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# **DISINFORMATION LANDSCAPE IN PORTUGAL**

EU DISINFO LAB



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## INTRODUCTION

- According to a [study](#) by Iberifier, corruption is the theme that motivates most information manipulation campaigns in Portugal. Misinformation has grown due to the “financial situation and vulnerability of the Portuguese media ecosystem”. Even so, 40% of Portuguese trust journalists, the highest rate in the European Union ([Digital News Report PORTUGAL 2023](#)).
- According to the same Iberifier study, in 2020, in just four months, 68,576 publications containing false content were detected on Facebook in Portugal, in which the origin of COVID-19 appeared correlated with the 5G network. There is more: on the same social network, a group on coronavirus gathered 624,000 members in three days. Between February 2020 and 15 July 2022, 1,037 debunks were produced and published by [Polígrafo](#) related to the pandemic.
- Between 20 February and 15 July 2022, Portuguese fact-checker Polígrafo carried out 238 articles and verifications, “of which 40 are national and 198 are from abroad”. These figures are indicative of the large amount of false content imported. In fact, the disinformation campaigns detected in Portugal are mostly translated or adapted from abroad, such as the case of the virus and the war in Ukraine.
- Unlike other European countries, no major national deliberate, systematic, and organised disinformation campaign has yet been identified in Portugal. However, social networks are dominated by “smaller and more radicalised” parties, which may promote disinformation campaigns in the future, with considerable impact on the digital environment.
- The weaknesses of the media sector worldwide, but particularly felt in Portugal, increase vulnerability to mis/disinformation. These are economic (unsustainability of the business model), professional (journalists’ precariousness) and social (exogenous) – increased disinterest, avoidance of news assets, etc.

## EMBLEMATIC CASES

### PRIME MINISTER APPROACHED IN THE STREET WITH A FALSE CLAIM ABOUT A REAL FIRE TRAGEDY

- On 4 October 2019, two days before the Portuguese legislative elections, the Prime Minister was confronted in the street by a citizen who accused him of being on vacation when the Pedrógão Grande fire occurred in 2017. The false accusation outraged António Costa – to the point of almost having a physical confrontation with his accuser. This was considered the [most striking episode](#) during the electoral campaign. The hoax about Costa’s allegedly ‘inappropriate’ vacation had been going on for months, circulating profusely on social media. Portuguese fact-checker Polígrafo denied this on 13 August, about two months before the altercation, which was captured by television cameras. Therefore, it gained national coverage, becoming a recurrent topic of the year.

### THE LIES AND INACCURACIES OF THE FAR-RIGHT PARTY “CHEGA”

- The far-right reached the Portuguese Parliament in 2019, through the CHEGA party). Since then, the deliberate strategy of bringing disinformation to the Portuguese public square has been more or less evident. In 2022, Polígrafo attributed the “national lie of the year” to André Ventura’s inaccuracies and falsehoods (i.e., the leader of CHEGA and his parliamentary team).
- In 2022, André Ventura was untruthful and inaccurate and took information out of context about [50 times](#) (on social media, during interviews, debates, and in Parliament). The round number earns the leader of CHEGA the title of “Pinocchio” in Polígrafo’s records, but he is now joined by a team, a parliamentary group, and a party that grows based on “fake news”.
- For example, Ventura repeated throughout the year that imprisoned politicians earn 3,000€ in subsidies or that a firefighter injured in the Pedrógão Grande fire receives only 290€; there are lies that Polígrafo debunked several times). Ventura tampered polls, lied regarding the anti-corruption index and the weight of taxes on wages, among many other cases documented by Portuguese fact-checkers.
- On 16 August 2023, Polígrafo grouped [ten falsehoods](#) uttered by André Ventura through social networks. Even after being denied, the political leader never erased his false allegations or retracted them.

### THE JUDGE WHO SPREAD DISINFORMATION ABOUT COVID-19

- Rui Fonseca e Castro, nicknamed “the denialist judge”, was suspended by the Superior Council of the Judiciary in March 2021. He was definitively expelled in October 2021, being inhibited from exercising the functions of a magistrate. Social networks were the stage for the former Judge who, since the beginning of the pandemic, spread the most varied denialist theories about COVID-19 and launched insults at the highest figures of the Portuguese state.
- Initially, he promoted civil disobedience against confinement and protection measures against COVID-19. Then, he quickly became even more radicalised in defending various theories that deny the seriousness or existence of the global pandemic and call it a farce based on political-economic interests.
- The former judge even gave an interview to the ultraconservative television channel “El Toro TV”, where he made a series of controversial statements, including that Portuguese men risk becoming sterile due to the COVID-19 vaccine.
- Many public figures, mainly politicians, became a target for Rui Fonseca e Castro. Through videos shared on his Facebook page or in public speeches, he launched the most varied insults and rumours that spread on social networks.
- Polígrafo wrote several fact-checks on these matters and grouped everything in a [specific publication](#) from October 2021.

# NARRATIVES

## PORTUGAL: ONE OF THE MOST CORRUPT COUNTRIES IN THE WORLD

- Unlike what happens in most European countries – where immigration is the central theme of political disinformation – in Portugal, [corruption](#) motivates most campaigns and actions to manipulate information (Moreno, J, 2019). It is common for false allegations to appear on Facebook with adulterated positions of the country in corruption perception rankings. Recently, a fact-checked [Facebook post](#) rated Portugal the 33rd most corrupt country in the world, blaming politicians and calling the country a “tax haven”. However, fact-checking reveals that Portugal is the 33rd least corrupt country in the world and not the opposite.
- Earlier, in 2022, a graph with data on “government corruption, by country” in the European Union, shared on social media, became popular. It was alleged that Portugal stands out at the top, with 88% corruption levels, surpassed only by Croatia, Bulgaria, and Cyprus. The [publication](#) concluded that “Portugal is the 4th country with the most corrupt government in Europe”. Once again, Polígrafo verified the statement and concluded that the perception of a limited number of respondents on whether government corruption is a big issue in their country is not equivalent to a concrete measurement of the levels of corruption in a government.

## TRUST IN NEWS? YES, BUT NOT SO MUCH ON SOCIAL NETWORKS

- News consumers in Portugal tend to trust the news, and interest in them has even increased slightly in 2022 (compared with the previous year), although users drop out when it comes to paying for information access. The country remains at the bottom of a Reuters Digital News Report [table](#). 58% of those surveyed in the aforementioned study say they trust the news: this is, by far, the highest figure among Southern European countries (in Spain, for example, it is 33%; in Greece, 19%) and places Portugal on the podium of confidence among the countries analysed, only behind Finland and Kenya. However, despite this perception, offensive, critical, injurious, and defamatory comments towards the media are frequent in various social media publications.
- Furthermore, suspicions of favouritism, links with political power (whether with the government or with the opposition) and the presence of trolls in comment sections are already frequent and easily verifiable narratives on any page of the national newspapers. The term ‘jornalixo’ was also popularised, combining the words journalism and garbage, often users when content goes against the reader’s convictions.

## COVID-19: MASKS, VACCINES, AND CONFINEMENT

- Portugal is especially vulnerable to international disinformation that is later supported by the national community, especially through social networks. The SARS-CoV-2 pandemic a fertile ground for misinformation and conspiracies. The alleged harmful effects of wearing masks, the overwhelming side effects of vaccines, or that mandatory confinement was part of the ‘Great Reset’ are just a few examples.
- The incentives to doubt and fear (mainly through social networks) about a disease on which very little was known were overwhelming, giving rise to what is already considered the greatest disinformation phenomenon disinformation in the history of mankind.
- Between reality and fiction, fear was the fuel for falsehoods and conspiracy theories to gallop at the speed of light: were the fundraising campaigns organised by WhatsApp to help health professionals true? Considering where the

virus came from, would it be wise to eat at Chinese restaurants? Would it be cautious to go to swimming pools? Will vaccines be safe? Should children be vaccinated, or does everyone risk dying from the cure rather than the disease? Finally, the doubt to end all doubts: Is this the greatest conspiracy in history, meticulously concocted by world tycoons, such as the American billionaire Bill Gates, to enrich and control humanity?

## ANTI-IMMIGRATION RHETORIC AND XENOPHOBIA

- Although misinformation about immigrants and refugees is not (yet) central in Portugal, it is a growing narrative with some hints of associated xenophobia. Several publications on social networks launch false allegations that usually have a common link: they intend to raise insecurity and suspicions about immigrants who live or are passing through the country. Polígrafo has already denied, based on the facts, that it is not true that “on average about 200,000 immigrants are [naturalised](#) per year” or that it is false that 54% of [Lisbon](#) is not inhabited by Portuguese nationals.
- Portuguese newspaper Observador has also had to clarify that it is not true that migrants and minorities commit [50% of crimes](#) in Portugal.

## COMMUNITY COUNTERING DISINFO

### FACT-CHECKERS – NATIVES

- [Polígrafo](#): Polígrafo is a journalistic project whose main objective is to ascertain the truth in the public space by actively scrutinising the various protagonists that move in the communicational ecosystem.
- [Viral](#): Viral is a fact-checking newspaper fully dedicated to clarifying misinformation in health, namely that shared through social networks.

### FACT-CHECK SECTIONS – BELONGING TO ESTABLISHED MEDIA OUTLETS

- [Observador](#)
- [Público – Prova dos Factos](#)

### OTHER INITIATIVES

[Iberifier](#), an observatory to fight against disinformation in Spain and Portugal, was launched in May 2021. It includes more than 90 researchers specialised in digital communication, disinformation, computing, and strategic analysis.

[Obercom](#) is an institution with the main task of investigating and analysing media and social communication in Portugal. Research is carried out within the framework of the Observatory or through national and international partnerships.

[Lusa – “Contrafake”](#) is a project for aggregating information and developing computational resources and technological tools based on artificial intelligence to protect and support communication professionals, citizens and institutions against actions of disinformation transmitted through social networks and other digital information sources.

[Associação Literacia para os Media e Jornalismo](#) is an association promoting education for the media, which aims to encourage citizens to use and interpret the means of social communication, namely in terms of access and use of information and communication technologies.

## POLICY AGAINST DISINFO

- In Portugal, [Law n.º 15/2022, of 11 August](#), simplifies the protection regime against disinformation and ensures its articulation with the European Action Plan against Disinformation. The State thus ensures compliance in Portugal with the European Action Plan against Disinformation in order to protect society against natural or legal persons who produce, reproduce or disseminate narratives considered to be disinformation.
- All Portuguese legislation in the area of Social Communication can be consulted [here](#).

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