness-raising initiatives to preserve electoral integrity and democratic values.

This report includes elections held in 2023. Its main editor is Enzo Panizio.  
Graphic design by Renata Leopardi.

*This is the revised and expanded version of a report originally published in December 2023.*

## 01

### Introduction

## 02

### Classification of false narratives

## 03

### Disinformation narratives about the electoral process

#### 3.1 The Serbian case

## 04

### Elections in EU countries during 2023

#### 4.1 Czech Republic - Presidential election- January

#### 4.2 Estonia - Parliamentary election - March

#### 4.3 Bulgaria - Parliamentary election - April

#### 4.4 Finland - Parliamentary election - April

#### 4.5 Greece - Parliamentary election - May/June (2nd round)

#### 4.6 Spain - Parliamentary election - July

#### 4.7 Slovakia - Parliamentary election - September

#### 4.8 Poland - Parliamentary election - October

#### 4.9 Netherlands - Parliamentary election - November

## 05

### Elections in Council of Europe (non-EU) member States

#### 5.1 Montenegro - Presidential election - March/April (2nd round)

#### 5.2 Turkey - Presidential and parliamentary elections - May

#### 5.3 Montenegro - Parliamentary election - June

#### 5.4 Serbia - Parliamentary election - December

## 06

### Methodological note

The purpose of this document 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.

Almost all of the public debates leading up to each of the considered elections have been polluted by a multitude of stories that have been verified as false by independent fact-checking organizations. This report addresses elections in **12 different countries** (Czech Republic, Estonia, Bulgaria, Finland, Greece, Poland, Spain, Slovakia, the Netherlands, Serbia, Montenegro, and Turkey) that took place at the national/federal level, such as presidential and parliamentary elections. Local and regional elections are not included.

In order to present a comprehensive picture of the landscape of mis/disinformation affecting electoral processes throughout Europe, we have collected all election-related stories and narratives that have been proved false by both local and international independent fact-checking organizations<sup>1</sup>. A “disinformation narrative” is intended as “the clear message that emerges from a consistent set of contents that can be demonstrated as false using the fact-checking methodology”, according to the EDMO’s definition.

<sup>1</sup> I.e. members of the European Digital Media Observatory’s (EDMO) fact-checking network, and/or signatories of the Code of Standards of the European Fact-Checking Standards Network (EFCSN) and/or of the Code of Principles of the International Fact-Checking Network (IFCN). In order to get the clearest picture possible, fact-checking articles from other organizations whose standards have not been verified by these networks have been collected and examined, but are not included in this report. The findings and examples presented in this document are based exclusively on the work of fact-checking organizations that have been verified as independent by the IFCN or EDMO or EFCSN network.

# INTRODUCTION

Thirteen elections held in the member states of the EU and the Council of Europe in 2023 were examined. The false stories analyzed were selected by reviewing all of the publications of the aforementioned fact-checking organizations in the pre-election and post-election period, following the criteria outlined in the methodology. The time period considered for each election was generally from two months before the election day (or the first round of voting) to one month after the election day (or the possible final round of voting).

This resulted in a selection of over **1.000 fact-checking articles**, which were qualitatively analyzed and color-coded by topic. Short texts were prepared to present the results, divided by country, plus an initial chapter analyzing disinformation narratives about the electoral process. The findings of this research were then reviewed by the members of the EDMO Task Force on the 2024 European Parliament Elections and integrated with their feedback. Opinions, unverifiable information and stories that have not been substantially disproved have not been included in this document.

Further methodological information [is available here](#).


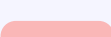
# 02

## CLASSIFICATION OF FALSE NARRATIVES

False narratives about the elections were divided into different categories based on content. Topics are color-coded to help consultation and to facilitate the search for specific topics and issues.

 Disinformation on the electoral process is marked in Yellow.

Other topics of disinformation:

-  War in Ukraine
-  Climate change (and related issues, such as countermeasures, etc.)
-  The EU, its institutions and laws
-  Economy (taxes, inflation, food/energy crisis)
-  Gender issues and LGBTQ+ community
-  Immigration, refugees or false stories spreading xenophobia and racism
-  Religion
-  Life expectancy, health and Covid-related disinformation
-  Foreign and security affairs, security threats
-  Current and past political alliances of the political actors

# 03

## DISINFORMATION NARRATIVES ABOUT THE ELECTORAL PROCESS

Disinformation narratives about the electoral process were identified in every election subjected to analysis, emerging as one of the most common narratives overall. Among those narratives, the suggestion of voter fraud or alleged unfair practices that would **invalidate the election results** appears particularly widespread, with the apparent goal of delegitimizing democratically elected representatives. These are sometimes portrayed as illegitimate, and more in general the legitimacy of the democratic process is put into question.

False stories that are consistent with this narrative have been identified in the Czech Republic, Estonia, Finland, Greece, Spain, Slovakia, Poland, the Netherlands, as well as in Turkey, Montenegro, and Serbia the non-EU countries considered. As mentioned above, none of the elections examined is exempt from this type of disinformation, famously used by Donald Trump around the U.S. presidential campaign of 2020. Moreover, similar unfounded accusations have occasionally been made by national members of parliament and other politicians. Ahead of the election in Slovakia, for example, the former prime minister and leader of SMER, Robert Fico, and the president of the far-right party Republika, Milan Uhrík, warned voters of possible electoral fraud.



# MAIN TOPICS

Specific claims used to suggest irregularities in the electoral process were very different depending on the countries where they were spread. The most common ones refer to alleged attempts to illegally add or subtract votes; malfunctions or fraud caused by electronic or postal voting; and supposedly odd counting procedures in the registry offices to increase the number of voters (e.g. surpassing that of the local residents).

Other false claims about the voting procedures included erasable voting pencils, pre-marked ballots, and even errors that actually occurred in the voting booths were presented as an organized attempt to manipulate the popular vote, even going as far as claiming that the election commissions themselves could cancel ballots at will. In Poland, where a referendum was held in conjunction with parliamentary elections, it was claimed that the two ballots used in the elections would be stapled together, therefore forcing voters to express themselves in the referendum.



Examples of fact-checking articles debunking false stories about election irregularities. Starting from the left: Eesti Päevaleht (Estonia) - "No, Ukrainian refugees will not be able to vote in the parliamentary election"; Demagog.pl (Poland) - "Will voting cards be clipped with referendum ballots? False"; Maldita (Spain) - "The conspiracy theory that Pedro Sánchez and the PSOE stopped trains from leaving Valencia to prevent passengers from voting".

Some false stories overlapped with other topics too. In several countries, false stories claimed that immigrants or Ukrainian refugees were allowed to vote, exploiting xenophobic sentiments to suggest an attempt to undervalue actual citizens' political choices. In Poland, these false theories were circulated before and on election day itself.

In Spain – the country where disinformation about the electoral process was most detected and quantitatively addressed by fact-checkers, according to our data – it was also claimed that Pedro Sánchez and the PSOE prevented trains from leaving Valencia so that passengers could not vote, or that the government offered jobs during the electoral campaign to please the electorate. A similar story was also proven false in Estonia, in this case involving a supposed pay raise for public employees.

## PRE-ELECTORAL PERIOD

These alleged irregularities are not only related to the post-election period. Disinformation about the electoral process was significantly present even before the vote took place. For example, the fact that in some countries postal voting is possible before the end of the electoral campaign has been taken as an opportunity for disinformers to spread suspicion and mistrust towards the vote. Trivial mistakes were also exploited for this purpose, such as a malfunctioning stopwatch during an election debate, which was claimed by some to be the proof of rigged elections.

In some countries, the presence of this type of disinformation was particularly relevant. In Spain, for example, where outgoing prime minister Pedro Sánchez called early general elections following the results of a previous round of regional and local elections, allegations of electoral fraud, which had already been circulating for the regional elections, were amplified during the following national electoral campaign.

Also noteworthy is the presence, before and during the vote, of disinformation about its technical procedures. Supposed "strange marks" on the ballots, ballot boxes allegedly moved to unusual locations or the possibility of multiple voting are among the false and inaccurate information possibly spread with the aim of creating confusion and/or encouraging people to make mistakes that would invalidate their votes.

# CONSPIRACY THEORIES AND ALLEGED FOREIGN INFLUENCES

The attempt to raise doubts about the legitimacy of the electoral process is often accompanied by false claims about “suspicious” deployments of armed forces or alleged interference from foreign countries and organizations.

In this sense, the most significant case is again that of the Spanish elections, where alleged conspiracies about the election’s validity were spread on various social media, including TikTok. False stories in line with this narrative claimed that European institutions (in particular the President of the European Commission, Ursula von der Leyen) and neighboring states such as Morocco were actively campaigning for Pedro Sánchez. In this context, King Felipe VI was also falsely accused of abandoning the political neutrality of the crown to call for the election of “progressives”. Other false stories suggested allegedly secret NATO meetings aimed at manipulating the election results. Numerous false stories alleging voter fraud were also widely spread after the election.



*A fact-checking by AFP Fakty (Slovakia). “Experts say the alleged recording of a phone call between the PS leader and a journalist from the Denník N. outlet shows numerous signs of manipulation”.*

In Bulgaria, interference by the United States was claimed with misleading content, while in countries with very strong religious sentiments, such as Turkey, alleged interference by foreign religious authorities was portrayed. In Slovakia – a country where the population is very suspicious about Western interference in the elections, according to a recent poll – an alleged phone call circulated in which Michal Šimečka, the leader of the social-liberal Progressive Slovakia party, discussed with a journalist about rigged elections. According to several experts, it was an **artificially generated audio**.

## 3.1

# THE SERBIAN CASE

Parliamentary elections in Serbia were troubled in many ways. According to a document by the International Election Observation Mission (including the European Parliament, OSCE, and the Council of Europe), they were “dominated by the decisive involvement of the President which together with the ruling party’s systemic advantages created unjust conditions”, with “underrepresentation of women”, while “most national broadcasters lacked genuine analytical reporting, detracting from the voters’ ability to make an informed choice”. A Council of Europe report on the Serbian election highlighted “excessive government control of the media landscape” and, as reported also by independent local fact-checking organizations, several pro-government media outlets actively campaigned for the ruling party. Throughout 2023, various newspapers – some of which receive public funding – spread unsubstantiated news on their front pages.

After the election day, independent observers and opposition parties raised concerns about unfair practices during the voting process, which they say was marred by illegal practices of “electoral engineering”. In particular, organized voter migration, cases of people voting in different cities, vote buying, and fictional residences, with dozens of people registered in single apartments. This led to several protests by the opposition parties and citizens and even to the repetition of the vote, but only in a minimal part of the polling stations.

In this context, disinformation about the electoral process itself circulated since the early stages of the election campaign and continued after the results of the election were announced. However, there was a **significant change** in the type of false claims circulated between the electoral campaign and the day after the polls closed.

**Before election day**, several claims – also made by president Aleksandar Vučić or members of the government – accused the opposition of trying to manipulate the election results, overthrow the government and “burn down” the country if they didn’t win, as well as buying votes or paying actors for propaganda purposes. Other false information on pro-government media outlets accused opposition parties and independent media of committing acts of violence against the ruling party and even of planning to kill Vučić and his family. The president himself was depicted as disadvantaged in the election campaign by less media coverage or an overly critical one.

**After election day**, instead, false stories and claims about the electoral process shifted from alleging several attempts by the opposition to manipulate the vote to describing the voting procedures as regular and fair. President Vučić – and other members of the government – claimed that “this was the fairest election ever”, that the aforementioned Council of Europe report was favorable to the way the election was conducted, and that Serbia did not have the time to deal with allegations of irregularities.

Pro-government media portrayed the voting process as regular, at times omitting coverage of the ongoing protests, and blamed the first independent observer which reported irregularities as the cause of the problem of fictitious residences, because it provided voting guidelines for off-site students. A photo of the half-empty Council of Europe assembly was also circulated, purporting to show the session when fairness of the Serbian elections was being debated and thus suggesting the failure of the so-called “Serbia haters’ agenda”.

# 06

## METHODOLOGY

To better define the concept of “false information about the election(s)”, some objective criteria were used to select the information and stories that had already been verified as false by EDMO or EFCSN or IFCN signatories.

To be included in the analysis, the false information had to meet at least one of the following criteria:

- False stories about the electoral process (voting procedures, alleged electoral fraud, conspiracy theories, etc.);
- Politicians’ statements proven false by independent fact-checking organizations;
- False stories targeting legitimate political views and issues, as well as targeting politicians or political parties in the context of electoral campaigns;
- False stories spread by politicians (e.g. through social media or in electoral programs) or media outlets with a significant reach;
- False stories and narratives about other well-known disinformation topics (e.g. the war in Ukraine, climate change, EU-related disinformation, LGBTQ+-related disinformation) that were relevant to the election debate, for example because they were explicitly mentioned in electoral programs or debates, or because they overtly supported various partisan agendas;
- False stories about the functioning of the state, institutions, laws and other legal or administrative issues linked to the current elections.

**Chronological criteria:** During the collection phase false stories were sorted, distinguishing mainly between the **pre-election period** (two months, on average) and the **post-election one** (usually one month). The period between the first and second round of the elections, if present, has been included in the **pre-election period**.

Narratives whose relevance to the electoral campaign was only indirect were excluded, even if popular. For a general overview of the most common disinformation narratives not directly related to the elections, check out EDMO's fact-checking network latest [Monthly Fact-checking Briefs](#) and [Investigations](#).