DETERMINING POLITICAL HARMFUL NARRATIVES

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Introduction

The fifth report Determining Political Harmful Narratives (HARM-TIVE) is a sublimation of the data from the monitoring of communication practices of the political actors in March 2024 in which harmful narratives were identified. Moreover, the report includes an analysis of the manner these harmful narratives were treated in the central news editions of nine television stations and 11 online media outlets.

The specificity of the March 2024 report is that for the first time since the monitoring began in September 2023, data are presented for a time interval of one month. The main reason for the reduction of the previous practice of bimonthly reports on the presence of harmful narratives in the public discourse are the activities of the political actors related to the pre-election campaign for the presidential elections, where the first round of voting is scheduled for 24 April, 2024, and the second for 8 May, concurrently with the parliamentary elections.

The Institute of Communication Studies (ICS) underscores that the candidates for president of the state are not subject to this monitoring.

For the purposes of this research, the websites and the Facebook pages of ten political parties that are represented by at least two MPs in the Assembly are monitored: Alliance for Albanians, Alternativa, DUI, Democratic Movement, VMRO-DMPNE, Levica, LDP, New Social Democratic Party, SDSM, Socialist Party. The profiles of the leaders of the political parties, as well as the profiles of the President of the Caretaker Government of the RNM, the deputies of the Prime Minister and the ministers in the Government are also monitored on Facebook.

The media sample includes the following 11 online media outlets and 9 television stations:

Online media: Lokalno; Nezavisen; Sloboden Pechat; A1on.mk; MKD.mk; Republika; Kurir; Almakos; Tetova sot; Nova TV; Vecer.mk.

Televisions: MTV 1 (public); MTV 2 (public, in Albanian language); Alfa TV (private); Kanal 5 (private); Sitel TV (private); TV 24 (private); Telma (private); Alsat M (private, in Albanian language); TV 21 (private, in Albanian language).

Similarly, as in the previous reports, the content and the scope of the harmful narratives propagated by the political actors, the intensity, the topics and the subjects towards which the negative messages are directed are empirically captured here. The report indicates the violations of the standards and principles for non-discriminatory and transparent political communication by the political representatives, as well as the standards for professional and ethical journalistic reporting.

The data contained in this report was obtained by a combination of several methods and techniques: quantitative-qualitative analysis through monitoring - observation, monitoring and determining the presence of pre-defined indicators (14 in total), which are correlated to some of the 16 harmful narratives; critical discourse analysis – examining the language, the rhetoric and the framing strategies used by the political actors and the media.

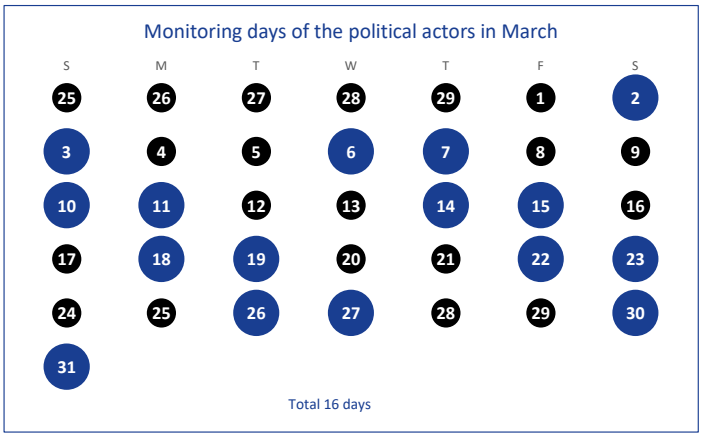
The dynamics for monitoring the content of the political actors is every consecutive third and fourth day of the month, and regarding the media every fourth day of the month. More details on the methodological framework, samples and monitoring dynamics, as well as details on the entire research process are available at: HARM-TIVE.

The research Determining Political Harmful Narratives (HARM-TIVE) has been conducted by the Institute of Communication Studies (ICS) within the framework of the project Use Facts: Fact-Based Journalism for Raising Awareness and Countering Disinformation in the Media Space in North Macedonia, supported by the British Embassy Skopje. The research is longitudinal and has been conducted during 2023 and 2024. It has been carried out in several phases by a team from ICS in cooperation with researchers and experts in the field of communications and media, as well as with media professionals in the field of monitoring and control.

> In March 2024, there was a notable reduction in harmful narratives present in the reporting of TV outlets, decreasing to 79 items from 90 in February. However, this trend was not mirrored in other areas. Political actors and online media outlets saw a slight increase in damaging narratives: political actors posted 142 harmful items in March, up from 136 in February; online media published 224 such news items, an increase from 211 in the previous month.

Analysed entity	Total number of news items/posts with harmful narrative/s							Total
	Sep.	Oct.	Nov.	Dec.	Jan.	Feb.	March	
Online media outlets	209	154	215	207	240	211	224	1,460
Political entities	143	135	171	176	148	136	142	1,051
TV stations	76	66	69	87	96	90	79	563

1. Monitoring of the communication practices and narratives of the political actors through their websites and Facebook pages



The monitoring of the communication of the political actors for a total of 16 days in March 2024 showed that they unofficially have started the campaign for the two election cycles scheduled for 24 April and 8 May, 2024 much earlier than the legally specified deadline (20 days before the election date). Their rhetoric is in the service of the elections, and the attacks on the political opponents have intensified day by day. The political actors used the deadlines for the preparation of the elections during which the candidates for the presidential and parliamentary elections were decided, to organise party events and meetings with the citizens, to promote coalitions, new electoral programmes, candidates for MPs and for the presidential office, as well as to request and to present international support.

The analysis below refers only to the communications of the political actors where harmful narratives were identified, with reference to the indicators that indicate the different harmful narratives.

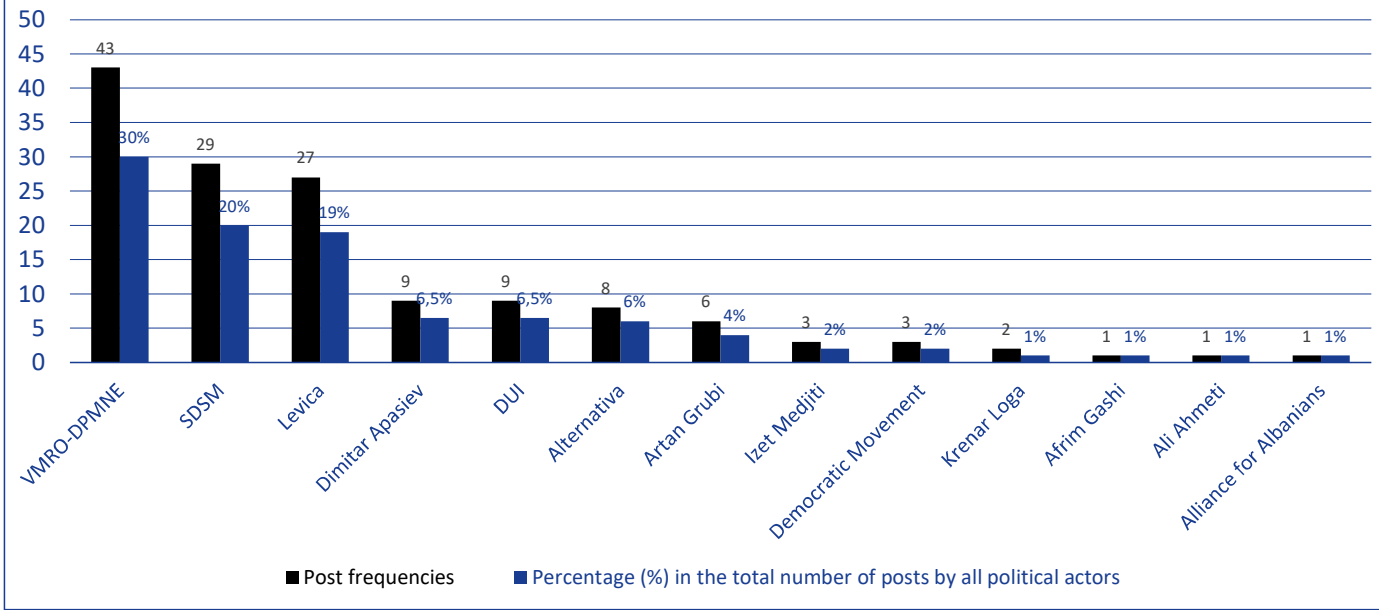
In the period from 1 March to 31 March, the monitoring of the websites and Facebook pages of the political parties and their leaders identified a total of **142 posts with a harmful narrative.** Of the aforementioned, 60 were posted only on Facebook, 36 were posted only on the Internet and 46 were posted on both communication channels. This confirms a similar trend as in the previous months that harmful rhetoric is more present on Facebook pages compared to the websites, as well as frequent repetition of the same posts on both communication channels.

Similar to the previous months, the most harmful narratives were noted in VMRO-DPMNE, then SDSM and Levica. As regards to DUI there was an increase in harmful posts compared to the previous months, and among the opposition parties of the ethnic Albanians in the country, Alternativa had the most harmful narratives. As in previous months, the monitoring for March showed no posts with harmful narratives on the websites and Facebook pages of LDP, the New Social Democratic Party and the Socialist Party, as well as on the pages of their leaders.

Bearing in mind that the opposition parties of the Albanians joined the coalition VLEN (WORTH) (composed of the Democratic Movement chaired by Izet Medjiti, Alternativa chaired by Afrim Gashi, the Besa Movement chaired by Bilal Kasami and the Alliance for Albanians - Taravari, i.e. the faction led by Arben Taravari with a joint appearance at the parliamentary elections and joint candidate for president Arben Taravari), they do the campaign and all communication to the public as a coalition, hence the statements of each of them are conducted as a communication message of VLEN.

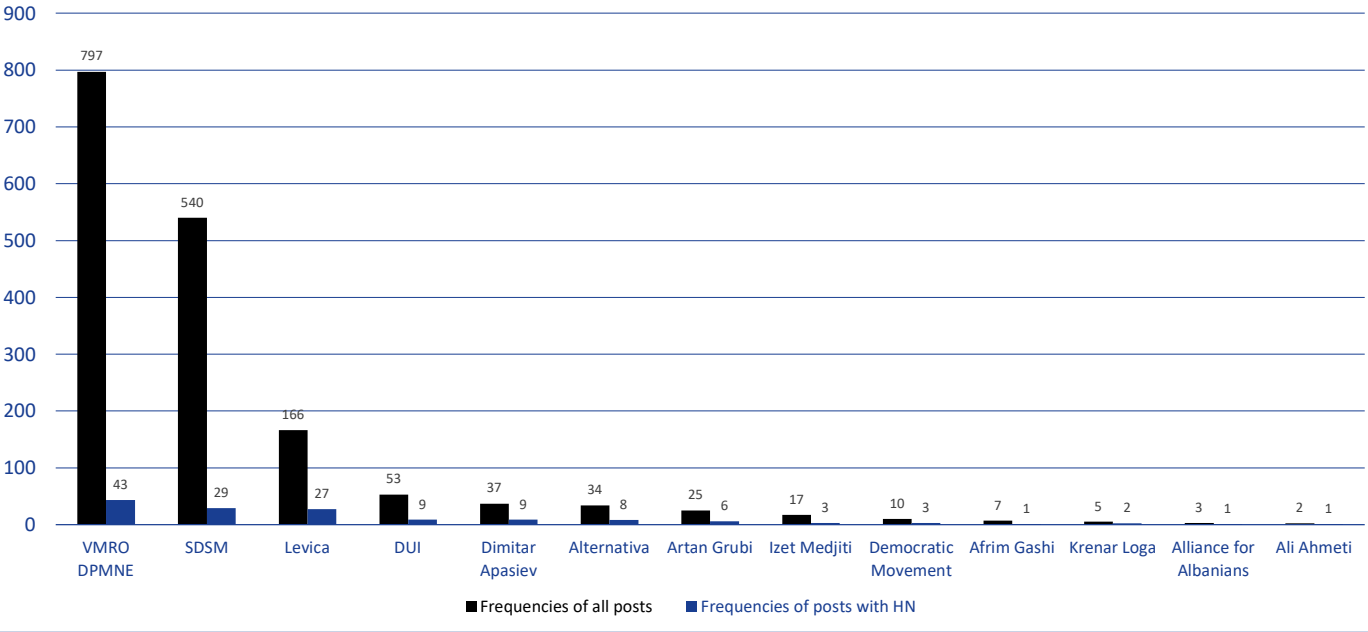
This time, there were not any harmful narratives identified by the leaders of VMRO-DPMNE and SDSM, Hristijan Mickoski and Dimitar Kovachevski, however as regards the leader of Levica, Dimitar Apasiev, nine harmful posts were recorded, by the leader of the Democratic Movement, Izet Medjiti, three were recorded, while the DUI's leader Ali Ahmeti and the leader of Alternativa posted one post each with a harmful narrative.

Table 1. Prevalence of posts with a harmful narrative by political actor



If the total number of posts by these three parties is taken into account, only 5.4% of the posts by VMRO-DPMNE and SDSM were harmful, while regarding Levica, with a significantly lower number of posts, 16.3% harmful posts were observed.

Table 2. Participation/percentage of posts of harmful narratives in the total number of posts on FB profiles of political entities



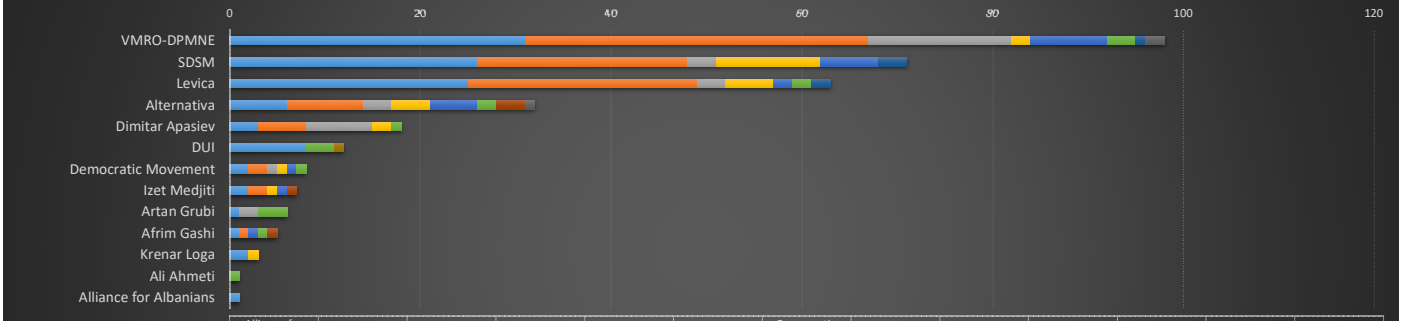
It was noted that there was a greater number of posts of activities of the political leaders with video materials, 'reels', remaking the same content and recycling it and spilling it over in a few days and posting it on multiple communication channels in order to reach a wider audience.

The most frequent posts by the political parties remained the press releases with regard to certain activities of the political actors and press conferences, as well as statements made by party spokespersons or reactions. In March, there was a more frequent use of edited video clips intended for criticism of the political opponents than before.

By far, the most common topic concerning which harmful narratives were identified was again domestic politics (100 out of 142 posts or 70.4 percent), while other topics were represented by two to five percent in the total number of posts with harmful narratives, and of these, corruption was the most popular topic.

As in previous months, the parties often developed harmful narratives to undermine trust in the institutions (through unsubstantiated claims of corruption and abuse of office), as well as biased information selection (deliberate omission of information) that could lead the public to wrong conclusions. Furthermore, one can observe an intensified rhetoric of character attacks on the political opponents (through labelling and ridiculing the political opponents and smearing other political parties), then, inciting socio-political divisions and populism, which mainly referred to pre-election narratives (through promotion of their own ideologies and plans). With a much lower intensity, the monitoring in March also observed harmful narratives of spreading panic, fear and insecurity (through frequent accusations of foreign entities for interfering in the internal affairs of the country, contrary to the national interests), extreme patriotism and nationalism, manipulative audio-visual content and ethnocentrism.

Table 3. Prevalence of harmful narratives in the posts of political actors (March 2024)



	Alliance for Albanians	Ali Ahmeti	Krenar Loga	Afrim Gashi	Artan Grubi	Izet Medjiti	Democratic Movement	DUI	Dimitar Apasiev	Alternativa	Levica	SDSM	VMRO-DPMNE
Undermining trust	1		2	1	1	2	2	8	3	6	25	26	31
Biased selection				1		2	2		5	8	24	22	36
Character attacks, demonization					2		1		7	3	3	3	15
Fomenting divisions			1			1	1		2	4	5	11	2
Populism				1		1	1			5	2	6	8
Foreign influence		1		1	3		1	3	1	2	2		3
Spreading panic, fear and uncertainty											2	3	1
Extreme patriotism				1		1				3			
MAVMS										1			2
Ethnocentrism								1					

The ruling parties SDSM and DUI continue to present themselves as a pro-European and progressive option for the citizens while criticizing the rest for being 'anti-EU'. The SDSM continues to target the VMRO-DPMNE as a political option which does not have any offer for the citizens for a European future, that they are the same political option from the past that did not reform and that they are against Macedonia's progress and membership in the European Union. DUI's rhetoric takes a step forward, describing the upcoming elections as elections in which citizens have to decide between Russia and the EU. In the statements of the senior officials of the DUI, it was claimed that the country is in great danger of Russian influence and that in the upcoming elections the citizens will have to choose the European option, i.e., the option that DUI stands for.

The united opposition parties of the Albanians remained focused on criticism of the DUI as their main opponent, often making allegations of corrupt practices by the DUI officials and accusing them of being under Russian and Serbian influence, and of falsely representing themselves as pro-EU. Among them, the presence of self-representation as EU-oriented and as saviours is most often noted.

VMRO-DPMNE presented itself as the saviour of the people and the country from the 'corrupt and destructive government' of the SDSM and the DUI. The harmful narratives by VMRO-DPMNE were most focused on Stevo Pendarovski and SDSM.

Levica again demonstrated the greatest diversity in topics and in actors towards which criticism and harmful narratives are directed. This month it can be noted that they were especially targeting the mayors and councillors in the local self-government units who come from the ranks of VMRO-DPMNE. The members of Levica presented themselves as saviours and defenders of the people, as well as leading the revolutionary battle against the 'SDS-VMRO-DUI coalition'.

1.1. Communication practices of the political parties and their leaders

Social Democratic Union of Macedonia - SDSM

The main focus of the Social Democratic Union of Macedonia - SDSM in their communication with the public is that the party's offer is European and it brings good for the citizens. Mostly in the discourse of the SDSM, it is noted that they present their political party as saviours and on the side of the citizens, distinguishing between 'us-the-good ones' and 'them-the-bad ones.' The leader of the SDSM, Dimitar Kovachevski, followed the same line of statements as the central statements from the party with the narrative that SDSM offers 'the EU as the only alternative', emphasizing - *'We offer hope, in contrast to the hopelessness of VMRO-DPMNE, our vision for a European Macedonia is real and achievable', i.e. that 'only the SDSM has both the personnel potential and the political will to do something better and something more for the country and the citizens*', and that *'DPMNE neither has a plan nor a vision for a better future of the country'*. Alongside the main actors in the SDSM's posts, VMRO-DPMNE and Hristijan Mickoski as their main political opponents, Gordana Siljanovska-Davkova, who is a candidate of the VMRO-DPMNE for president of the country, also emerged in March. VMRO-DPMNE was often referred to as 'DPMNE', omitting the abbreviation 'VMRO' to emphasize that the party was not the successor of the Macedonian revolutionary organization.

SDSM continued with the practice of 'recycling' content, which took place on the same day or in several consecutive days, both on the Facebook page and on the website, first through a press conference, usually by one of the party's spokespersons. Afterwards, there was a press release with a repetition of the text from the press conference, a statement to the media by an MP or an MP from the party and post on the website. Facebook content from the press conference was also posted, with video material, text content such as press release, and sometimes the same press release in a shorter form or a series of shorter posts with the main points.

Among the indicators that can be found in their posts is the promotion of their own ideology as better than that of the political opponent, using a populist discourse, attacking the political opponents as an anti-European option. This thesis is further strengthened by the slogan that the party promoted during March for the upcoming elections 'We will not give up on the future' where they claim to offer a European future for Macedonia. The main messages they send is to present that their option is better than the option of their main political opponent, so various issues of public interest, as well as appearances of the SDSM's leader are framed in that narrative of pro- and anti-European options.

As regards to most political actors, the monitoring notes the use of manipulative audio-visual materials where photographs, video materials or accurate data were often used, which were combined with manipulative data, in order to influence the public.

Regarding SDSM, a post few days after the promotion of the presidential candidate Gordana Siljanovska-Davkova can be noted in which there is a photo of her together with the Bulgarian MEP Andrej Kovachev who is known in the Macedonian public as a negationist of the Macedonian people. In the post it is said in a negative tone that 'the photograph of Siljanovska with Kovachev is a confirmation of the cooperation of the Macedonian and Bulgarian VMRO' and that 'Siljanovska stands proudly with Kovachev, who denies us as people.' It was later determined that the photograph is accurate, but that it dates five years ago (VMRO-DPMNE reacted with a press conference regarding the topic). Malinformation, such as the posting of this photo, is published with the intention of manipulating the public or leading them to a wrong conclusion, thereby distorting the image of what the reality is and what a lie is.

The promotion of the presidential candidate Gordana Siljanovska-Davkova, who is supported by the VMRO-DPMNE, and which took place on 2 March, is framed in the big picture of an attack on the main political opponent of the SDSM, which is the VMRO-DPMNE. In a statement from SDSM's official, which was posted both as press release and a post on the party's Facebook page it is said that *DPMNE with Siljanovska-Davkova offer a return to isolation, far from the EU*. It is further claimed that what *Mickoski and DPMNE together with Siljanovska are offering is to give up on the future*. A parallel is drawn with the election for the Mayor of the City of Skopje, who was also a candidate supported by VMRO-DPMNE, that *it is enough to look at what happened in Skopje* and that DPMNE did not bring about any positive change. Thereto, the political opponent was attacked for being the anti-European option for the citizens and that *DPMNE cannot bring about any positive changes because the only chance for Macedonia is EU membership - and they are against that.*

Similar rhetoric was noted throughout the month, related to various social events. During the opening of the promotional headquarters of the party in Ohrid in a SDSM's press release the president of the party, Dimitar Kovachevski, was quoted while attacking 'DPMNE' that they do not have a plan for Europe and the future and they cannot bring about changes, as was seen with the takeover of local government in several places. Concurrently, his own party presented itself as oriented towards the EU, in contrast to the political opponent.

This statement promotes the main theme which the SDSM has been presenting to the public for a longer period, and which is also the basis for the promoted campaign 'We will not give up on the future', from 'European Macedonia' through whose messages they claim that the future is European and it can be brought by the SDSM, while VMRO-DPMNE are a party with an anti-EU position. Such messages were frequent by the SDSM's leader at the opening of the promotional headquarters of the SDSM as well as in other public appearances.

The practice of framing every current major event in the party's communication strategy for the promotion of its own ideology as pro-EU, as opposed to that of the political opponents, can also be seen in the public reaction posted in a press release dated 30 March after the announcement of the persons' names who are on the candidate lists for MPs. In the paragraph it is said that it is *an EU-blocking list, it is the offer of DPMNE with 80% of the same MPs* while criticizing the political opponent as an anti-EU option and a retrograde, unreformed party whose MPs were against the country's membership so far in the EU and implemented an active blockade of the Macedonian Assembly. It also promoted its own ideology that the choice of the citizens in the next elections will be *between hope and a prosperous European future with the SDSM and hopelessness, going back 10 years with DPMNE far from the EU.*

The most harmful narratives used by the SDSM were the use of populism, undermining the trust of its political opponent, as well as biased selection in which only the positive attributes of its own political option are presented, and only the negative ones of the political opponent.

Having in mind that populism is a form of political communication, *populism, therefore, is a communication frame that appeals to and identifies with the people, and pretends to speak in their name... a master frame, a way to wrap up all kinds of issues* (Jagers & Walgrave, in Reinemann, 2016:13) is very easy to use, especially in pre-election. However, populism as a harmful narrative contributes to a blurred image in the public concerning what politicians actually do and what positions they have on certain issues, which makes it impossible for the citizens to form a true picture of the social developments and the political offer, and thus to make honest choice when exercising their democratic right, i.e. the right to vote.

Democratic Union for Integration – DUI (Bashkimi Demokratik për Integrim – BDI)

Compared to the previous monitoring periods when harmful narratives were noted less often in DUI's communication, a more intensive communication and an increase in the number of harmful narratives was noted in March. DUI continued with the key communication message in the promotion of its election activities - 'Yes to the EU - No to Russia.' On 9 March, DUI's candidate for president, the current Minister of Foreign Affairs Bujar Osmani was promoted, as well as the electoral platform 'Yes for the EU - No for Russia.' With regard to the candidate for president, several promotional activities were noted, among the people, the expressed support for an 'Albanian president', and his work as Minister of Foreign Affairs was put in favour of his promotion as a candidate. Thereby, the chairpersonship of the OSCE was used, as well as his trips abroad, the visit to the diplomatic-consular missions of Macedonia abroad where documents were issued to the Macedonian citizens, in order to inspect how the process was going and to help in issuing documents to our diaspora.

DUI continued with the practice of presenting itself in its communications as a defender of the national identity, defender of justice, EU-oriented, transparent and accountable. In party's posts, eight times a harmful narrative for undermining trust, three for foreign influence and one for ethnocentrism were recorded. An allegation of foreign influence was noted in a post by DUI's leader.

The main actors in DUI's posts were the president of the party Ali Ahmeti who is referred as 'the president of DUI', the Albanian opposition, VLEN (WORTH), Arben Taravari, Bilal Kasami, Izet Medjiti, Afrim Gashi, VMRO-DPMNE, Gordana Siljanovska-Davkova, concerning whom there were not any other designations noted. As second other actors, Bujar Osmani was noted as the 'future president' and Hristijan Mickoski, who was referred as 'the president of VMRO-DPMNE.' Zijadin Sela was noted as the third other actor and he was referred as 'the president of the Alliance for Albanians'.

While with the political party DUI and the candidate for president, one finds more of a populist approach in order to promote their own ideology, regarding the official of DUI and government minister Artan Grubi, there was also a denigration of the Albanian opposition, with a tendency to portray it as anti-European and close to VMRO DPMNE, and the main argument used was the non-voting of the constitutional changes, for the inclusion of the Bulgarian community in the preamble of the Constitution.

On Artan Grubi's profile, a video content was posted, which shows the likes by people in other countries of his posts, and it contains a text with insults towards the officials from the Albanian opposition. In the post, he calls the Besa leader Bilal Kasami 'Bill the Russian', Izet Medjiti 'Izet the African', Afrim Gashi 'Afrim he does not knows himself where he is from because he is in awe,' Arben Taravari, 'Arben TR, Arben Turkmenistan, and one whose name no one knows, for all the love❤ and 👍 which were brought to me by their Russian Asian-African comrades.' Grubi's reaction was regarding the likes that appeared on his Facebook page from different countries. The post, in addition to containing insults and humiliating speech towards the political opponents, also has elements of hate speech, given that the connotation of his post is negative and stigmatizing.

There is also a DUI's post in which it directly pointed out to the association of the political actors in order to cause riots after 8 May. It is claimed that with a 'Russian script' in 'coordination with VMRO-DPMNE and Levica' the Albanian opposition is attacking the DUI's officials and that it aims to cause riots, but 'they will receive the deserved response on 8 May.' Such narratives and serious accusations concerning the political opponents that are put in a sensitive period with insufficient arguments, with insufficiently substantiated allegations of foreign influence, contribute to the spread of fear, panic and insecurity among the population. This communication practice violates the principle of evidence-based communication, which pollutes the public discourse and lowers the level of the political communication.

The DUI's officials pointed significantly to malign Russian influence, such as messages in the speech by DUI's leader at the establishment of the DUI-led coalition for the upcoming elections 'European Front.' In the spirit of their campaign slogan 'Yes for the EU - No for Russia', Ali Ahmeti says that 'Russia should not be underestimated', therefore that its presence is visible through the formation of parties, media, 'militants who want to break our firmly established path, that we want a peaceful Balkan and we want our country to be peaceful and to join the EU similarly as we are in NATO.' Through the usage of the populist discourse, DUI, according to Ahmeti's speech, is the option that is on the side of the citizens, pro-European and that it represents the true values as the defender of the people.

Such rhetoric of sowing fear in the public and allegations of foreign malign influence was explicitly seen in posts on Artan Grubi's profile from an interview with Euronews Albania in which he directly talked about the malign Russian influence in Macedonia, and presented DUI as an option for the EU. For example, he claimed that during the election of Talat Djaferi as the President of the Assembly on 27 April, 2017:

> *the mass of people who forcibly entered was led by a Russian agent, who was identified inside the Assembly, and at the head of the protests was the United Macedonia party, which is pro-Russian and was founded by Alexander Dugin, the leader of the Putinist philosophy in Russia. Not to mention that they bought televisions in N. Macedonia, they have three political parties, one of which is a parliamentary party with two MPs, they have non-governmental organisations, the German report came out about paid journalists from Russia, the brutal intervention in the MOC and the most disturbing was the Russian intervention in Corridor 8, through the application of a Croatian company, a Russian property, which includes three Russian agents, who were supposed to supervise the construction of Corridor 8. Many Macedonian journalists are directly in the service of the Russian Embassy and Moscow with their anti-Albanian, anti-NATO and anti-EU positions. Three parties (Levica, United Macedonia and Macedonian Concept) are openly pro-Russia and congratulated Putin on his election. The entire energy infrastructure depends on the Russian gas and influence in North Macedonia. The only gas entering Macedonia was bought from Russia for the next 10 years. There was also tacit tolerance on the part of the institutions or the leaders of the institutions towards the Russian influence.*

According to Grubi, the largest Macedonian parties, VMRO-DPMNE and SDSM have elements that can encourage the Russian and the Serbian interventions in the country and that Serbia is massively present in Macedonia.

By linking information previously known to the public regarding the events of 27 April, as well as information that has been discussed in public, as regards to the malign Russian influence through various actors in the country, Artan Grubi framed it in the thesis which the political party DUI is pushing that they are the political option that mainly fights against the malign Russian influence.

The topic of the malign Russian influence and the attempt of the Russian actors to influence political and social processes in the country are not new and are often researched and publicly presented. It is a serious

topic of public interest in a country that is a NATO member which is fully aligned with the common foreign and security policy of the EU's positions, as well as with regard to the package of sanctions against Russia, especially after the Russian invasion of Ukraine. When the political actors state that there are malign foreign influences in the country, it is necessary to indicate the points where the influence is and where the danger is in order for the citizens to understand the manner in which the choice by voting for a certain political option is connected with the choice between the EU and Russia, to be properly informed in order to make the right choice when voting. Otherwise, if there are not any arguments, data, if there is not any foreign influence illustrated, the impression is given that it is a populist thesis related to a very serious and politically sensitive topic, purpose-built only for political marketing for the upcoming elections.

VMRO-DPMNE

Similar to the previous months, VMRO-DPMNE, as the largest opposition party, in March focused on criticism of SDSM and DUI, i.e. the ruling parties in the country, but this time there is also a focus on criticism of the current President of the country and candidate for the upcoming presidential elections, Stevo Pendarovski.

Out of a total of 445 posts (157 on the Facebook page and 228 on the party's website) this month, 43 posts with a harmful narrative were identified. Of those, 19 were posted only on the party's website, 5 were posted only on the Facebook page, and 19 were posted on both communication channels. In comparison to the previous months, this month there is an increased number of posts/communications from the party, but a lower number of noted harmful narratives, reducing the percentage of harmfulness.[1]

With a total of 43 identified posts with harmful narratives, the criticism of VMRO-DPMNE this month was mainly focused on Stevo Pendarovski (20 times) and the SDSM called 'SDS' (19 times), yet again they often talked with reference to the Government or the authorities 'of SDS and DUI' (17 times). Having less intensity, negative mentions of Dimitar Kovachevski were noticed (6 times) and the people or the citizens (7 times) are mentioned in a neutral tone in the harmful posts of VMRO-DPMNE. Although Stevo Pendarovski, Dimitar Kovachevski and Bojan Marichikj were mentioned in a negative context, they were not named differently. Solely while mentioning the City of Skopje's Mayor, Danela Arsovska, she is named 'SDS and DUI's favourite appendage', 'SDS and DUI's extended arm' and 'the pawn of SDS and DUI'.

This month, VMRO-DPMNE most often used, in the harmful communication, unfounded claims regarding the corruption of the political opponents, labelling and ridicule, but also deliberately not conveying the full picture of the event and promotion of their own ideologies. Foreign entities were less often blamed for negative influence in the country and words and formulations were used that smear the rival political parties. Therefore, VMRO-DPMNE, as in the previous months, mostly developed harmful narratives of biased selection of information, undermining trust in the institutions, attacks and demonization of the political opponents, especially Stevo Pendarovski, and populist narratives.

The form in which the posts with harmful narratives of VMRO-DPMNE were packaged was mostly a press release and press conference, but this month one can also notice several posts with manipulative audio-visual content, i.e. video compilations of Stevo Pendarovski's statements, followed by party comments regarding his relationship with the people.

1 Percentage of harmfulness from the total number of posts: March 5.4%, February 21.6%, January 27.7%

The most common topic was again domestic politics (20 posts), but also topics referring to the field of corruption (6 posts), foreign policy (5 posts), healthcare (3 posts) were also discussed, two posts each referred to the topic of economy and the topic of crime, education and justice were mentioned once each, and three posts were noted as other. Topics with reference to the field of domestic politics mostly referred to criticism of Stevo Pendarovski (13 out of 20), but also as regards to the upcoming elections (4 out of 20). The topics in the field of corruption referred to accusations of nepotism and partisanship of the administration of the rival SDSM, the US blacklist, Stevo Pendarovski and the Government's official vehicles, spending public money on purchases and using it for party purposes. In terms of foreign policy, harmful narratives were developed with regard to Stevo Pendarovski and the EU.

In the identified posts with a harmful narrative, VMRO-DPMNE mostly presented itself as saviour and defender of the people and justice as well, and attempts to present itself as a transparent and EU-oriented party were less often noticed this month.

In a post on 2 March on VMRO-DPMNE's website the speech of the party's leader, Hristijan Mickoski was posted, from the convention for the election of VMRO-DPMNE's candidate for the president of the country, where the party's main pre-election populist messages can be noted, with the key message in the title of the press release: *Mickoski: The country is in chaos and they took it away from the people, it is time for changes and for Macedonia, which we will return to the people.* Here, a series of unfounded findings of total dysfunctionality are evident, via which a biased selection of information is done and trust in the institutions is undermined - *The country is in complete chaos. The institutions are paralyzed; there is apathy and disillusionment everywhere. Faith in the politicians has been lost, because the will of the people has been tricked many times. Nothing is functioning; the citizens have the feeling that the country has been hijacked by a small group of corrupt politicians and are therefore sceptical that this can change. The country has been taken from the people's hands, and if the feeling of the people can be described in the shortest way, we no longer have a country.* Furthermore, they used insulting labels as regards to SDSM, which develops the demonization of the party - *The Macedonian party in power, SDSM, has been reduced to a servant and an accomplice in all scandals. There is no one who is not ashamed of their performances wherever they represent us around the world.* It is also possible to notice the use of populist formulations that smear SDSM at the expense of promoting its policies, which causes discord and divisions in the society:

> *They were going to take us to Europe, and they seized two million citizens, earlier there was quarantine during the Covid, and now they created a state prison... The patients are not certain what kind of therapy they are getting, money is made unscrupulously at the expense of the most vulnerable, there is nepotism everywhere, justice nowhere... Let's not pretend that these are elections about whether or not we will join the European Union. Above all, these are elections for Macedonia. Where the choice should be - organised Macedonia, with laws that apply to everyone, where there is no first and second class citizens. And I believe that the citizens know and will make the right choice, for themselves, for their families, for their children.*

In the focus of the criticism of Stevo Pendarovski, edited video content from Pendarovski's public statements with text messages and comments are usually posted. In a post from 2 March on VMRO-DPMNE's Facebook page there is edited video of excerpts by Pendarovski with a message - *Pendarovski said in 2019 that he had not forgotten the messages No Justice, No Peace, and as a proper servant he signed the amendments to the Criminal Code. The citizens were against it, but Pendarovski decided to listen to the bosses from DUI and SDS. Today he still says without any shame that he showed that no one could control him. If it weren't shameful and sad, Pendarovski would be an excellent stand-up comedian.* Obviously, with negative labels towards Pendarovski as an 'excellent stand-up comedian', subservient to the 'bosses from DUI and SDS' and with that claim of corruption and unprofessionalism, a harmful narrative is being developed with a biased selection of information and audio-visual content that does not reflect the full image of the events, with

the aim of undermining the confidence in Pendarovski's work as a President. By using wording that he as a servant listens to the 'bosses' i.e. the ruling parties SDSM and DUI, Pendarovski is attacked unfoundedly and improperly that he was not and will not be an independent President for all citizens, but only a dependant of the parties in the executive power.

In a post on 7 March, on VMRO-DPMNE's Facebook page, edited video content of statements by Pendarovski and the Bulgarian MEP Andrej Kovachev was again posted with the following narrative - *Pendarovski received political support in 2019 from the MEP from Bulgaria, Andrej Kovachev, known for the negations of the Macedonian identity. Pendarovski proudly boasted about it. Concurrently, Andrej Kovachev glorified Pendarovski for the statement 'it is a historical fact that Goce Delchev is Bulgarian. This shameful statement by Pendarovski was a direct destruction of the Macedonian positions and Kovachev used it as an argument. While Pendarovski was praised by Kovachev, the MEP complained that VMRO-DPMNE opposes such views of Pendarovski Stevo* in which the claims of unprofessionalism and abuse of office of the President Pendarovski in the service of helping the alleged negative foreign influence coming to us from Bulgaria can be noted.

Again, in a 10 March post on the party's Facebook page a manipulative audio-visual content from interviews of Pendarovski and Kovachev was presented, by which it is claimed that *Pendarovski disgracefully attributed Bulgarian ethnic origin to Goce Delchev - he acted as if he was a member of the historical commission, but from the Bulgarian side.* Where once again a biased selection of information and undermining trust in the institution of the President is done, and it aims at smearing Pendarovski as an unsuitable candidate for a President. The same messages are repeated and elaborated in a 18 March press release on VMRO-DPMNE's website, entitled *Pendarovski spent half of his mandate to please the Bulgarian negative circles, and now he is demanding a mandate from the Macedonian citizens he betrayed,* where unfounded claims of unprofessionalism and abuse of office by the President are repeated, but also alleged negative foreign, Bulgarian influences that spread fear and insecurity are discussed - *Apparently, it was more important for Pendarovski to be praised in Bulgaria, than to protect the interests of the citizens in Macedonia...Pendarovski should know that he was elected President and took salary from the people's money to be the protector of the Macedonian positions, not the foreign ones.*

One of the frequently mentioned cases in the month, regarding which two press conferences and two posts were made, was the alleged scandal with the SDSM's consultant, Asaf Eisin. On 22 March, a post of the press conference of Aleksandar Nikoloski was noted on the website and on the Facebook page of VMRO-DPMNE, entitled *Pendarovski and Kovachevski are caught in a lie - How much does it cost, who will pay it and why is the contract for the engagement of Asaf Iseini not recorded by SDS?* At the press conference, Nikoloski used unfounded allegations of corruption of the SDSM - *Today we will continue with the scandal about the questionable foreign consulting of SDS and Stevo Pendarovski by the controversial foreign consultant Asaf Isein.... Bearing in mind that we have serious information that he was hired by SDS, it is obvious that Pendarovski and Kovachevski are caught on act as both of them are lying regarding the engagement of this person.... The question they have not answered to this date is who will pay this person and why the contract with him is not recorded by SDS as the political parties usually do when they hire foreign consultants.* These claims are not supported by evidence and facts, but are attacks with arbitrary arguments, by means of which a biased selection of information is done in order to lead the public to the conclusion that the SDSM is doing something criminal in the strategic planning of their election campaign.

A few days later, on 26 March, a post of the party's press release on VMRO-DPMNE's website and on another one Nikoloski's press conference posted on the website and on the Facebook page with regards to the same topic were noted. Also, in this case unfounded allegations of crime and corruption were used - *So we have Pendarovski's statement and we have the 'signature' of the expensive Balkan rascal Isein. Now it still remains to be said how much and with what kind of money they pay these kinds of advice? Precisely because of this reason Pendarovski and Kovachevski and SDS are silent. If they are paying Asaf Isein with black money, then they are committing a crime. If his engagement is paid for by a foreign entity, then they are breaking the law again, all the more so that that foreign factor would have its own interests in interfering in*

the elections in Macedonia. by means of which biased selection of information and undermining the trust in the institutions is being performed. Additionally on 27 March, another press release was posted on the VMRO-DPMNE's website where SDSM is again accused of criminal activity with unverified findings of corruption *- SDS, Kovachevski and Pendarovski are running away from answers as regards the scandal with the rascal Asaf Isein, like the devil from incense... There are serious indications that this person was paid with money in hand, black money which was previously pumped out of the rigged tenders in REK Bitola. If this is true, and none of those summoned denies it, then the Government goes from one crime to another. Specifically, black money had been illegally acquired, and therefore the law is broken once again when it is paid in hand to someone who advises you on the eve of the campaign to run a smear campaign, with labelling and divisions.'* Such serious accusations of alleged corruption of the SDSM in the pre-election period, coming from the largest opposition party in the country, are harmful because they are not supported by evidence, although one of the main principles of ethical and honest political communication is to be based on evidence and facts, instead of spreading manipulative and selective arguments that can reduce confidence in the electoral process and the institutions.

Levica

In March 2024, the communication channels of Levica and their leader Dimitar Apasiev were dominated by posts promoting their presidential candidate Biljana Vankovska, as well as the opening of the local offices of the party, and frequent posts related to the presidential elections were also noted. The monitoring recorded a similar trend of harmful narratives on Levica's website, as well as on the Facebook page of the party and the leader Apasiev, which were focused on harsh and sometimes inappropriate and harmful criticism and labelling of the presidential candidates of SDSM and VMRO-DPMNE, as well as towards the ruling parties SDSM and DUI and the opposition party VMRO-DPMNE.

Out of a total of 76 posts on the party's website and Facebook page (on the days of monitoring), harmful narratives were noted in 28 (21 harmful Facebook posts and 7 harmful website posts, in which the same post was repeated only once on both communication channels). In March, a total of 69 posts were recorded on the leader Dimitar Apasiev's Facebook page, of which harmful narratives were identified in 11 posts.

Levica often used unfounded allegations of corruption, deliberately omitting information concerning events and using words and formulations that smear the political opponents, thus developing harmful narratives of undermining trust in the central and the local government institutions, as well as tendentiously selecting information that leads the citizens to wrong conclusions. Harmful narratives about negative foreign influences in the country, mainly from the West but also from Bulgaria were less frequently observed, inciting social divisions, spreading panic, fear and insecurity, but also populist narratives where through smearing the political opponents it presented itself as the only non-corrupt political option that advocates for a better standard of living of the citizens and protection of the national interests.

Similarly, the leader Apasiev posted harmful narratives of biased selection of information with attempts to undermine trust in the institutions, to incite social divisions and negative foreign influence and negative and inappropriate labelling of political opponents and other subjects dominated in his post, by which he developed a harmful narrative of demonization of the persons he spoke of.

The form in which the posts of Levica's harmful narratives were packaged was most often a press release (17 times), an interview (5 times), a reaction (2 times), as well as one statement, one press conference, one speech and one Facebook video reel from the guerrilla action by Levica - Gjorche Petrov - *Posts with harmful narratives on Apasiev's Facebook page have 10 reactions and one press release.*

The most common topic in Levica's posts, where harmful narratives were identified, was domestic politics (18), then economy (4), and less frequently harmful narratives were developed on the topic of education (2), healthcare (2), crime and corruption (1). Specifically from the field of domestic politics, in the posts with a harmful narrative by Levica for this month, general political topics were mentioned such as the quality of democracy in Macedonia, the quality of the MPs in the Assembly, the political and economic situation in the country, but also specific domestic-political topics such as the amendments to the Criminal Code, relations between VMRO-DPMNE and DUI, the Ohrid Agreement, the status of displaced persons after the 2001 military conflict, as well as the presidential elections, with particular criticism and attacks on the candidate Stevo Pendarovski.

The other topics of domestic politics referred to the policies at the local level, i.e., the construction of multi-storey buildings and for the DUP in Gjorche Petrov, the Mayor's final account of the budget expenditures in Bitola and the Council's vote regarding the final account, removal of a historical memorial plaque in Ohrid, blocking of the DUP in Kavadarci, the terminated contract for an electric vehicle factory in Tetovo, environmental crime in the Municipality of Gazi Baba, the situation in Probishtip, the elections, the opening of the Shtuka and Ilovica mines, children's playgrounds in the Municipality of Aerodrom, Skopje. The main economic topics referred to the profits of the banks and the pre-election indebting of the country, as well as the situation concerning the fruit production and exports, while the topics concerning education and healthcare referred to the student manifesto from state universities, the financial support for students and the position of the country towards new medical graduates.[2]

In the 11 identified harmful posts on the leader Apasiev's Facebook page, topics from the field of domestic policy dominate (10) and one post was about healthcare, i.e., about the mental state of the population. Specifically, in the field of domestic politics, in Apasiev's harmful posts, the presidential elections, collecting signatures for the presidential candidates and political advertising, attacks on the President Stevo Pendarovski, criticism of TV Kanal 5 and its director Ivan Mirchevski, criticism of the work of Prime Minister Djaferi, attack on SDSM were discussed... In addition, the terrorist attack in Moscow was noted as a secondary topic.

Considering the diversity of the topics, a record 165 actors were mentioned in the 28 identified Levica's posts with harmful narratives, with the most frequently mentioned this month being Levica[3], VMRO-DPMNE and their advisors (10 times), DUI (8 times), SDSM (7 times)...[4] Also, this month, Levica used the same names of the key actors that it criticized in its posts with harmful narratives: 'DPMNE' for VMRO-DPMNE, 'SDS' for SDSM, which it also called an 'insignificant partner of DUI', while they used the word 'Monster' to name DUI. They continue to call the Government 'criminal government of SDS and DUI', 'unpopular government' and 'outgoing government', and they also talked about the VMRO-DPMNE-SDSM-DUI coalition. Referring to the mentioned politicians, the biggest focus of the harmful criticism this month was aimed at the candidate for

2 A secondary topic was identified in 7 posts with harmful narratives: on 01.03 - collecting signatures for presidential candidates, on 10.03. - Illegal constructions in Ohrid and the connection between business and politics/domestic policy, on 11.03. Economy - foreign investments, on 14.03. - Domestic policy - the upcoming elections, on 14.03 - foreign policy - sanctions against Russia, on 15.03. - economy - the standard of living of the population and on 18.03 - foreign policy - the relationship with the USA and the positions towards the Bulgarian demands towards Macedonia

3 In all 28 posts - once (and - 21 times throughout the texts of the posts, and Levica-Aerodrom, Levica-Gazi Baba and 'Levica in Gazi Baba', and Levica-Kavadarci were also mentioned.

4 The candidate for President from the Levica Biljana Vankovska (4 times), the leader of the party Dimitar Apasiev (3 times), 'SDSM-VMRO-DPMNE' were mentioned 2 times each, Red Youth (Crvena Mladina), Goran Velevski 'young physicians' and once each Gordana Siljanovska Davkova, Stevo Pendarovski, Amar Mecinovikj, Boris Krmov, Slavica Grkovska, Timcho Mucunski, Artan Grubi, Imer Selmani, Rumen Radev, Nefi Useini, Kiril Pecakov, Sashko Janchev, Jovana Mojsovska, GROM, UCHK, Ombudsman, Democratic union are less frequently mentioned.

President Stevo Pendarovski using harmful and inappropriate labels such as 'servant', 'vassal', 'puppet of Bulgarian politics', 'silent letter', 'servant of the Kale[5]', 'little politician' and 'careerist'.

Similarly, on the leader Dimitar Apasiev's Facebook page, 60 actors were mentioned in 9 identified posts with harmful narratives, and in every post Levica was also mentioned.[6] Negative labels and names have become inappropriate and harmful in Apasiev's communication, calling the 'SDS-DPMNE-DUI' - 'axis of evil', 'Bermuda triangle', 'triple pact' and 'bourgeois parties', and he still named VMRO-DPMNE 'Vmroids', he named SDSM as 'pro-Bulgarian SDS', 'Soros-sluts', and 'SDS 'of our country'', he called the President Stevo Pendarovski 'louse', Dimitar Kovachevski - 'the imposed prime minister' and Talat Djaferi - 'the terrorist prime minister'. This month, in Apasiev's post there was also an attack and negative inappropriate labelling of a media outlet, i.e., Kanal 5 TV, calling it 'cheap television' and 'K(Anal) 5', and calling Ivan Mirchevski a 'gruevistic servant'.

In its harmful posts, Levica often presented itself as the saviour and defender of the people, while no special intention of self-representation was observed with Apasiev, but once it was noticed that he presented his party as the defenders of the national interests, when he talked about the '**Macedonianism of the Levica'**.

As in earlier, hashtags were a characteristic feature in the posts with harmful narratives of Levica and the leader Apasiev, and especially of Apasiev, the harmfulness and labelling can be observed in the hashtags.[7]

In the focus of criticism towards Stevo Pendarovski, a post on Levica's Facebook page from 18 March, contained a press release and a graphically designed photo of Pendarovski with the President of the Republic of Bulgaria Rumen Radev, with a text message - *THE CHOICE FOR THE SERVANT PENDAROVSKI IS A CHOICE FOR SAN STEFANO BULGARIA AND DESTROYING MACEDONISM.* The press release was replete with unverified findings and negative and inappropriate labels with regards to President Pendarovski, by biased selection of information and undermining of trust in the institution of the President of the country - *The Macedonian public remembers Pendarovski as a silent letter in domestic and foreign policy, who does not react to the resurrected Bulgarian neo-superiority and Greater Albanian secessionism and who slavishly silenced the daily mocking of the insignia of the Macedonian nation and the denial of the Macedonian language... Pendarovski during his term was a puppet of the Bulgarian nihilist policies... Pendarovski's defeat on 8 May will be the beginning of the return of sovereignty to the hands of the Macedonian people, who will finally get rid of such careerists and vassals in politics...* Additionally, through the labelling of Pendarovski as a subject or 'vassal' of foreign interests, claims of harmful foreign influences can be noted, in this case from Bulgaria and the USA. This is the only post that appeared on the two Facebook channels of Levica and of Apasiev.

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5 Translator's note: 'Kale' is a term in Macedonian to denote the fortress Kale which is located in the centre of Skopje. The American Embassy in Skopje is located in its vicinity and the term 'Kale' is a jargon term used for the Embassy.

6 The following were mentioned twice: SDSM, DUI, SEC, AVMU, Ivan Mirchevski, Talat Djaferi, VMRO-DPMNE-SDSM, and once: Dimitar Kovachevski, Zoran Zaev, Fatmir Bitikji, Frontline, Racin, Trn, Gradska, Centar.mk, Civil MK, Stevo Pendarovski, presidential candidates, Stevcho Jakimovski, Biljana Vankovska, GROM, Alliance for Albanians, Arben Taravari, Government, citizens, Macedonia, the ruling parties.

7 Hashtags on the Levica's Facebook page: #Fight, #FightStartsNow, #LevicaOutAndAbout, #LevicaInParliament, #WeWillWinInTheEnd, LevicaForProbishtip, #RedEast, #RedWave, #RedGaziBaba, #LevicaForGorcePetrov #LevicaInCouncils, #GreenNotConcrete, #365Amendments

Hashtags on the Facebook page of Dimitar Apasiev: #ElectionsAreOurRevenge, #DpmneClientelism, #BoycottAdvertisersOnKanal5, #TikTakTikTak, #MirchevskiShaking, #LevicaDoesNotForgive, #LevicaDoesNotForget, #Colleagues, #LestWeForget, #BigMagic

Regarding the leader Dimitar Apasiev, the narratives heated up in this pre-election month, mainly with the use of inappropriate and offensive labels. In a post on 31 March on Apasiev's Facebook page, conveying the news of an interview with the President of Guyana, Mohamed Irfan Ali, the short status message says - *This is the kind of PRESIDENT I want! Not the louse Pendarovski.* In addition to Pendarovski, the leader of Levica continued with inappropriate labels towards the Prime Minister Talat Djaferi - *Did the Prime Minister-TERRORIST of Northdjanistan[8] condemn the terrorist attacks in Moscow and why not?' #Colleagues* (post on Apasiev's Facebook page, 23 March).

It is particularly worrisome that this month the leader Apasiev, in addition to criticizing and labelling the political opponents, also made indecent attacks on the television station Kanal 5 TV. In a post on Apasiev's Facebook page, dated 3 March, there were unfounded allegations of corruption and inappropriate labels for the Kanal 5 TV and the director – *Of all the cheap media, only (K)ANAL 5 continues persistently with the vmroid hunt against the Levica!? 🤔 Its director IVAN MIRCHEVSKI - the gruevist servant, takes out his frustrations because we blocked the Law on Media Bribery, which he considers to be his project.'* In addition, Apasiev called for a boycott of the television and announced 'War' on Kanal 5 TV - 📢 *Beginning from this week on, we will start a systematically organized campaign of BOYCOTTING all products and companies that are advertised on this cheap and unprofessional television!!! Pictures, names, brands, everything...# BoycottAdvertisersOnKanal5, #TikTakTikTak..* After this post the Agency for Audio and Audiovisual Media Services reacted noting that *The politicians and the public office holders must be aware of the weight of the words expressed and the responsibility they have in front of the citizens. Improper communication has a negative impact on freedom of expression, above all in sensitive periods such as pre-elections, and it violates the dignity of the media workers,* and the Association of Journalists of Macedonia (AJM) in its reaction emphasized that *With this post, Apasiev is making an attempt to discredit the Kanal 5 medium, and by using vulgar phrases hate speech by his followers can be encouraged. This manner of addressing the media by the leaders of the political parties is unacceptable and it can threaten the safety of the media workers.*

Likewise in a post on his Facebook profile dated 22 March, Apasiev made unfounded allegations of corruption accompanied by improper labels to the Agency for Audio and Audiovisual Media Services - AVMU, and also to the State Election Commission - SEC - *The Bermuda Triangle, the Triple Pact or the 'Axis of Evil' (SDS-DPMNE-DUI), through their fools in the Agency for Audio and Audiovisual Media Services and the State Election Commission, are once again trying to directly harm the Levica Party, which is the only real threat to their uncontrolled corruption,* and thereby undermined trust in AVMU and SEC, and biasedly selected information that developed a narrative of smearing SDSM-DUI-VMRO-DPMNE, which were allegedly trying to harm Levica. Moreover, the harmful narrative regarding negative and undesirable foreign influence in the country was also noted - *In this manner, with a by-law and with the support of foreign western embassies, they want to change the law and neutralize the phenomenon of Levica!*

One example that reflects the manner in which Levica directed public criticism towards the local authorities from the ranks of DPMNE was a video post on the party's Facebook page dated 30 March, entitled *LEVICA IS MORE SUCCESSFUL IN CARING ABOUT AERODROM THAN MAYOR MUCUNSKI* where, through the promotion of the party's volunteer activities for the repair of a 'ruined' playground in the park of a district centre in the local community, the Mayor of the Municipality of Aerodrom, Skopje, Timcho Mucunski, was criticized with unverified allegations for carelessness and corruption, which undermined trust in the Municipality - *he does not see any problem in the ruined children's playgrounds,... It is sad that the local government cares more about the business deals that produce concrete monsters than the children's happiness.* With the intention to emphasize the difference, a populist narrative of divisions was developed and the Mayor of Aerodrom Municipality from VMRO-DPMNE was vilified as undesirable, at the expense of promoting their own ideologies

8 Translation of 'Severdjanistan' – derogatory term used to reflect the change of the name of the country from Republic of Macedonia to Republic of North Macedonia. The term is usually used against the SDSM & DUI officials in whose terms of office the name change happened.

and activities in the service of citizens - 'The citizens will choose and support people with a clear vision and purpose, instead of persons who are incapable of performing the function entrusted to them by the citizens... In contrast to them, the main interest of Levica is the contentment of our people. '

Alliance for Albanians – Sela (Aleanca për Shqiptarët – Sela)

Due to internal turmoil over whether the Alliance for Albanians - AA should form a coalition with DUI or with the Albanian opposition, two groups/factions of the party emerged during the month of March. One is led by former leader Zijadin Sela, and the second by the current leader Arben Taravari, who joined the opposition.

The Minister of Justice Krenar Loga is among the officials who are in the AA, led by Sela, whose official government profile is also the subject of monitoring in this research. In his posts there were noted communications that contain harmful narratives regarding events, topics or issues related to the elections. Out of six noted posts, five refer to the domestic policy and one to the topic of healthcare. The topics of domestic policy were elections, inter-party relations and the constitutional amendments.

His communication to the public was focused on promoting the activities of his party, i.e. the wing of the Alliance for Albanians, led by Zijadin Sela, and he was critical of the Albanian opposition parties. Krenar Loga often mentioned Zijadin Sela as 'the leader of all Albanians', and himself as 'pro-European oriented' and as a 'principled and honest politician'. He presented his option as a defender of the people, of his own national identity, transparent, accountable and oriented towards the EU.

In one of the posts on his Facebook profile using unverified findings, he tried to undermine trust in the European Union for Change coalition, which he claimed *has a tradition of leaving on the street the partners of the coalitions they establish (some as 'WE CAN, some self-kidnap themselves, some do not separate from Mickoski, and some do not detach themselves from the Government), just as they change the names of these coalitions.* What is more, he said that *AA's stamps are not individually owned, even less by 'the one who left his political home, and as for the ultimatums, use them with VMRO, not with the Alliance for Albanians.*

Thus, he presented his political opponents as dishonest, and himself and the faction he belongs to as honest politicians, transparent and accountable. Nevertheless, considering that there were not any more details offered concerning the allegations that were presented, this discourse can be considered as spreading populism and promoting one's own political ideology as better for the citizens.

European Union for Change - ESU (Lidhja Europjane për Ndryshim)

During March, the European Union for Change - ESP (Lidhja Europjane për Ndryshim), i.e. the opposition bloc composed of the political parties Alternativa, Besa movement and the Democratic Movement, strengthened the cooperation with the Alliance for Albanians led by Arben Taravari for a joint performance in the upcoming elections. Arben Taravari is their presidential candidate. Their coalition is called VLEN (WORTH) and the appearances of these political actors became more frequent during the month of March as part of this coalition. On top of the promotion of Arben Taravari as the presidential candidate of the coalition, during the month of March their communication continued to be critical of the ruling party DUI, but also of the Government in general. They presented their political option as saviour and defender of the people and that they were with the citizens for justice and the fight against corruption.

Democratic Movement – Levizja Demokratike

Among the political actors who are part of VLEN, harsher rhetoric can be noted by Izet Medjiti, the leader of the Democratic Movement (DD). In a Facebook post for the promotion of VLEN Medjiti stated that *Now the victory of the Albanians bears the name VLEN and that DUI can no longer represent the Albanians'.* He stated that in the last elections, *DUI spoke about green policies, and now about European ones, i.e., 'it talks about everything, but not about Albanians'.* He criticized them for making alliances with *'minority communities only to avoid destruction and abandonment by the Albanians. However, the Albanian is not a minority, the Albanian is VLEN!*

In the post a populist discourse that promoted VLEN as a better option than DUI was used, which was on the side of the Albanians. Concurrently, by glorifying one's own political option and promoting who works more for the Albanians, one enters the trap of nationalism, because at the same time one puts an equation between the efforts to improve the lives of ethnic Albanian citizens, which are in the offer of the political party, or only as the promotion of a political option that focuses on who will be a bigger nationalist in the eyes of the citizens.

In a Facebook post by the Democratic Movement's leader, Izet Medjiti, the Deputy Prime Minister Artan Grubi was called 'Artan Casinoman' and it was stated that he was lying and insults were directed at him stating that there was nothing to be expected from people who enter politics to *cure their children's frustrations and console themselves for the fact that no one wants them in politics, no matter how hard they try?! Such people insult and enjoy the fact that the Government allows them to insult!'* Hereupon it was said that his *'PR experts paid with gambling money'* will not *save him in the elections because the people know best and they do not vote for casinomen.* The post contained allegations regarding crime and corruption that were not supported by adequate facts, which undermined trust in the political opponent, and he was portrayed as a dishonest and irresponsible politician.

In another post by Izet Medjiti his own ideology was promoted and he criticized those who *destroyed DUI, realized that they lost power, that is why they engage in gambling* and that *the old voters of DUI, whom I know well because I have shared every problem with them, are not voters because of gambling, but because of courage and patriotism.* It stated that DUI voters would join the victory by voting for VLEN. Such statements discredit DUI as a credible political option, and promote VLEN as a new, fresh option that offers brave politicians and patriots.

Alternativa

The focus of Alternativa's posts, as part of VREDI were the officials from the ruling set of the Albanian parties. In the criticism towards Zijadin Sela and Krenar Loga, they present themselves as defenders of their own identity and promote themselves as the better option for Albanians, transparent, European-oriented and on the side of the citizens.

In a post criticizing Zijadin Sela posted at Alternativa, and as a joint position of VREDI, it was said that *Zijadin Sela and Krenar Loga came up with a cheap alibi* and that they are going against the will of the Albanians and putting their own interests before the interests of the Albanians which are *clearly and unequivocally determined to send DUI to the opposition.*

In another example it was stated that the citizens must decide between the pro-European coalition VLEN (WORTH) and *the corrupt elite of DUI, who are WORTH nothing, because they have been holding the Albanians from North Macedonia hostage for 20 years.*

This is a common narrative towards them – taking the role as representatives of the majority of Albanians, and all others are against the will of the Albanians. The frequent narrative 'we-good ones' and 'you-bad ones' which can foment divisions and create impatience towards the opponent is present in both political parties and their leaders.

On the Facebook page of the leader of Alternativa, Afrim Gashi, in March there is noted a post which referred to the parliamentary and presidential elections. It referred to a party activity in Gostivar, the promotion of Arben Taravari as a candidate for the president of the VLEN (WORTH) coalition. In his speech, Gashi said that Albanian voters were faced with a choice between *corruption and the virtue of honesty, between moral depravity and ethics, between poverty and welfare, between migration and ancestral home, between EU integration and cooperation with Vuchikj.* In the post, he portrayed his leader and party as the defenders of the people, and through a populist discourse he promoted his own ideology as more important, better and in the interest of the citizens, while the political opponents are working dishonestly, corruptly and under the influence of Serbian President Vuchikj.

The theme of foreign influence, except in the example with the Serbian president, VLEN (WORTH) also used it in criticism posted with regard to DUI's presidential candidate Bujar Osmani. In the posted article, Bujar Osmani was criticized for his work, allegedly for corrupt practices, non-transparency and dishonesty. He was named in the post as 'the patient Osmani', where the term 'Patient' is the term under which the Special Public Prosecutor's Office investigated Osmani as a former Minister of Health.

It is also said that he cannot claim to be a pro-European politician because *he was the first politician on our continent who, after the Russian aggression in Ukraine, opened the door and welcomed Vladimir Putin's right-hand man, Sergey Lavrov, in Skopje. What can you say about Europe when you open the door to Russia, you patient Osmani?*

Monitoring of official communication channels of the Government officials

The monitoring includes the official Facebook pages of the Government officials in order to determine their communication practices, i.e., whether they use harmful narratives. It is noted that the Government officials who are also party officials continue the practice of using only one Facebook profile through which they communicate with the public concerning their activities, regardless of whether they are party officials or in the capacity of Government officials. It is noted that the Government officials do not use harmful narratives, but the presence of posts in which the ministers share party information is notable.

During the month of March, 93 posts were posted on the Facebook page of the President of the Caretaker Government, Talat Djaferi, in the monitored days – 41 posts, while there were not any harmful narratives noted. It can be seen that the President of the Caretaker Government, Talat Djaferi, used the official Facebook page to promote his activities as Prime Minister, but also to promote the party he comes from. Hence, among the posts there was information regarding the support for Bujar Osmani as a presidential candidate, the visit to the NLA monument in Prekaza, Kosovo, iftar dinner with the president of DUI Ali Ahmeti, live broadcasts of party activities, news about DUI's coalition with other parties, etc. The monitoring notes that the regular activities as the Caretaker Prime Minister, which were posted in Albanian and Macedonian language, were often translated into English, and most of the posts related to party-political activities were usually posted only in Albanian and English.

On **Bojan Marichikj's** Facebook page, the first Deputy Prime Minister, 103 posts were posted in March, and 54 posts in the monitored days, of which there were not any posts with a harmful narrative noted. Regarding Marichikj, similarly to other government officials, the Facebook page was used for the promotion of the party-

political activities. On top of the regular posts relating to his activities as the first Deputy Prime Minister, the posts contained content about party meetings with the citizens, support for the candidate for president supported by SDSM Stevo Pendarovski, promotion of the SDSM's views, activities of the SDSM's youth with SDSM's president Dimitar Kovachevski, as well as the support he received at the party congress for a candidate for MP in electoral constituency No 1.

Slavica Grkovska, the Deputy Prime Minister in charge of Good Governance Policies had 35 posts on the Facebook page in the month of March, 19 of which were in the monitored period. There were not any harmful narratives observed, and the only misuse of the official government Facebook page that she has as an official was the information about the party activity from the SDSM'S 8 March marching in Kavadarci.

On the Minister of Foreign Affairs, Bujar Osmani's Facebook page, during the month of March, 156 posts were posted, 85 posts during the monitored days, and there were not any harmful narratives noted among them. Minister Osmani devoted himself almost entirely to his candidacy for the presidential elections and used the official Facebook page mainly to communicate the party's positions and the pre-election campaign with personal promotion and posting information in respect of his meetings and activities as a candidate.

The practice of using the official Facebook page as a government official for the promotion of party's activities was also noted in the communication of Minister of Defence Slavjanka Petrovska. During the month of March, 41 posts were posted, of which 25 were posted on the monitored days, and there were not any harmful narratives observed. On the other hand, posts for the promotion of party-political activities were noticed. Among them were the 8 March marching organized by the SDSM, support for the presidential candidate Stevo Pendarovski, promotion of the new party platform for the parliamentary elections of SDSM, etc.

During March, 111 posts were made by Panche Toshkovski, the Minister of Interior in the Caretaker Government, of which 54 were in the monitored period. Harmful narratives were not noted, but posts regarding party and religious propaganda were noted. Alongside the posts about his activities as Minister of Interior, posts were noted in support of the presidential candidate Gordana Siljanovska-Davkova, as well as posts with reference to visits to religious objects, a practice that his predecessor, Oliver Spasovski, also had. In a secular state, where the church and the state are separated, government officials are not expected to promote themselves by visiting religious sites of a particular religion, which are not related to the work of the official, who should represent the interests of all citizens regardless of religious, political or any other personal preference.

The Minister of Environment and Physical Planning, Kaja Shukova, posted 18 posts in March, and 11 posts in the monitored days. Harmful narratives were not identified. As her colleagues, the Minister Shukova also used the Facebook page for party propaganda. Party activities were promoted, such as the traditional 8 March marching organized by the SDSM, support for the presidential candidate Stevo Pendarovski, the programme of the SDSM for the upcoming parliamentary elections.

There were not any harmful narratives noted among the other government officials during the monitored period.

The trend for the government officials to use the official government Facebook pages for party-political activities was noted repeatedly during the monitoring period. Practicing this approach does not represent a professional approach in communicating with the public, taking into account that the government officials are expected to post content related to the work of the Government, the decisions it makes, the policies it creates, the laws it proposes on the official communication channels and the manner it works in favour of the public interest and in favour of the citizens. By party promotion of the official Facebook profiles, the Prime Minister and the ministers directly violate the principles of professionalism and impartiality in the communication of government representatives, and the Government's The Code of Ethics for Civil Servants. Adopted by the Government of the Republic of Macedonia, the Code contains an obligation for the civil servants to perform

their work tasks in a politically neutral manner, not to represent their political beliefs in the performance of their work tasks, nor to carry out political activities that may affect the confidence of the citizens in their ability to perform work tasks in an impartial manner.

For the purpose of promotion of the party activities, it is necessary to have special communication channels that will be used to communicate with target audiences and in a manner that is determined by the communication strategy applied by a certain party as a political option.

1.2. SUMMARY

The monitoring of the political actors' communication practices during the month of March shows that the political communication is put in service of the elections. Although the campaign for the presidential elections had not yet started in March, the first round of which will be held on 24 April, and the second on 8 May, the same day as the parliamentary elections. However, considering that this month was the election period for the preparation of the elections, the candidates for the presidential and parliamentary elections were being decided the public discourse had a great focus on the elections. With almost all political entities that are subject to monitoring, it is noted that there is a trend to present themselves that they are on the side of the people, that they represent their interests in contrast to their political opponents and that they are the better offer in the upcoming elections. However, compared to the previous two months, there was more frequent public communication, but also a significant reduction in harmfulness in the communication of the political parties (in March the total percentage of harmfulness is 8.3 percent, in February the percentage of harmfulness is 28.2 percent, while in January the harmfulness is 50.3 percent).

The main actors and narratives remained unchanged. SDSM directed harmful narratives at VMRO-DPMNE, while the main opposition party mostly targeted with harmful narratives the ruling SDSM and DUI. Levica directed the harmful narratives to SDSM and the DUI as the ruling parties, as well as to VMRO-DPMNE. The European Union for Change, now expanded and united in the VLEN (WORTH) coalition, had as its main actor the DUI, which on the other hand criticized the Albanian opposition.

In the public discourse of the political actors' websites and Facebook pages in Macedonia, rhetoric is often used in which allegations of corruption, non-transparency/non-accountability, unprofessionalism is presented, which are used as a basis for accusing the political opponents, undermining trust in the institutions, biased data selection that leads to wrong conclusions and fomenting socio-political divisions in the public.

In March, the use of populism increased, the promotion of one's own ideology as better than that of the political opponent, using populist discourse, attacking the political opponents. SDSM attacked its opponents as an anti-European option. This thesis was further strengthened by the slogan that the party promoted during the month of March for the upcoming elections 'We will not give up on the future' where they claim to offer a European future for Macedonia.

Through the use of populist discourse, DUI promoted itself as the option that is on the side of the citizens, pro-European and that it represented the true values as the defender of the people. The campaign led by DUI for the elections rests on the thesis of foreign influence, 'Yes to the EU - no to Russia', which claims that the country is in danger of Russian influence and that with the right choice (the so-called choice for DUI) the country will move towards the EU, and it will break away from Russia. The Albanian opposition united in VLEN (WORTH) promoted itself as a better option than DUI, which is on the side of the Albanians.

There is a tendency among the Albanian parties to promote their own political option as an option that works more for the Albanians, thus entering the trap of nationalism, because at the same time an equation is made between the efforts to improve the lives of ethnic Albanian citizens, who are in the offer of the political party, or just as a promotion of a political option that focuses on who will be a bigger nationalist in the eyes of the citizens.

Via sharp attacks and inappropriate labels, as well as addressing many different topics with criticism of the central and local authorities, Levica and the leader Apasiev were trying to position themselves as the only political option that was not corrupt and intended to protect the national interests and to defeat the establishment of the 'coalition SDSM-DUI-VMRO'. With the fact that Pendarovski is running for a second term, Levica put a serious focus on demonizing President Pendarovski, and improper communication was noticed in the criticism of the national media Kanal 5 TV, AVMU and SEC.

VMRO-DPMNE presented itself as the saviour of the people, which continued with intensified attacks on SDSM and the 'SDS and DUI' government, this month, having a particular focus on smearing Stevo Pendarovski through manipulative audio-visual content, who was mainly accused of allegedly representing harmful Bulgarian policies towards our country. Similarly, as Levica, VMRO-DPMNE populistically promised to defend the national interests, restore the national dignity and to return the country back into the hands of the citizens.

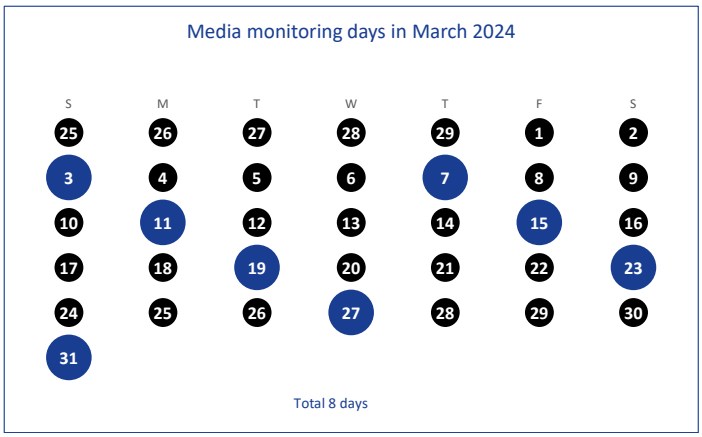
Taking into consideration that the election period is approaching, there is an increased use of populist discourse among the political actors. The populism is a form of political communication, which is easy to use, because 'populism, therefore, is a communication frame that appeals to and identifies with the people, and pretends to speak in their name... a master frame, a way to wrap up all kinds of issues (Jagers & Walgrave, in Reinemann, 2016:13) is very easy to use. Nonetheless, populism as a harmful narrative contributes to a blurred image in the public regarding what politicians actually do and what positions they have on certain issues, which makes it impossible for the citizens to form a true picture of the social developments and the political offer, and thus to make an honest choice when exercising their democratic right, i.e. the right to vote.

The topic of malign foreign influence is not new in the Macedonian society and has been often researched and discussed in the public. However, when the politicians who have the responsibility to lead the country or aspire to lead the country point to foreign influence in the country, it is necessary to stress the points where the influence is and where the danger is in order for the citizens to be clear about in what manner the choice is connected with voting for a certain political option with the choice between the EU and Russia, in order for the citizens to be adequately informed to make the right choice in the vote. Otherwise, if there are not any arguments, data, if there is not any foreign influence illustrated, the impression is given that it is a populist thesis related to a very serious and politically sensitive topic, purpose-built only for political marketing for the upcoming elections.

In this context, the political actors need to respect the principle of evidence-based communication. The manipulative speech, which includes disinformation, false information and malinformation, can seriously affect the democratic processes and the elections, by creating and spreading lies, character attacks, which can result in a decrease in trust in the electoral process and in the institutions. Therefore, it is important that the politicians and the public officials do not use disinformation and share only verified information in their communication.

2. Monitoring of the media reporting on the political actors

Report on the monitoring of the reporting of online media on the political actors



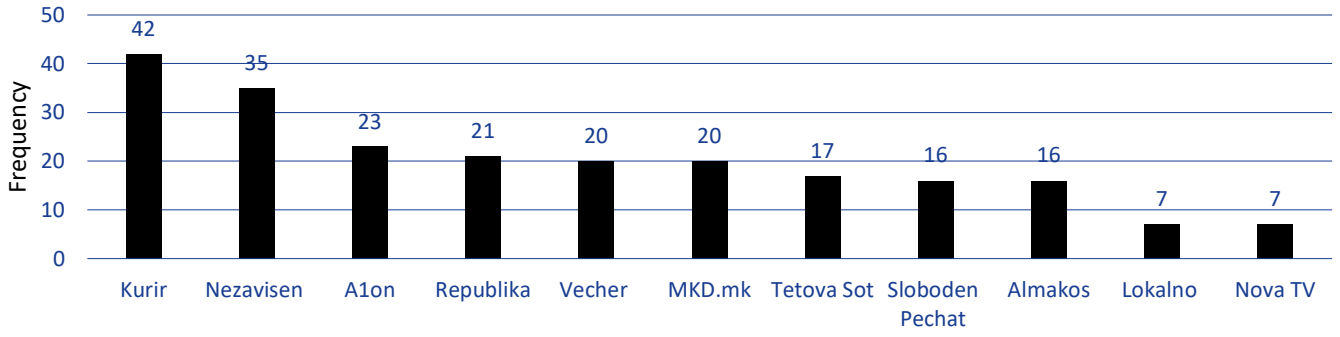
The monitoring of online media **in March (conducted in eight days of the month) identified 224 news items with harmful narratives**, a number that continuously, in the last four months, exceeds 200 such news items per month. In terms of the topic, they also predominantly refer to domestic politics, and this time, the focus is on the already started pre-election campaign for the presidential and parliamentary elections, on the presidential candidates, the programmes of the political parties, the pre-election coalitions, the amendments of the constitution, the latest blacklist of the USA, the EU integration of the country, and somewhat less on the fight against corruption, the economy, justice, health.

In terms of the genre, the most numerous are the press releases of the parties (89 news items or 39.7%) and politicians' speeches (49 news items or 21.9%). Together with the posted Facebook statuses, politicians' statements on debate shows or interviews on television stations and news agencies (11 news items or 4.9%) cover 2/3 of all analysed news items. Then follow the reports (28 news items or 12.5%) and news/news with statements (29 news items or 12.9%), and interviews, analyses, or comments are less common. Most of these news items have precise sources (207 news items), and rarely, even incidentally, unclear and imprecise sources, but most often, it is only one source (179 news items). The media report unilaterally (there is only one side, i.e. 191 news items), and the reason for posting the news items are mostly pseudo-events or press conferences, statements of the political actors (112 news items or 50%), and less often current events (63 news items) or social developments (23 news items). The number of news items signed with the name and surname or initials of the author/journalist is very small (22 or 9.8%), compared to those without an author (197 news items or 87.9%).

Frequency of harmful narratives in the online media

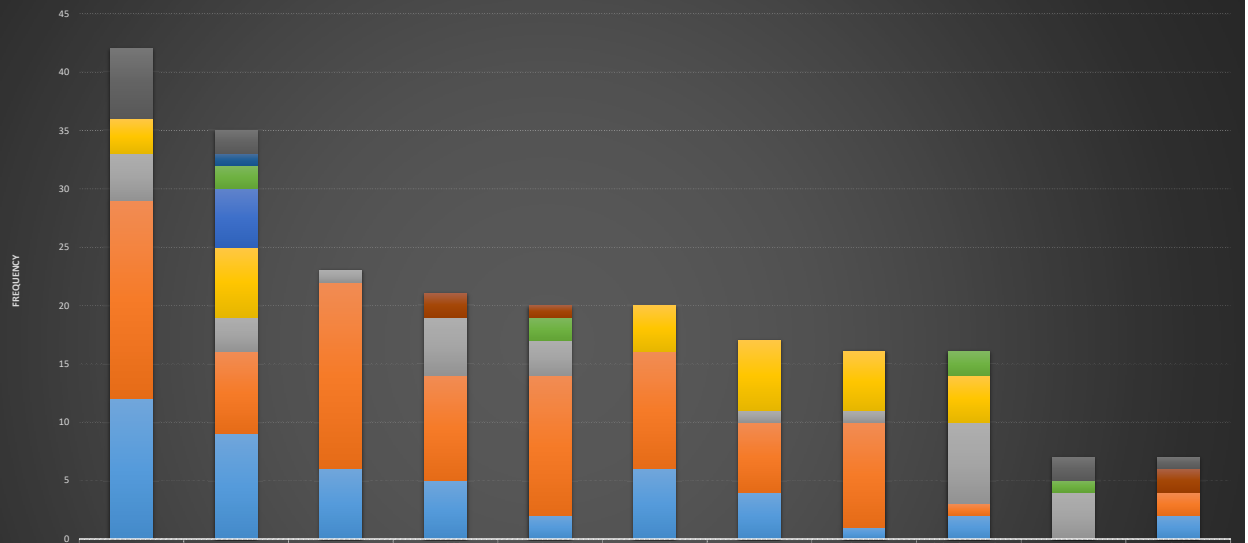
The Kurir portal stands out with the highest number of news items with harmful narratives (42 news items), followed by Nezavisen (35 news items). They are followed by A1on and Republika, which, in the past period were in the first/second place. The order of the portals with the least news items with harmful narratives has also been changed. That is, in the previous analysed months, Nova TV consistently had the lowest number of news items with harmful narratives, followed by Sloboden Pechat or Tetova Sot, and this time, in addition to Nova TV, it is Lokalno.

Table 4. News items with harmful narratives



The genre structure consists of two dominant forms. These are the press releases of the parties and the reported speeches of the politicians, their Facebook statuses, the interviews for other media and the press conferences. They are most prevalent on Kurir (in 35 out of a total of 42 news items) and are almost exclusively taken/reported from the party VMRO-DPMNE, from the statements of its president, the MPs, the spokespeople, even from its ministers and deputies in the caretaker government. We must mention A1on as well, which with 22 news items (out of a total of 23), in terms of information, relies mostly on the press releases of the parties and the speeches of the politicians, however, in addition to the dominance of VMRO-DPMNE and SDSM, space is also given to other political entities, such as DUI, the coalition VLEN (WORTH), the movement ZNAM. They are followed by MKD (with 16 out of a total of 20 news items) where VMRO-DPMNE prevail, Vecher (with 14 out of a total of 20 news items) and Republika (with 14 out of a total of 21 news items) exclusively relying on positions, press releases from VMRO-DPMNE, as well as Nezavisen (with 18 out of a total of 35 news items) where, in addition to VMRO-DPMNE and SDSM, the political subjects also include DUI, Levica, the VLEN (WORTH) coalition, the Alliance for Albanians and Democratic Alliance. Nova TV stands out, which not only has the lowest number of news items with harmful narratives and none of them is a press release of a party or a reported speech of a politician, but mostly news/news with a statement. In addition, on Sloboden Pechat, news items with harmful narratives (16) prevail in the news (7 news items) and the reports (4 news items).

Table 5. News items with harmful narratives according to genre structure in March 2024



	Kurir	Nezavisen	A1On	Republika	Vecher.mk	MKDmk	Tetova Sot	Almakos	Sloboden Pechat	Nova TV	Lokalno
Other	6	2	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	2	1
Interview	0	0	0	2	1	0	0	0	0	0	2
Commentary	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Analysis/commentary	0	2	0	0	2	0	0	0	2	1	0
Analytical reportage/news item	0	5	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Report	3	6	0	0	0	4	6	5	4	0	0
News/news with a statement	4	3	1	5	3	0	1	1	7	4	0
Broadcast press release	17	7	16	9	12	10	6	9	1	0	2
Broadcast speech of a politician	12	9	6	5	2	6	4	1	2	0	2

The main topic in all Internet portals, regardless of the number of news items with harmful narratives, is the domestic politics. This is most noticeable in Sloboden Pechat (in 15 out of 16 news items) and Nova TV (in 6 out of 7 news items), where the domestic politics is almost the only topic, while in Almakos, the domestic politics prevails with 13 news items (out of a total of 16), on Tetova Sot with 14 (out of a total of 17), and on Lokalno with 5 (out of a total of 7). In Kurir and Nezavisen, portals with the largest number of news items with harmful narratives, the thematic focus is on the domestic politics (in Kurir there are 27 such news items out of 42, and in Nezavisen there are 24 such news items out of 35), but attention is also paid to the economy, crime and foreign policy. On the other portals, MKD.mk, A1on, Vecher and Republika, where half of the analysed news items informatively cover the domestic politics, there are also numerous topics in the field of economy, crime and corruption.

The topic of domestic politics, again, is mostly covered through the press releases of the parties and/or the positions and statements of the political subjects (taken from other media or from press conferences). They are short, void of content, but full of harmful narratives, and often with obvious non-/intentional errors in the titles, content, names of the political actors, with multiple identical news items on the same day with the same content. A few characteristic examples:

- *Katica Jancheva became a racketeering factory, the blackmailed Jakimovski covered up the case before the SDS judiciary, but did not escape the blacklist,* news item – press release of the party, comprised of several short paragraphs and completely taken (both the title and the text) from the VMRO-DPMNE website. The occasion is the publication of the latest blacklist of the USA for corruption containing the names of the presidential candidate Stevche Jakimovski and the former president of the SPO, Katica Janeva. What is evident is the misspelled name of the president of the SPO ('Jancheva', not Janeva) in the title of the news item, the result of the automatic sharing of the VMRO-DPMNE announcement without any interventions and corrections, not even linguistic and lexical. According to VMRO-DPMNE, the two actors, but also all the officials of the 'coalition SDS and DUI', end up on the blacklist of shame and crime, and both parties are *a factory for crime, corruption and production of manipulations.* (source, **Kurir, 19.3.2024**). The same news item with identical form and content was published the same day on Vecher.mk (with the name Jancheva) and Republika (with the corrected name Janeva), as well as on numerous other portals (with the corrected name Janeva).
- *VMRO-DPMNE accused the Minister of Health of nepotism,* a news item consisting of two paragraphs, taken integrally from the press release of VMRO-DPMNE. However, the long title from the party *Nepotism in healthcare continues even with the fifth minister of health – cases of employment of whole families, there is no resolution of the status of the medical staff who have been engaged with a contract on temporary services for years*' was edited, and in order to inform the public who is the mentioned minister, a photo of the current Minister of Health was posted, with a caption under the photo – the Minister of Health, Ilir Demiri, and an explanation in brackets that the photo is taken from the portal. As mentioned in the text, according to VMRO-DPMNE, the department of Health is a 'den of nepotism' i.e., a dwelling (cave), a gathering place where (figuratively) suspicious people gather. Further on, names and clinics where wives, brothers, sons, daughters of the current and former ministers are employed are mentioned, and the 'government comprised of SDS and DUI' is considered responsible for the exodus of the medical staff (source, **Nezavisen, 27.3.2024**).
- Lefkov: *Pendarovski lied that he had not seen the French proposal, and then said that he had written it in Skopje,* a news item from the press conference of the MP and a member of the executive committee of VMRO-DPMNE, Mile Lefkov, in which, in several passages, he repeats what was said in the title, about Stevo Pendarovski (without mentioning the function, even though he is still the president of the country) who is a 'liar' (that he had not seen the French proposal, and then that he had written it) and qualifies him as a 'confused politician and a manipulator' who he does not think of Macedonia, and together with SDS, they are the source of all problems that Macedonia had in the past years. The news item further states that the MP Mile Lefkov also played a video and said that Stevo Pendarovski is a politician without a position. However, the video is not included in the news item. On the other hand, the same day, the portal published an identical news item, with the same content and with two photos of the President Pendarovski from 2022 (probably as a guest on Kanal 5 on one of them) and below them, the first caption states the following *we, in Skopje, have not seen the French*

proposal (dated 16 June), and the second caption states the following *I worked on all those documents* (dated 30 July), as well as the video (as part of a press conference) where the two statements are combined, edited into one, from which the reader should conclude that he, as he says, has worked on all documents together with everyone else and that he has worked on the French proposal together with Macron on those two or three points. What is the reader to think and understand, why were the recordings spliced, what was said at those appearances, what was the context, finally, these are public appearances and the public was informed, and now there is a reaction? In addition, if you look at the time when the news items were published, the second, detailed news item (with all attachments, photos, videos) was published first, and a few hours later the edited version of the news item followed, in which a video was also announced, as a support for the reporting towards the President Stevo Pendarovski. It is unclear why this version of the news item was published at all, whether it was an unintentional error or whether it was a decision of the editorial staff of the portal. (source, **Republika, 19.3.2024**).

- News item: 'Kovachevski announced the leaders of the MP candidate lists for the parliamentary elections' and the news item Kovachevski: 'The election programme of SDSM is a clear, concrete and sustained plan for the future of Macedonia', from taken press releases (of the party) from the SDSM website, in which, according to the title, the president of the party, Dimitar Kovachevski, will present at the Congress of the party the election programme for the next four years, as well as the leaders of the MP candidate lists of SDSM. But, then (the same day, from the same event) two more (short) news items followed, also taken from the SDSM website and from Dimitar Kovachevski's address. One of news items was 'We will not give up on the future - negotiations completed by 2027 and EU membership until 2030' where Kovachevski talks about the party's European path from which there is no giving up; and the second one, *There are no changes, DPMNE tried to falsify signatures just as they falsified the polls*, where he calls the political opponent VMRO-DPMNE a 'party of lies and mendacities' that rigs and falsifies polls, and now *has not collected valid signatures for Siljanovska (for president) and submitted the candidacy with 40 signatures from the MPs.* The question is why these last two news items were presented to the public, is it because all the press releases that the parties send to the media are published, probably not, not in this particular case, because that day, SDS has sent 9 press releases from the Party Congress, and the portal published four. What is the criterion of what, how, how much will be published, is it the public interest? (source, **A1on, 23.3.2024**)

The motive for publishing the news items with harmful narratives is mostly pseudo and current events. There were identified 112 news items as pseudo-events (50.0%), i.e., those are the press releases of the political parties, press conferences, statements and reactions of the political entities (politicians, spokespeople, MPs, mayors, members of the political parties). If you add the news items created from guest appearances of the political subjects in other media (11 news items), the total number of pseudo-events covers more than half of all analysed news items (54.9%). Current and currently planned events are 1/3 of the analysed news items (73 or 32.8%). The pseudo-events are the most numerous on the portals Kurir and Republika, followed by Vecher and Tetova Sot, on Almakos they are the current ones, while A1on balances between the current and pseudo-events. Nezavisen, in addition to the large number of current events (the largest of all other analysed portals), also has the largest number of news items whose occasion are the social events/topics.

Political actors in the analysed news items

There are numerous actors represented in the news items with harmful narratives in online media. But those with two (55 news items or 24.64%) and three actors (61 news items or 27.2%) dominate, followed by news items with four actors (28 news items or 12.6%). Regarding the representation of the political actors, the most present are the collective, i.e., the political parties, and the individual ones are by far less present. Thus, VMRO-DPMNE dominates on the Kurir and Nezavisen portals with the largest number of news items with harmful narratives, followed by SDSM and the government, and from the individual ones, the presidential candidate Stevo Pendarovski, while on Nezavisen the president of SDSM, Dimitar Kovachevski, the president of VMRO-DPMNE, Hristijan Mickoski and the presidential candidate of VMRO-DPMNE Gordana Siljanovska Davkova are most present. Vecher emphasizes SDSM and DUI, then Stevo Pendarovski, while on Republika, the Government is the most represented, followed by VMRO-DPMNE, and from the individual ones, Hristijan

Mickoski and Stevo Pendarovski. Two entities are most present on Lokalno and A1on, VMRO-DPMNE and SDSM; VMRO-DPMNE, DUI and SDSM are most present on MKD.mk, while on Lokalno, the only entities represented in the news items are VMRO-DPMNE and SDSM. VMRO-DPMNE and Stevo Pendarovski have the advantage in Sloboden Pechat, while on Tetova Sot it is VMRO-DPMNE and DUI, and on Almakos it is DUI, the government coalition and the VLEN (WORTH) coalition.

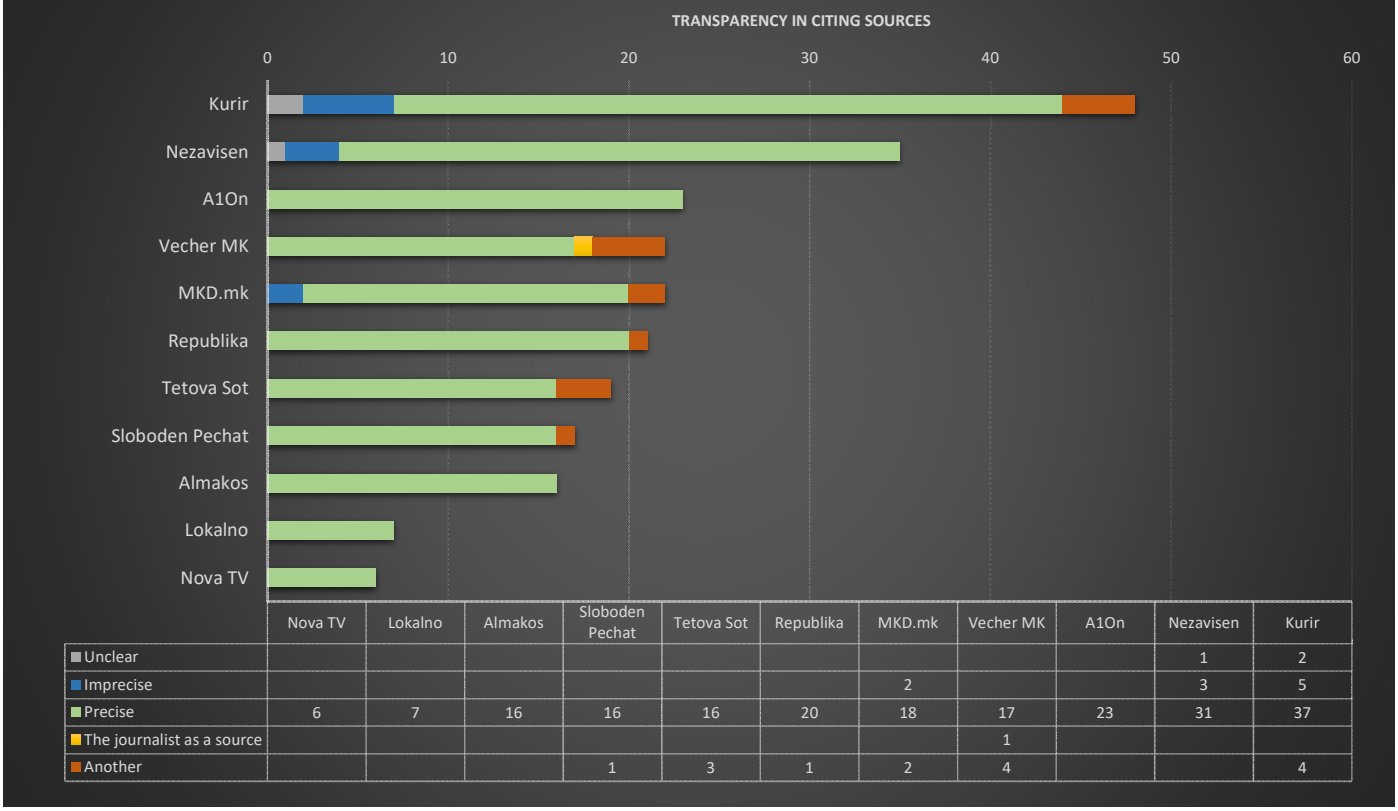
On the whole, as in the previous analyses, the most represented political entity in the online media with news items with harmful narratives is the opposition VMRO-DPMNE, followed by SDSM, and among the politicians, it is the president and presidential candidate Stevo Pendarovski, followed by Hristijan Mickoski, the president of VMRO-DPMNE. Their presentation, as well as the presentation of other political entities represented in the analysed news item, is different on various portals, but mostly, the political actors are discussed in the context of the specific topic. This is the case on Vecher and Nova TV, while on Almakos, Republika and Lokalno, in addition to discussing the actors in the context of the topic, they are also quoted. A1on and Nezavisen, in addition to quoting and discussing the actors in the context of the topic, rarely and incidentally resort to paraphrasing the political actors as well. On the other portals, Tetova Sot, Kurir, Sloboden Pechat and MKD.mk almost equally, and especially when it comes to the most represented actors, they are quoted and paraphrased and discussed in the context of the topic. Regarding the attitude towards the political actors, negative attitude prevails, but it is expressed by another political entity, while the journalist is almost exclusively neutral. The most negative attitude expressed is towards the parties VMRO-DPMNE and SDSM, and among the political actors, towards the presidential candidate Stevo Pendarovski. Thus, Vecher has the most negative attitude towards SDSM, followed by DUI and Stevo Pendarovski, Kurir has the most negative attitude towards the Government and Stevo Pendarovski, Republika has the most negative attitude towards the Government, followed by SDSM, Lokalno has the most negative attitude towards VMRO-DPMNE, Nezavisen has the most negative attitude towards VMRO-DPMNE, followed by Hristijan Mickoski and the Government, A1on has the most negative attitude towards VMRO-DPMNE followed by Stevo Pendarovski, MKD.mk has the most negative attitude towards SDSM and DUI, followed by VMRO-DPMNE, and Sloboden Pechat has the most negative attitude towards VMRO-DPMNE. Positive attitude is much rarer, but mainly when the political actors talk about themselves, notably by DUI on Tetova Sot, by VMRO-DPMNE and SDSM on A1on, by Dimitar Kovachevski on Sloboden Pechat and by VMRO-DPMNE and Dimitar Kovachevski on MKD.mk.

Journalistic (un)professionalism

One-sided reporting is a constant in online media. This month, again, the monitoring determined that there is almost no portal in which two or more sides are consulted, **only one side (191 news items, or 88.8%)**. In Vecher, Kurir, Republika, Nova TV, Lokalno, A1on and MKD.mk, all news items, except for one (where two sides were consulted), have one source. Tetova Sot and Almakos stand out with several news item each where two sides were consulted, and Sloboden Pechat and Nezavisen with two or more consulted sides.

The situation is the same with the source of information, i.e. the portals mostly rely on **one source (179 news items) that is mostly precise (207 news items)**, while the unclear or imprecise sources are rare, which is directly related to the prevalence of news items from the reported press releases of the parties and speeches of the politicians. In Tetova Sot, Nova TV, Lokalno and A1on, the single source is the main actor mentioned in the news item. Some unclear or imprecise source can be found in Kurir, Nezavisen, while Vecher, Kurir, Tetova Sot, MKD.mk have sources (albeit few) from other media as well, mostly from television stations, but also newspapers and news agencies.

Table 5. Type of sources by online medium (March 2024)



	Nova TV	Lokalno	Almakos	Sloboden Pechat	Tetova Sot	Republika	MKD.mk	Vecher MK	A1On	Nezavisen	Kurir
Unclear										1	2
Imprecise							2			3	5
Precise	6	7	16	16	16	20	18	17	23	31	37
The journalist as a source								1			
Another				1	3	1	2	4			4

As for the **visualization**, every portal includes a photo, either current or from the archives, often more, but usually they are unmarked, with the exception of Sloboden Pechat where a description of the photo and the source is given, and occasionally on Nezavisen including the name of the photographer. Kurir stands out with the largest number of archival and current photos as well as video statements. On Vecher, Nezavisen, A1on and Republika, the most numerous are the archival photos, and on MKD.mk the current ones are the most numerous. In that context, several striking examples of the use, mis/use of visualization follow:

In the news item 'Whoever loses the elections should disappear from the political scene', according to the content, this is a challenge (when, where?) by the Minister of Economy, Kreshnik Bekteshi from the party DUI, for the leaders of the parties to sign an agreement whereby those who lose will be obliged to leave the political scene. The news item contains comments on the challenge by the president of SDSM, Dimitar Kovachevski, the vice-president of VMRO-DPMNE, Aleksandar Nikoloski, the president of the Alliance for Albanians, Arben Taravari, and the minister Kreshnik Bekteshi speaks about Ali Ahmeti. In addition, a photo collage of four political leaders is included in the news item, under which, the captions states: 'Kovachevski, Mickoski, Ahmeti, Taravari. Photo Collage/Sloboden Pechat'. In addition, the first and the last name of the author/journalist is clearly stated at the beginning of the news item. (source, **Sloboden Pechat, 15.3.2024**)

The news item: 'Pendarovski claimed that it was insane to amend the Constitution at the request of Bulgaria, and today he is the main supporter of the amendment - the words of this man should be taken with a grain of salt', statement of the party VMRO-DPMNE, in which the President Stevo Pendarovski is called a man who *says one thing in the morning, explains himself at noon, and denies himself in the evening* (related to the amendment of the Macedonian constitution), arrogant, a man who lies, without dignity, credibility and integrity, and this is supported with visualization - graphic image and video dated 2020. His image is on the graphic image on a black background on the right side and in the middle, in white letters, the captions states: 'PENDAROVSKI STEVO SAID THAT NO ONE FROM THE BULGARIAN SIDE HAD REQUESTED AMENDMENTS OF THE CONSTITUTION', and the video contains a 20-second clip from his appearance on Telma TV, where his words from the graphic image are repeated. A few days

later, the media team of the presidential candidate Stevo Pendarovski reacted indicating the publication of manipulative videos by VMRO-DPMNE in which President Pendarovski's statements had been taken out of context (source, **Kurir**, **7.3.2024**).

The news item: 'Pendarovski squashed the dignity of the people and of Macedonia (VIDEO)', a statement by VMRO-DPMNE, is actually a continuation of the attacks on the President Stevo Pendarovski, this time related to the mixed expert historical commission with Bulgaria, and on him as a man who lost his integrity and credibility and stepped on the dignity of the people. This time, next to the graphic image on a black background, on which the caption in white letters states: 'JUDGE FOR YOURSELF WHAT KIND OF A PERSON IS STEVO PENDAROVSKI', an edited video recording is provided of two appearances of Pendarovski, one on Kanal 5 and the other one on TV 21 (for which it is said to be dated July, 2022). The question of the context, which arises from the edited video material, remains open here. This news item was also published by Republika portal with the same content and visualization. (source, **Kurir, 15.3.2024**).

Dominant harmful political narratives

This month 224 news items with harmful narratives and 338 posts (words, sentences, formulations, paragraphs, news items titles) were identified. This is most noticeable on the Kurir, A1on and Nezavisen portals. The focus is predominantly on allegations of corruption, impartiality/unaccountability, unprofessionalism, abuse of office without any attempt to substantiate the claims, as well as on unverified/difficult to verify findings as a basis for accusing the political opponents (149 cases), as well as on the use of negative words, labelling, ridicule and gross disrespect of other people (40 cases). These are news items that undermine the trust in the institutions, biasedly select and attack, demonize a certain person, permanently present in the entire monitored process in the online media.

The practice of creating multiple news items from one event continues, but at a reduced pace, undoubtedly due to the increased dynamics of the activities of the political actors in the pre-election campaign that fills the space for daily media information and coverage. However, certain events, appearances, activities of the political actors, and especially those abundant in negative rhetoric, are multiplied in the internet space, i.e., the media share them among themselves (un/verified), and for the sake of the currentness and in a race against time, they publish the information, often not bothering to change the title (especially if it is bombastic) of the news item, or even its content or visualization. A few characteristic examples:

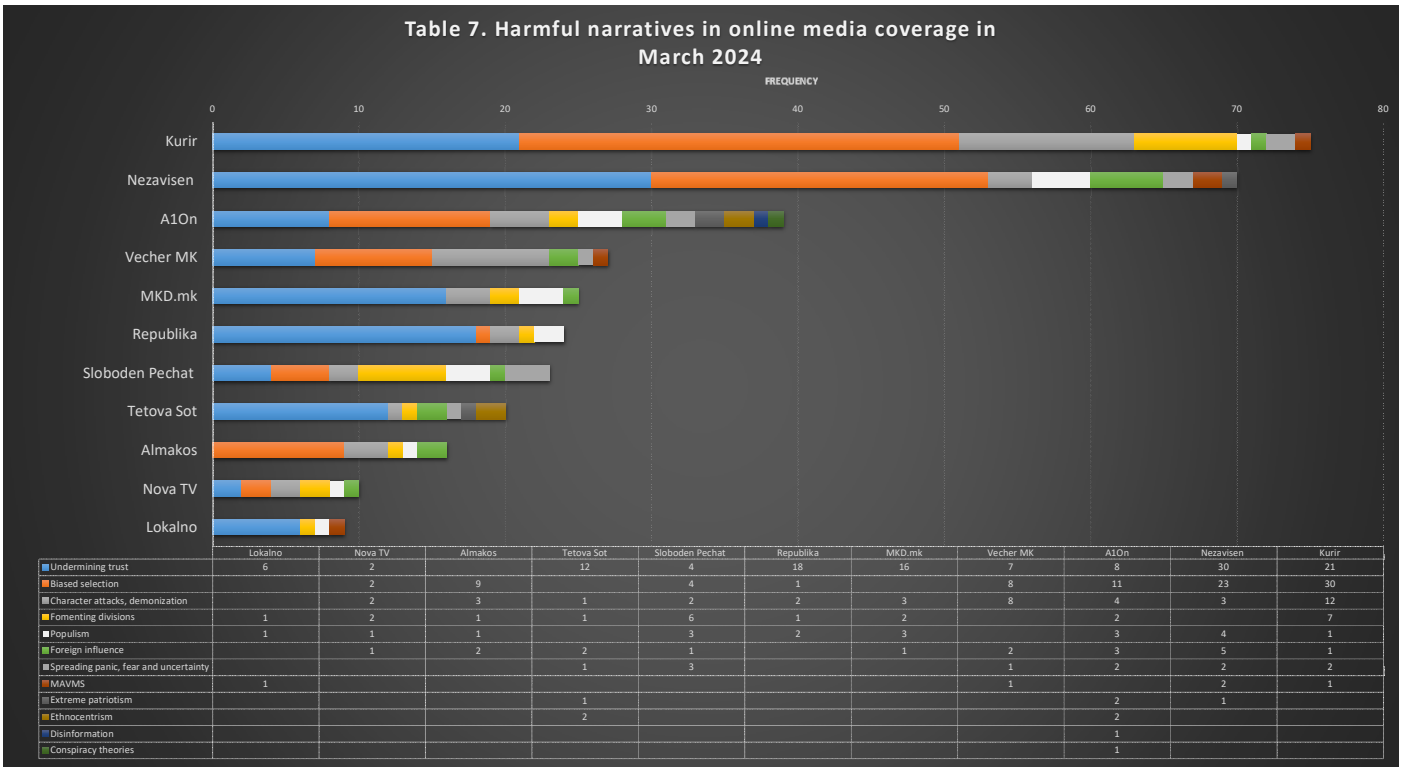
Kurir, with two news items, published on 23.3.2024, conveys information about what is happening in SDSM, i.e., at the meeting of the Executive Board of the party where the MP candidate lists were discussed. The first news item, titled 'TENSE ATMOSPHERE IN SDSM: Oliver Spasovski and Darko Kaevski demonstratively left the meeting of the party', is composed of only two sentences. In the first one, Klan TV is quoted that the atmosphere was tense, with great dissatisfaction with the arbitrariness of the President Dimitar Kovachevski and the imposition of lists that did not include many of the most prominent members of SDSM, and in the second one, Kurir learns from 'its own sources' that the director of the Customs Administration, Stefan Bogoev, also left the meeting disappointed. A few hours later, the portal published a new news item, 'TV 24 learns: Kaevski asked to be removed from the list due to dissatisfaction with the position' with a text containing several sentences, a repetition of what has already been said, about the atmosphere, the reactions to the proposed lists, with one added sentence about the dissatisfaction of Darko Kaevski, also contained in the title of the news item. Kurir emphasizes both in the title and in the news item that the source is TV 24, supported by a photo (screenshot) of a list of two constituencies of SDSM. (source, **Kurir, 23.3.2024**).

Vecher, in its news item 'Dimitrievska - Kochovska warns of a cataclysm: THE BUDGET IS ABOUT TO BANKRUPT!', with excerpts taken from the interview of the vice president of VMRO-DPMNE, Gordana Dimitrieska Kochoska for 360 Degrees on MTV, and in several paragraphs, she talks about the growth of the GDP of 1%, the public debt that has exceeded the allowed limit which shows that the situation is alarming and that we can talk about bankruptcy, and that the criminal activities and the corruption of the government have eaten the money. The day before (18.3.2024), the citizens had the opportunity to read the text titled 'The criminal activities and the corruption of the Government have eaten the money, the GDP growth is 1%, and the public debt of 62.1% has exceeded the allowed limit', in fact it is a completely identical text from the same interview with Gordana Dimitrievska Kochovska for MTV, only with a different title. The question arises as to why was this done, the portal copy-pastes its own content.

Numerous portals, television stations, news agencies published one or the other news item, and of the analysed portals, Republika, Kurir did the same, while VMRO-DPMNE has on its web page only the part of the interview titled 'The criminal activities and the corruption of the Government have eaten the money, the GDP growth is 1%, and the public debt of 62.1% has exceeded the allowed limit' and another news item 'Dimitrieska Kochoska: The next government led by VMRO-DPMNE will increase the growth of the economy' in which she argues that the party has prepared budget projections until 2028. The portal was able to share this news item as well, and thereby complete the story (source, **Vecher, 19.3.2024**).

Again, on the Internet portals, regardless of the number of news items with harmful narratives, the undermining of the trust in the institutions and biased selection dominate, a constant in the monitored process so far, followed by character attacks person and their demonization, however, with a much lower frequency. The undermining of the trust in the institutions is most often present in the news items of Nezavisen, Republika, MKD.mk and Tetova Sot, and the biased selection is most often present on Kurir, A1on and Almakos. On the other hand, the undermining of the trust, biased selection and character attacks are almost equally represented on Vecher. This is shown in the following table:

Table 7. Harmful narratives in online media coverage in March 2024



	Lokalno	Nova TV	Almakos	Tetova Sot	Sloboden Pechat	Republika	MKD.mk	Vecher MK	A1On	Nezavisen	Kurir
Undermining trust	6	2		12	4	18	16	7	8	30	21
Biased selection		2	9		4	1		8	11	23	30
Character attacks, demonization		2	3	1	2	2	3	8	4	3	12
Fomenting divisions	1	2	1	1	6	1	2		2		7
Populism	1	1	1		3	2	3		3	4	1
Foreign influence		1	2	2	1		1	2	3	5	1
Spreading panic, fear and uncertainty				1	3			1	2	2	2
MAVMS	1							1		2	1
Extreme patriotism				1					2	1	
Ethnocentrism				2					2		
Disinformation									1		
Conspiracy theories									1		

Kurir is a portal with the most news items with harmful narratives (42), and the most frequent among them is biased selection (30 posts), followed by undermining the trust in the institutions (21 posts). In the news item 'The Energy Commission of VMRO-DPMNE: As of today, REK Bitola does not produce electricity!',

taken from the press release of VMRO-DPMNE reported from the Facebook status of the party's Energy Commission, which states that the largest producer of electricity has failed and instead of producing, it consumes expensive imported electricity in order to prevent a major disaster at the plants and asks if this 'dilettante, irresponsible, kleptomaniac and mafia management of the energy facilities is part of the planned scenario of SDSM announced as green energy strategy and termination of the work of REK Bitola', but also demands the outgoing Government to immediately dismiss the most incompetent management of ESM. Immediately afterwards, ESM published the information 'This afternoon, one of the blocks in REK Bitola is expected to be connected to the network', with the explanation that due to a broken pipe (which is a common occurrence), there was a network outage, but the electricity was compensated by its own production facilities and in the afternoon, connection of one of the blocks to the network is expected. However, a few hours later, another news item followed, 'SDS and DUI brought us to a situation where all three blocks in REK Bitola are not working, and instead of working, the director is counting commissions', i.e. the statement of the president of VMRO-DPMNE, Hristijan Mickoski (an answer to a journalist's question), about the condition of REK Bitola, given during a visit to the Municipality of Aerodrom. He 'emphasizes' (as the news item states) that, according to their information and what they will inherit from the criminal government of SDS and DUI is alarming and catastrophic and that 'the country is facing a cataclysmic situation', and at the same time the director 'accordion player' has fun and sings with the employees (for the International Women's Day) and counts commissions instead of managing the plant. We have selective presentation of data and ignoring others for the same event. The question is whether Hristijan Mickoski, as well as the journalists, were not informed about the press release by ESM, and ESM is the one to provide is with an answer about the non-operation of REK Bitola, but the bitter impression from Mickoski's 'terrifying' message that 'the country is facing a cataclysmic situation' remains **(source, Jurir, 11.3.2024).** Many online media, television stations and news agencies informed about the event, and of the portals included in the analysis, Republika, Nezavisen, Sloboden Pechat, A1on, Lokalno and Vecher. Only Republika published the statement of the president of VMRO-DPMNE with the same title and text as Kurir, but with a different (older) photo showing the Prime Minister, Dimitar Kovachevski, the Minister of Economy, Kreshnik Bekteshi and the former CEO of ESM, Vasko Kovachevski (while on Kurir, it is Hristijan Mickoski).

Second portal with the most articles with harmful narratives is **Nezavisen** (35 news items) and mostly with 30 posts (words, paragraphs, parts of texts) it tries to undermine the trust in the institutions, followed by biased selection (23 posts). For example, in the news item 'Kovachev cannot enter Macedonia, but Siljanovska took a picture with him in Bucharest', it is a reported party press release of SDSM, although this is not indicated in the news item, but with a shorter text, which first explains that Gordana Siljanovska-Davkova met the Bulgarian MEP Andrey Kovachev, one of the fiercest anti-Macedonians, at the Congress of the European People's Party in Bucharest where 'the presidential candidate was together with the leadership of VMRO-DPMNE'. Then, qualifications follow that she is proud of Kovachev and stands proudly next to him, and that Kovachev is one of the biggest deniers of the Macedonian people, language, history and culture, that he uses every opportunity to say that Macedonia is an artificial country, that Macedonians are artificial people, that they were artificially created and that he was sanctioned by the European Parliament because of his Nazi salute. Because all of that, 'VMRO-DPMNE cannot bring any changes or anything good for Macedonia.' In the news item, in addition to the text, there is also a photo of Gordana Siljanovska Davkova with the Bulgarian MEP Andrej Kovachev, but with two more photos from the press release by SDSM of Andrej Kovachev, behind which it is written in large letters, 'Andrej Kovachev has now attacked ASNOM too - it was a pillar of anti-Bulgarianism' and 'The Miladinov brothers did not write the Collection of Folk Songs but 'Bulgarian folk songs'. The portal published the rebuttal of VMRO-DPMNE that SDSM is spreading lies, and that the photo of Gordana Siljanovska Davkova and Andrej Kovachev was five years old. The same news item states the new accusation of SDSM that what VMRO-DPMNE and its presidential candidate is offering is returning to isolation and some dark past **(source, Nezavisen, 7.3.2024).**

On A1on, out of a total of 23 news items with harmful narratives, 8 refer to undermining the trust in the institutions, 11 refer to biased selection. In the news item 'There are no changes, DPMNE tried to falsify signatures just as they falsified the polls', the words of the president of SDSM, Dimitar Kovachevski, at the Congress of the party are cited, about VMRO-DPMNE as a party that uses 'lies and mendacities' and not only

that they falsified polls, they also falsified the signatures for the presidential candidate Gordana Siljanovska Davkova. That is, they did not collect valid signatures for Siljanovska and submitted her candidacy with 40 signatures from MPs. In fact, it is a party press release of SDSM, but it is not indicated in the news item. What is striking is that on the same day another news item was published titled 'DPMNE caught in a lie, did they falsify the signatures for Siljanovska?', with the same content and also a statement taken from the SDSM's website. The portal published three more news items from the SDSM Congress, where the President Dimitar Kovachevski announced the election programme, the leaders of the MP candidate lists and the European vision of the party (**source, A1on, 23.3.2024**).

On other portals, for example, on **Republika** with 21 news items with harmful narratives, biased selection prevails (18 posts). In the news item 'The outgoing Government strikes at the citizens again, Kovachevski with EUR 2,500 appanage does not feel hunger, but 600,000 citizens are barely surviving', press release by VMRO-DPMNE , consisted of 5-6 short sentences, in which SDS and DUI are attacked because they enjoy the privileges and the comfort of their positions and because they destroyed the standard of living of the citizens, also, Dimitar Kovachevski with an appanage of EUR 2500 does not feel hunger while 600,000 fellow citizens live with MKD 150 a day. The occasion for the press release was probably Dimitar Kovachevski's request to use the legal (official) right to appanage (after the end of the position), a compensation in the amount of the salary he received while in office (about which nothing is said in the news item). The request was adopted by the Committee on Elections and Appointment Issues. Such request was also submitted by the former Minister of Interior, Oliver Spasovski, however, he is not mentioned in the news item. The presented qualifications, especially the tasteless comparisons, have a strong emotional charge and can incite anger and hate speech among the public (**source, Republika, 23.3.2024**).

On **Tetova Sot**, out of 17 news items with harmful narratives, 12 refer to undermining the trust in the institutions. In the news item, VREDI asks: Will the DUI-zation of the judiciary end up on the black list?'', a statement by the VREDI (WORTH) Coalition, in which DUI is called a 'so-called' progressive party that has occupied the judiciary, the Public Prosecution Office and the competent institutions, all appointed or elected with political influence of DUI to prevent charges, trials, penalties. But change is coming and justice will be restored. The same announcement of the VREDI coalition was reported by Almakos (**source, Tetova Sot, 19.3.2024).**

On **MKD.mk**, the most posts (16) that undermine the trust in the institutions were identified from 20 news items with harmful narratives. In the news item 'I expect a convincing victory for Siljanovska-Davkova', the president of VMRO-DPMNE, Hristijan Mickoski, after signing for Gordana Siljanovska-Davkova's candidacy for president of the state in the regional office of the SEC in the Municipality of Karposh, says for the opposing candidates Stevche Jakimovski from GROM and Biljana Vankovska from Levica that their role is to weaken the potential of Siljanovska-Davkova, that they will have an 'entertaining role', asking whether 'they will remain consistent lackeys of their masters and support Stevo Pendarovski in the second round...' He called Stevche Jakimovski and Biljana Vankovska 'lackeys' or servants, which colloquially means people who earn their money by serving other people, and figuratively, it means people who go against the general interests, who secretly serve the enemy (**source, MKD.mk, 3.3. 2024**). Numerous other portals reported the same attitude of Hristijan Mickoski towards Stevche Jakimovski and Biljana Vankovska, Kurir reporter it with the same title, including a video of Hristijan Mickoski's statement; Vecher went with a different title 'Vankovska and Jakimovski will have an entertaining role, an opposition to the opposition', and Lokalno went with the title 'Vankovska and Jakimovski will have an entertaining role in the first round', but excluding the part where Hristijan Mickovski calls them lackeys. **Vecher**, in the news item 'Citizens SHOULD HELP STEVO MOVE OUT FROM MACEDONIA', comprised of three short paragraphs, conveys the answer of the president of VMRO-DPMNE, Hristijan Mickoski, to a journalist's question about his comment on the candidacy of Stevo Pendatovski (without specifying where, when). There, he used Stevo Pendarovski's statement of 'some time ago' (Hristijan Mickoski does not specify when) that 'Had he not been the President, he would have had moved out of Macedonia'. He refers to the Regional Youth Leadership Forum in Novi Sad, Serbia, held in November 2019, and his statement at that time was 'If I were not the president, I would have moved out' given in the context of the long-term negotiations of the state with the EU and the brain drain, which caused numerous reactions, among others from VMRO-DPNE. In the news item in Vecher there is a small but significant difference in Pendarovski's statement - if he were not the president (meaning in the current presidential elections)

and therefore, Hristijan Mickoski says that we need to help him move out (meaning he will not win) and says 'the fewer people like Stevo in Macedonia, the better for the citizens and for the country, and we should find ways to bring all those who emigrated due to the bad policies of Stevo Pendarovski back home, because they are the people who are needed at home' (**source, Vecher, 3.3.2024**).

2.1. *Monitoring of the media reporting on the political actors*

Report on the monitoring of TV stations' reporting for March 2024

In March, 2024, the central news editions of nine TV stations in a total of eight days (3, 7, 11, 15, 19, 23, 27 and 31 March) were analysed. During the analysis, 79 news items that contained harmful narratives, or approximately 10 news items per day, were registered.

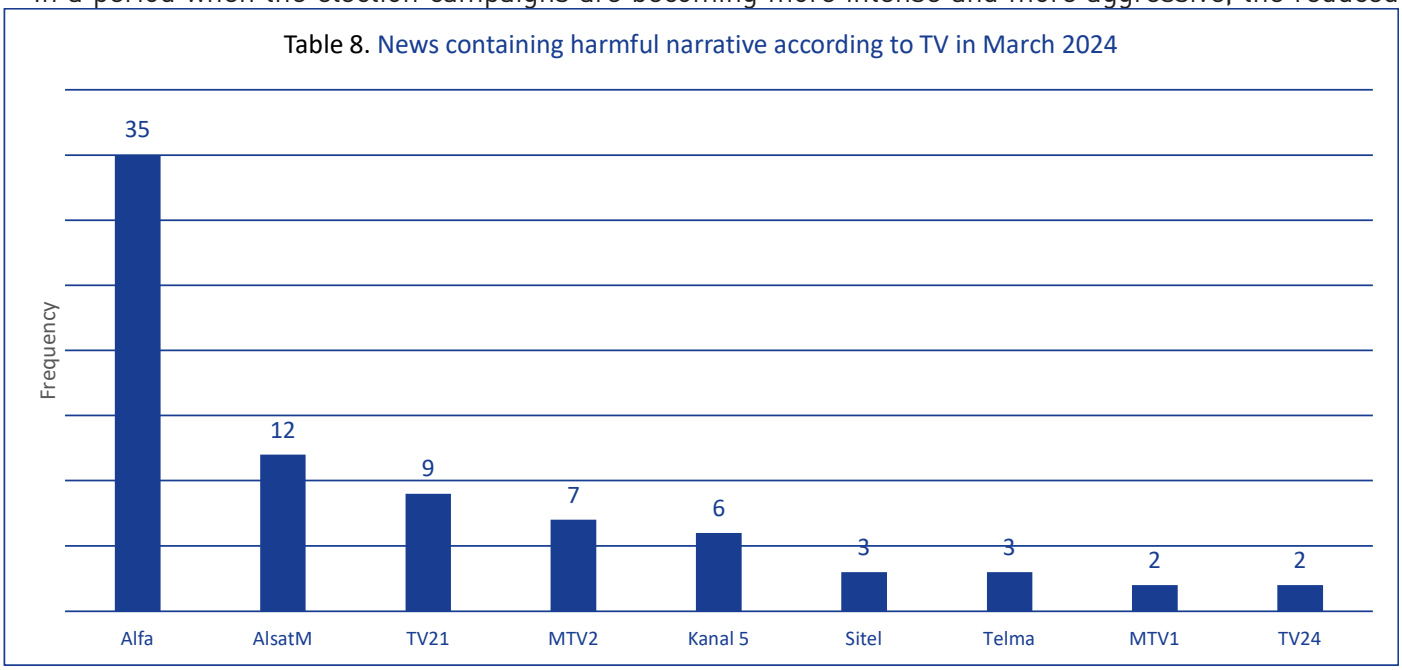
The most frequent harmful narratives, as before, were biased selection (53) and undermining the trust (47). Alfa TV is, once again, the television station with the most news items with harmful narratives.

Frequency of harmful narratives among the TV stations

Unlike the previous months, when we constantly observed an increase in the number of news items with harmful narratives, in March we can conclude that there was a decrease in the number of these news items (79). Compared to December (a total of 87 news items with harmful narratives were registered in the monitored 8 days or 10.9 news items per day), January (96 news items or 12 news items per day) and February (90 news items were registered in the monitored 7 days or 12.9 news items per day), the number of 79 news items with harmful narratives, or just under 10 news items per day (9.87), which is a notable drop.

In a period when the election campaigns are becoming more intense and more aggressive, the reduced

Table 8. News containing harmful narrative according to TV in March 2024



number of news items containing harmful narratives may indicate that television stations are becoming more cautious about how they report in their central news editions, and the harmful narratives are much more noticeable in the online space.

Most news items with harmful narratives were registered on 11 March (15 or 19% of the total number of news items), and the least were registered on 23 March (5 or 6.3). On 11 March, in addition to the topics related to the upcoming elections, the topic of the problem in REK Bitola also appeared, which was used by the political actors for daily political accusations and spreading harmful narratives.

Alfa TV is, again, the TV station with the highest number of registered news items with harmful narratives (35 or 44.3%), however, pertaining to this TV station, as well as to most of those that are part of the analysis (with the exception of Alsat M TV and Kanal 5 TV where a very slight increase was registered), **there is a decline**. Alfa TV is followed by Alsat M TV (12 news items or 15.2%), TV21 (9 news items or 11.4%), MTV 2 (7 news items or 8.9%), Kanal 5 TV (6 news items or 7.6 %), Sitel TV and Telma TV (3 news items each or 3.8%) and MTV 1 and TV 24 (2 news items each or 2.5%).

The most common genres, as in the previous months, are the report (26 or 32.9%) and the analytical-reportage (23 or 29.1%). The increased number of news items coming from a broadcast speech of a politician (11 or 13.9) is noteworthy, which should not be surprising for the period in which pre-election political campaigns dominate. However, as we have emphasized many times in our reports, even in such specific pre-election periods, the media must not be a platform for the campaigns of the politicians and the parties, but their statements, positions and values must be analysed and put into context.

As usual, most of the news items come from domestic politics related fields (57 or 72.2%). Other topics, such as the economy (6 or 7.6%), justice (5 or 6.3%), corruption (3 news items or 3.8%), etc., are much less frequently observed.

The parliamentary and presidential elections (35 news items) are the most numerous topics in news items with harmful narratives. In addition to this dominant topic, in March, several news items were related to the publication of the names of new persons on the blacklist published by the USA, followed by the selection of candidates in the Academy of Judges and Public Prosecutors, the technical problem in REK Bitola, the financing of cultural projects, etc. However, these topics are also often put in a pre-election framework and instead of the experts on the topic informing the viewers about the genesis of the problem and its possible solutions, again, the political actors, who use each topic for mutual accusations, play the main role. An example of this is the statement by the president of VMRO-DPMNE, Hristijan Mickoski, who used the problem in REK Bitola to accuse the management of inappropriate behaviour and corruption:

'[...] We have information, reasonable doubt, that while the accordion-player - director is having fun and singing songs for the International Women's Day with the employees, unfortunately, instead of managing the plant where he is the director, he is engaged in counting commissions and the plant is working without the three blocks.' **(TV 24, 11 March, 2024).**

If we analyse the motive of the news items, we can also notice the intention to use each topic in support of the pre-election campaign and earn political points among the voters. Although, current events are still the most common motive for most news items (30 or 38%). In March, the pseudo-events were in second place (25 or 31.6%), followed by the social events in third place (21 or 26.6%).

This indicates that the political actors more often decide to organize press conferences or publish press releases, just to be present in the media and to have their voice heard, and the media more and more enable them to do so. Unfortunately, these pseudo-events, that use every topic for daily political profit, are very often used for unfounded accusations, mutual insults, inciting divisions and undermining the trust in the institutions, which is part of the most common harmful narratives that are part of the analysis of this report.

Alsat M TV (11 out of a total of 12 news items with a harmful narrative were on the occasion of pseudo-events) and TV 21 (4 out of 9 news items were on the occasion of pseudo-events) offered the most space in their news editions to the news items whose occasion was a pseudo-event.

An example of such pseudo-event is the press conference of the political coalition VLEN (WORTH), dated 19 March, where political opponents accused each other of corruption, involvement in the judiciary, and the USA were called to investigate it.

The US administration should investigate the role of the prosecutors, judges, experts, investigators, ... all elected or appointed with political influence by DUI, in stopping the punishment and confiscation in all cases of their criminal partner - Sasho Mijalkov. **(Alsat M TV, 19 March, 2024).**

Political actors and sources in the analysed news items

The omnipresence of the political actors who have an opinion on every social topic, trying to frame it in a daily political context and use it in their pre-election activities, is noticeable throughout this period, which was mentioned in the previous reports. As before, the main actors are the three largest political parties (SDSM, VMRO-DPMNE and DUI), the presidents of these parties or their prominent members. In March, the presidential candidates were often seen in the news items with harmful narratives, Stevo Pendarovski and Gordana Siljanovska-Davkova more frequently than the rest. The presidential candidate Stevcho Jakimovski appeared in several news items, but the reason was the published USA blacklist, not his candidacy.

The rhetoric between them escalates and the insults they use for each other have become more and more serious and disrespectful. According to the opposition, the President of the state, Pendarovski is a 'puppet', Arben Taravari from the Alliance for Albanians 'lost his marbles', Ali Ahmeti has 'lost his compass' or is 'snail commander'.

SDSM and DUI are often accused of crime and corruption by their political opponents, but they are also presented as a government that failed in doing anything during their rule:

Changes in Macedonia are necessary. Governed by DUI and SDS, Macedonia is sinking into poverty, crime, corruption and hopelessness. Apathy and failure must be replaced by progress and successes. **(Alfa TV, 31 March, 2024).**

DUI is attacked by the opposition VMRO-DPMNE, as well as by the Albanian united opposition VLEN (WORTH). Very often, it is mentioned in connection with the criminal activities in the country and the mafia, however, these attacks do not have well-founded support, but are mostly general and arbitrary. As an example, we single out the statement of the presidential candidate from the VLEN (WORTH) coalition, Arben Taravari:

Today, the Big Brother, i.e., the party in power, DUI, organizes the lives of Albanians, their news, their history, chooses their doctors, appoints their judges, even dictates what music they should listen to. Those who are not obedient and violate the orders of the party, are sacked from their jobs, have rigged court proceedings and are discredited in the media. **(TV 21, 3 March, 2024).**

On the other hand, according to their political rivals SDSM, VMRO-DPMNE remains an obstacle to the EU integration and voting for this party means voting against the EU:

VMRO - DPMNE proposes to give up on the European future [...], in the next elections the choice will be between integration and isolation. **(Alsat TV, 11 March, 2024).**

As we can see in Table 2, the attitude of the journalists towards the actors was mostly neutral, someone

TV channel	Actor	Frequency	Manner of representation			The person who represents the actor and the manner of representation											
						The journalist				Someone else				Him/herself			
			Quoted	Paraphrased	Are talked about	-	+	-/+	0	-	+	-/+	0	-	+	-/+	0
MTV2	Pendarovski	2			2					2							
	VMRO-DPMNE	2	1		1				2								
	Dimitar Kov.	3	3		2				3								
	SDSM and DUI	2			2					2							
	Antonio Milo.	2	2		2					2							
	Ali Ahmeti	2	2		2				2								
Kanal 5	D. Kovachevski	3	2		1				1	2							
	Mickoski	2	2	2					2								
	VMRO-DPMNE	3	2		1				3								
Sitel	Government	3			3					3				1			
Alsat M	DUI	6			6				2	4							
	Ali Ahmeti	5	1		4				3	3							
	Coalition VLEN (WORTH)	3	2	2						3							
	SDSM	3	2	2	2				2	2							
	Pendarovski	5	3		2				3	2							
	Mickoski	2			2					2							
	VMRO-DPMNE	2			2					2							
	Kovachevski	2	1	1	1				1	2							
Alfa	A. Nikoloski	6	6	3	4				2	2					2		
	VMRO-DPMNE	3	2		1		1		2						2		
	H. Mickoski	4	3	1			2		2								
	Kovachevski D	7	2		6	4				3							
	Government	18			18	15				3							
	SDSM	4			4	3				1							
	Pendarovski	3			3	2				1							
TV21	SDSM	3			3				3								
	Taravari	2	2		1				2								
	Ali Ahmeti	3	3	1	2				1	3							
	VLEN (WORTH)	3	1		2				3								
	Mickoski	2			2				2								
	D. Kovachevski	2	1		1				2								

else spoke about the actors (their political opponent), and the journalists did not have a position and only reported the statements.

An exception is Alfa TV, which, as before, has a biased attitude towards the political actors, openly attacking the ruling coalition (SDSM and DUI), and defending or supporting the largest opposition party, VMRO-DPMNE. We can see from Table 2 that out of 18 news items in which the Government was discussed, in 15 of them the journalist had a negative attitude towards the government. Then, in the news items in which the president of SDSM, Dimitar Kovachevski, appears as an actor, the journalist had a negative attitude in 4 out of 7 news items, in 2 out of 3 news items they had a negative attitude towards the President Pendarovski, and in 3 out of 4 news items they had a negative attitude towards SDSM.

In contrast, of 4 news items in which the president of VMRO-DPMNE, Hristijan Mickoski was mentioned, the journalist had a positive attitude in 2, and a neutral attitude in the other 2 news items.

We can add to this attitude towards the various actors in the news items of Alfa TV the fact that in 18 news items in which the government was mentioned, in none of them any representative of the government was neither quoted nor paraphrased.

This attitude towards the political actors is much more noticeable in the announcement of the news items, where the news anchor frames each topic and gives an explanation before the news item of who are the positive and the negative actors, for example the news item from 23 March:

Having regard to the names of the possible MPs, we can see from afar that SDSM is not thinking about the elections, but about the day after the elections. The joint stock company is going bankrupt. We are to see who will be the preclosure manager of the bankruptcy estate. We will see who will be dropped from the list, and who will be part of the horse-trading. **(Alfa TV, 23 March, 2024).**

For Alfa TV it is already clear who will win the elections and the experts they consult, only confirm who has sincere intentions and who should be voted for:

Macedonia needs a woman president. The messages of the candidate Gordana Siljanovska Davkova for national unity and togetherness are sincere, the experts say. The professor is an excellent choice for the head of our country, says Sinisha Pekeski, **(Alfa TV, 3 March, 2024).**

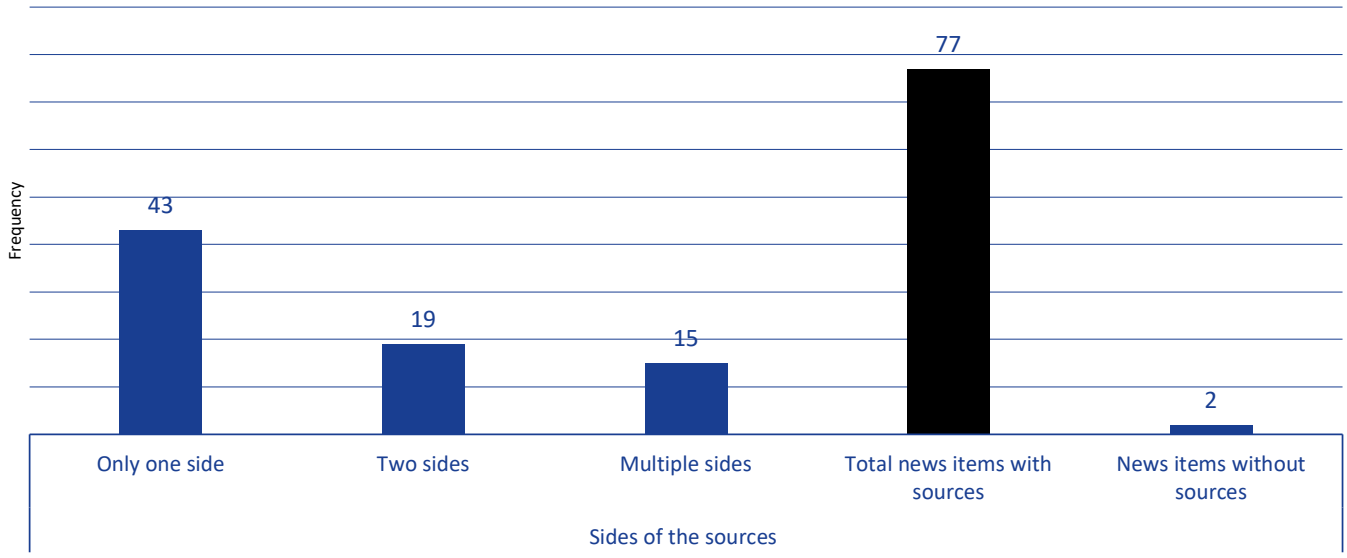
Unlike Alfa TV, neutral attitude of the journalist can be noted in all other television stations and the attitude (mostly negative) is of the other political actors who attack their political rival.

As usual, the news items with harmful narratives are one-sided (43 or 54.4 % were one-sided), and much less often they offer two sides (19 or 24.1 %) or three or more sides (15 or 19 %). We observed most news items in which only one side is represented on Alfa TV (26 or 78.8% of news items), as well as on Alsat M (7 or 58.3%)[9].

However, such one-sidedness is not always related to the bias of the TV stations, sometimes it supports the

9 50% of one-sided news items were found on MTV 1 and TV 24; however, considering that only 2 news items with harmful narratives were registered on these TV stations, we cannot draw a conclusion that would be based on sufficient data.

Table 10. Frequencies of representation on used sources in the news items that have harmful narratives (March 2024)



thesis that instead of analysing complex social issues in a more serious manner, the journalists present the events through the political statements of the parties given at the organized pseudo-events. Hence, we find one-sided news items on all TV stations that are part of the analysis.

Such an example is the press conference of VMRO-DPMNE related to the public procurement of textbooks, where a very important topic surrounding education reforms was covered by a statement from a pseudo-event of a political party:

Imagine, for 5 years they could not allocate funds for something that is their legal obligation, on the other hand, they could allocate millions for new digital textbooks. We would like to remind the public of the purchase of EUR 500,000 worth digital textbooks, which no one used. **(Telma TV, 31 March, 2024).**

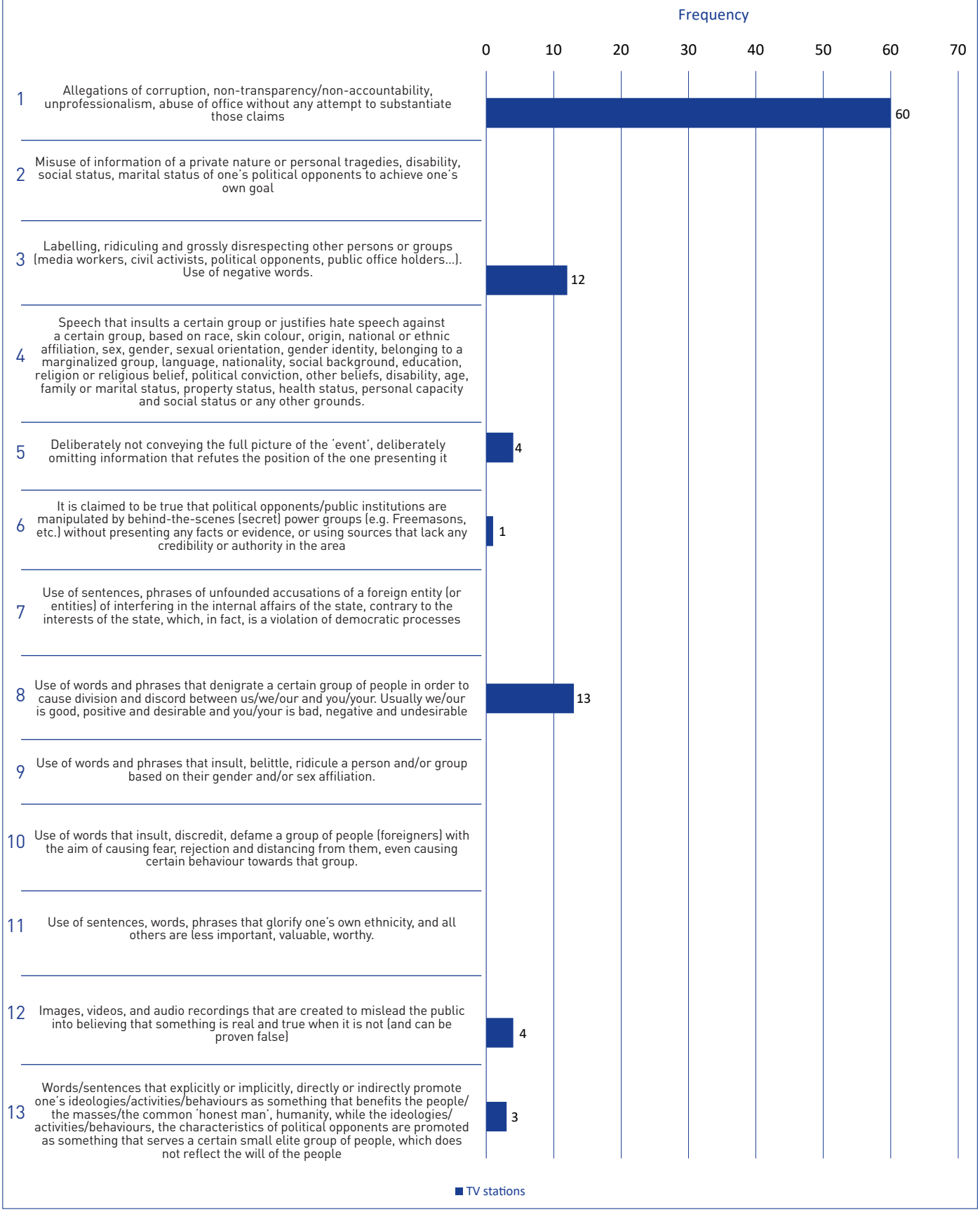
Similarly, to the representation of the sides, the distribution of sources is most often associated with only one source (38 news items or 48.1%), 20 news items (or 25.3%) had two sources, while 3 or more sources were registered in 19 news items (or 24.1 %). There were no sources in 2 news items or the journalist was the only source, which is less than in the previous months (for example, in February, 5 such news items were registered).

The most common harmful narratives

In March, during the monitoring of the central news editions of 9 TV stations, a total of 79 news items containing a total of 139 harmful narratives were registered.

The political actors and parties, and less often the journalists, created these harmful narratives mostly through claims of corruption, non-transparency, non-accountability, unprofessionalism, abuse of office, however without supporting those claims (60 such cases or 61.9%), also through the use of words and formulations that denigrate a certain group of people in order to cause division and discord (13), through insults, mockery and labelling (12) and deliberately not conveying the full picture and omitting information (4).

Table 11: Indicators of harmful narratives on TV stations in March 2024

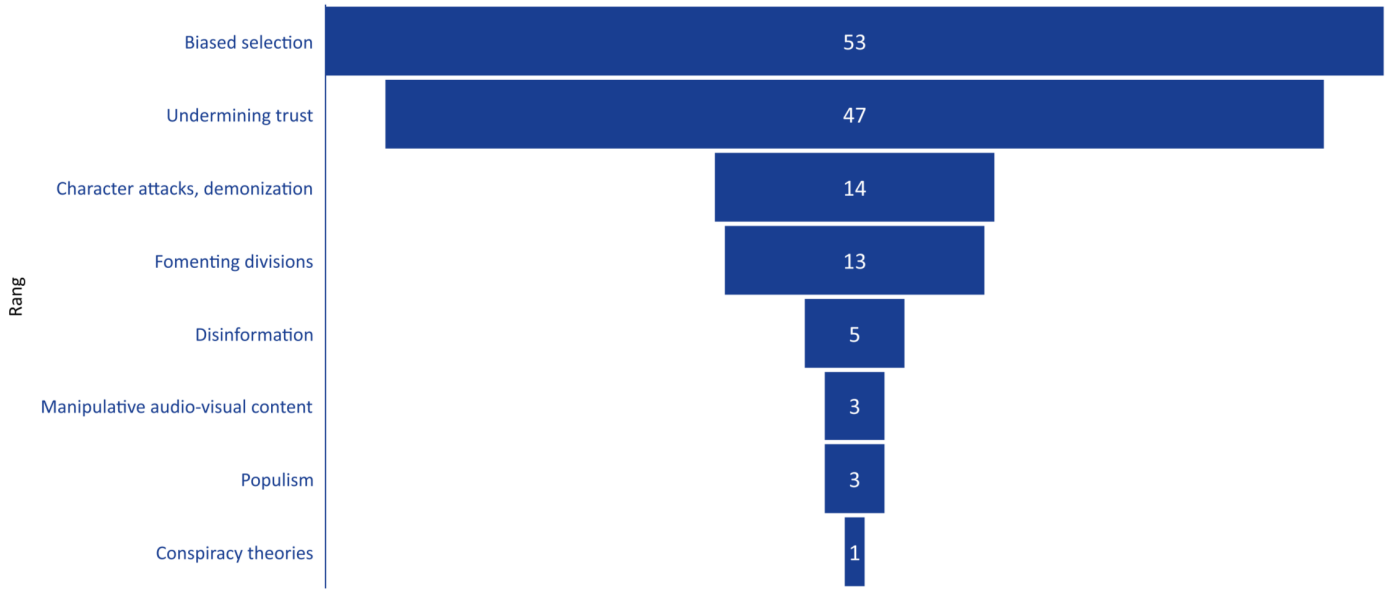


Such news items created a total of 139 harmful narratives, the most common of which are biased selection

(53), undermining the trust (47), character attacks and demonization (14), fomenting division (13) and creating disinformation (5).

During this period, there were many accusations of crime, negligent and unaccountable work, but instead of

Table 12. Frequency of harmful narratives in March 2024



providing well-founded evidence, the political actors often use the 'he said/she said' techniques, and replace one topic with another the very next day. On 27 March, the Additional Deputy Minister for Information Society and Administration from VMRO-DPMNE accused the ruling coalition of 2, 700 pre-election employments, cases of electoral pressure and possible irregularities. These are very serious accusations and they must provide evidence, not serve as political accusations that will be quickly replaced by new ones.

On the other hand, the role of the media is to investigate these serious accusations, to consult various sources, to include all stakeholders, and to offer a serious journalistic product, not just an accusation without arguments:

The Additional Deputy Minister for Information Society and Administration revealed that two months before the elections, there were 2,700 jobs in the public sector. Andonovski also warned that some of the candidates for employment were under pressure to persuade people to vote in the elections. Second, but not least is that the public institutions gave illegal bonuses to people about whom we do not know if they show up at work at all. **(Alfa TV, 27 March, 2024).**

The basic rule in journalism is that a journalist shall publish accurate and verified information. Such serious statements must be confirmed from several different sources, supported by evidence and data that will provide accuracy and a clear picture of what is happening. It is especially important for a journalist to verify the information coming from the political parties during election campaigns.

In this particular case, the journalist not only broadcasts the unverified and unfounded accusations of a political actor, but further amplifies and confirms them, offering them as proof of the corruption and criminal activities of the political opponent. In accordance with the Code of Ethics of the Journalists, *reporting on the political processes, especially the elections, should be impartial and balanced. The journalist must ensure*

professional distance from political subjects. [10]

The tendentious discourse (emphasized against or emphasized in favour of a certain political actor) is contrary to the professional journalistic reporting and a serious violation of the ethical principles of the profession.

MTV 1

Only two news items and a total of two harmful narratives were noted on the first channel of the public service, the second month in a row. Such a small number is insufficient for any analysis, but we can conclude that MTV 1, especially in their central news, are careful about how they report and whether they will leave room for the political actors to spread harmful narratives.

In the first of the two analysed news items, the political actor is the one who creates the harmful narrative, while in the second news item, the journalist and the political actor do it together.

MTV 2

The trend of decreased number of news items with harmful narratives was also noted in the central news of the second channel of the public service. In March, 7 news items that contained harmful narratives were registered on MTV 2, compared to December (17), January (11) and February (10). Most often, in the MTV 2 news items, there are claims of corruption, non-transparency, non-accountability, unprofessionalism and abuse of office, however those claims are unfounded which results in harmful narrative and biased selection (6 cases).

The analysed news items show the pre-election narrative of the parties, abundant in mutual accusations and attacks, stating who is for progress and who is for backsliding and crime. In all these news items, the creator of the harmful narrative was the political actor, while the journalist only broadcasts them, without intervention.

We can see in the statement of the opposition coalition VREDI, published on 27 March, the narrative of the opposition, that anyone who enters into a coalition with DUI, only serves the interests of Ahmeti.

Zijadin Sela does not state his position on this offer, because we know that they have agreed long ago to exclusively serve the interests of Ali Ahmeti. **(MTV 2, 27 March, 2024).**

Most of the news items had 3 or more sides (4 or 57.1%), and only one news item offered only one side of the story. The topics were mostly in the field of domestic politics, and the occasion for the event was either a current event (4 or 57.1%) or a pseudo-event (2 or 28.6%).

Alfa TV

In the case of Alfa TV, the number of news items with harmful narratives (35) was also lower compared to February (40), but higher than December (26) and January (31). The most frequent harmful narratives were undermining the trust (31) and biased selection (29).

What has not changed is the tendentious attitude, in which one political actor is attacked and their political

10 Code of Ethics of the Journalists of Macedonia: https://znm.org.mk/kodeks-na-novinarite-na-makedonija/

opponent is supported. What singles out Alfa TV from the rest of the TV stations that are the subject of this research, is that very often the journalist either independently (in 3 cases) or together with the political actor (18 cases) directly participates in the creation of the harmful narrative. In the remaining cases (21 cases), the political actor creates the harmful narrative, but the journalist broadcasts it mostly approvingly (29 cases).

Such a tendentious and openly supporting attitude can be seen in the following examples from the news anchor's announcement of the news:

Even if they combine their voters, SDSM and DUI will lack almost 8 percent to reach VMRO-DPMNE, Kovachevski, Pendarovski and Ahmeti together cannot reach the huge degree of trust that Mickoski enjoys among the citizens, and as much as 71 percent of the citizens want to send this government into retirement. The results of the polls are becoming more and more ruthless towards the government. **(Alfa TV, 31 March, 2024).**

Not even E remained from the European Front, with which Kovachevski hoped to unite SDSM and DUI. Even less 'front', because despite the eligibility that the president of SDSM offered to Ahmeti, the desire of the ex-prime minister collapsed like a house of cards, and the front split into two. For the time being, Kovachevski is joined by NSDP and LDP, while Ahmeti seems to have created his own front, with probably 4 other man-parties, including Menduh Thaci, one of the first officials on the US blacklist. **(Alfa TV, 31 March, 2024).**

The coalition led by SDSM presented the programme 'For a European future'. Dimitar Kovachevski, certain of his win, promised milk and honey while using the old rhetoric, **(Alfa TV, 31 March, 2024).**

The leader of the MPs candidate list in the fourth constituency, Filipche, promised high salaries for the doctors. According to the former Minister of Health, the government has done a lot for the health system - although things in the field are different: Those who are connected get employment, young residents work a second job so they can survive. Private specialization costs EUR 10,000 and their salary is MKD 26,000. **(Alfa TV, 31 March, 2024).**

Although the journalist's job is to monitor the work of the government, criticism must be well founded, use different sources and provide space for all stakeholders to present their side of the story. Closeness to a political option and attacking the opponent must not be the way of reporting in democratic societies.

During the analysis of Alpha TV, we also noted that they mostly reported on the biggest political parties and the actors coming from them, but as previously noted, with serious criticism and attacks on the government and the ruling parties, and with positive attitude towards the opposition.

Most of the news items on Alfa TV had only one source (22 or 62.9%) and only one side (26 or 78.8%), which is another indicator of the imbalanced and non-objective attitude towards the political actors in Macedonia.

Kanal 5 TV

During the analysis of Kanal 5 TV, a total of 6 news items with harmful narratives were registered, which is slightly more than the previous month (4). The most common narratives were biased selection (6 cases) and character attacks (4). All of these narratives were created by the political actors, while the journalists of Kanal 5 TV broadcast them in their reports.

One of the harmful narratives that has not been exploited much in the campaign so far and was not often

registered by the monitoring of the TV stations is related to images, videos and audio recordings created in order to mislead the public that something is reality and truth. Such is the report broadcasted on 7 March, in which SDSM representatives showed an old photo in which the VMRO-DPMNE candidate has been photographed with the Bulgarian MP Kovachev, however they presented it as a new one:

Siljanovska proudly stands with Kovachev, who denies us as a people. Citizens expect answers from Siljanovska. **(TV Kanal 5, 7 March, 2024).**

In the news items of Kanal 5 as well, the most common actors were VMRO-DPMNE, the government, Kovachevski and Mickoski, and they were usually mentioned in a negative context, but not by the journalist, who only conveys such statements, but by the political opponents.

TV 21

In March, a total of 9 news items with harmful narratives were registered on TV 21. The most common among them was the narrative of biased selection (7 cases), mostly in the news items in which corruption, non-transparency, non-accountability, unprofessionalism and abuse of office were mentioned, however without well-founded support (6 cases).

What should be highlighted is that the motive of as many as 4 or 44% of all news items was some pseudo-event, and for the remaining news items the motive was some current event (5 or 55.6%).

Very often these news items were one-sided (3 or 33.3%) or had two sides (44.4%), while only one of them had 3 or more sides.

An interesting example is the one in which the opposition coalition VLEN (WORTH) replaces the theses and claims that DUI helps the spread of the Russian influence in Macedonia, which is DUI's most often used accusation against VMRO-DPMNE and other opposition parties:

VLEN say that it was DUI that helped spread the Russian influence in Macedonia through Serbian casino businesses, through Daka Davidovic, Soravija, the plans for the return of Nikola Gruevski. **(TV 21, 19 March, 2024).**

These mutual attacks, in the competition for votes and political points, do not offer any serious evidence, and the journalist should recognize this and distance themselves from them or investigate them.

Sitel TV

In March, there were only 3 news items with harmful narratives (4), related to biased selection (1), fomenting division (1), undermining the trust and conspiracy theories. For example, the statement of the presidential candidate, Maksim Dimitrievski, published on 7 March, in which he sees a conspiracy against him in which the Constitutional Court is also involved:

In this case, the claim that has been repeated many times is confirmed that the government, through its satellites installed in the judicial and the Public Prosecutor's Office, creates unfounded cases, abuses the legal system, in this case the Public Prosecutor's Office, and in certain moments also some of the judges of the Constitutional Court. **(Sitel TV, 7 March, 2024).**

Alsat M TV

Alsat M TV is the television station that in March, following Alfa TV, had the most news items that contained harmful narratives (12 or 15.2%). Most of those news items (9) contained claims of corruption, non-transparency, non-accountability, unprofessionalism and abuse of office, without well-founded support for those claims. These indicators show the existence of harmful narratives that undermine the trust (8), foment division (4) or character attacks (2). It must be noted that the political actors are to blame for the creation of all these harmful narratives (15 in total), while the journalist in all cases only conveyed them without intervention, i.e., without taking any position.

What stands out in the analysis of Alsat M TV is that the motive of almost all news items (11 or 91.7%) was a certain pseudo-event.

This indicates that certain political actors, even when they did not talk about current events or social developments, succeeded to do so on Alsat M TV through their press releases, press conferences and statements, i.e. pseudo-events created for the purpose of obtaining media space. In their central news editions, Alsat M allowed them to state their views and agendas, as well as harmful political narratives, without any specific motive, current event or the like. Media must not be a free medium of the political parties, which will broadcast all their press releases and statements, but a place where the political developments will be analysed in an objective and balanced manner.

One such pseudo-event is used by the representatives of the Alliance for Albanians to accuse the current political opponents of DUI:

...in the past 22 years we learned very well about how harmful it (DUI) is on the political scene, their actions, the actions of their leadership contain only crime and corruption. **(Alsat TV, 27 March, 2024).**

Telma TV

In March, only three news items with a total of 5 harmful narratives were registered on Telma TV. The most frequent harmful narratives were biased selection (2) and undermining the trust (2). All of them were created by the political actors, while the journalists conveyed them and clearly emphasised them, but did not have a position.

In his statement published on 19 March, the president of SDSM, Dimitar Kovachevski ignores the opposition's explanation that the relevant matter should be resolved by an existing law and claims that they are deliberately blocking the Law on Restrictive Measures in the Assembly. This way the public is misinformed, because only part of the picture of the problem is broadcast:

It is obvious that, for some reason, he is preventing that law from being submitted for a committee discussion and thus from being adopted. If they don't plan to submit it for a committee discussion, they should state the reasons they don't want it adopted in the Assembly. **(Telma TV, 19 March, 2024).**

TV 24

In March, TV 24, together with MTV 1, published the least news items with harmful narratives, only 2. These 2 news items contained character attacks (2) and biased selection. They were produced by the political actors, while the journalists just broadcast them without intervention.

2.2. SUMMARY

Media outlets which are subject of this monitoring continued in March to help the political actors in spreading harmful narratives. It is positive that at the height of the period of pre-election campaign for the presidential and parliamentary elections, the number of harmful narratives registered in the central news editions on the 9 TV stations has decreased. There are noted 79 news items with harmful narratives in the television stations, compared to February when there were 90 such news items. Unlike televisions, in most online media the practice of unilaterally broadcasting the toxic rhetoric of political actors continues unabated. In March, in online media there were recorded 224 posts with harmful narratives, which is a slight increase compared to February when there were 211 harmful news items.

Key features of online media reporting

Analysed subject	Total number of news items/posts with harmful narratives							Total
	Sep.	Oct.	Nov.	Dec.	Jan.	Feb.	March	
Online media	209	154	215	207	240	211	224	1.460
TV stations	76	66	69	87	96	90	79	563
Analysed subject	**Total number of broadcast harmful narratives**							**Total**
	Sep.	**Oct.**	**Nov.**	**Dec.**	**Jan.**	**Feb.**	**March**	
Online media	444	393	575	422	467	330	338	2.969
TV stations	122	153	139	162	160	143	139	1.018

for March 2024

The negative rhetoric for months, systematically and with small oscillations, has been very high on the agenda of the online media when reporting on political actors. It is a trend that is constant and is no longer a surprise. Such is the picture this month as well, with a number of 224 news items and 338 posts, sentences, paragraphs, wordings, titles of news items with harmful narratives. The informative online space is dominated by allegations of corruption, unaccountability, unprofessionalism, abuse of office without providing supporting evidence, unverified/difficult to verify findings as a basis for accusing political opponents. Political actors as the main creators of harmful narratives with 'stories' - speeches, statements, appearances, press releases, as a tool for informing the public, undermine trust in institutions and attack political opponents in a biased and selective manner. Online media, in their effort to inform 'in detail' about the developments on the political scene in society, directly/indirectly provide platform for harmful narratives, and even strengthen them. In this monitoring period, according to the number of harmful narratives, Kurir and Nezavisen lead, followed by Republika and A1on.

Thematically, as before, the focus is on domestic politics, but this time particularly the election campaign is mixed for both the presidential and parliamentary elections. It, more or less, also dictates the narrative in the media space, that is, with the strengthening of the negative election campaign, the negative rhetoric is also strengthened. Although the presidential campaign is in full swing, the most represented political entity is the opposition VMRO-DPMNE and behind it SDSM, and only then the president and presidential candidate Stevo Pendarovski and then Hristijan Mickoski, the president of VMRO-DPMNE. The other presidential candidates are much less, and some are rarely and sporadically present in the polluted media space online. The articles are short, consisting of a few sentences or two to three paragraphs, which say everything and nothing, and in the expressed words, sentences, formulations there are the most harmful narratives. But it is exactly the use of negative rhetoric and flooding with attacks, comparisons, qualifiers, denigrations of political opponents that dominate this monitoring cycle with a strong emotional charge, that causes the entrapment to an increasing

number of political actors, as well as the public.

Regarding media outlets, the story is no less important than the information in terms of how the articles with harmful narratives are presented. This month, in terms of genre, the online media are dominated by party press releases and the speeches and statements by political actors (politicians), i.e. 2/3 of all analysed news items. Obviously, they are often supported by precise sources, single source and one-sided reporting, which is directly determined by the chosen genre. Simply put, the source is clear and precise when it comes to a press release by a certain political party, which the media outlet, as a rule, integrally downloads and reports on its page, and what the other party thinks, says, reacts to the specific topic of the press release, the public may be informed a few days later. Therefore, the largest number of such news items are not signed with the name and surname/initials of the author/journalist. Thus, with certain portals, the publication of the same news item multiple times in one day and with the same content can be seen, which additionally multiplies the number of harmful narratives. So much for journalistic un/professionalism.

Key features of TV stations reporting for March 2024

In March 2024, a total of 79 news items with harmful narratives were registered in TV stations reporting, or just under 10 news items per day (9.87). The most common harmful narratives were biased selection (53), undermining the trust (47), character attacks and demonization (14), fomenting division (13) and creating disinformation (5).

The political actors and parties, and less often the journalists, created these harmful narratives mostly through claims of corruption, non-transparency, non-accountability, unprofessionalism, abuse of office, however without supporting those claims (60 such cases or 61.9%), also through the use of words and formulations that denigrate a certain group of people in order to cause division and discord (13), through insults, mockery and labelling (12) and intentionally not conveying the full picture and omitting information (4).

Among the TV stations, Alfa TV is, again, the media outlet with the highest number of registered news items with harmful narratives (35 or 44.3%), however, pertaining to this TV station, as well as to most of those that are part of the analysis (with the exception of Alsat M TV and Kanal 5 TV where a very slight increase was registered), we can note a decrease.

Although there is a slight decrease in the number of news items containing harmful narratives on Alfa TV, the manner of tendentious information and representation of sides is still very obvious. Unlike all other television stations, where the creators of the harmful narratives were usually the political actors, and the journalists just conveyed them without intervention, on Alfa, the creators of these narratives were either the journalist alone (in 3 cases) or the journalist and the political actor (18 cases).

One of the basic principles of journalism, which has often been emphasized in the previous reports, is that journalists must maintain an independence from those they cover. According to Leighton Walter Kille, this principle is the foundation of trust in the media and journalism, and the journalist must have independence of spirit and mind. Even when the government is criticized for certain actions, accuracy and the principle of a fair and balanced attitude must always be primary, not attachment and closeness to the opposite side.

Journalism must be an independent monitor of those in power and a watchdog that will defend those most affected, i.e., the citizens. However, in order to be professional and objective, the journalist must always seek

the truth and offer facts for their claims, consult all stakeholders, and support their work from different sources.

Kille emphasises another important feature of professional journalism, which is to keep information and news in proportion: *Journalism is our modern cartography: it creates a map for citizens to navigate society*, says Kille.

In the cartography of Macedonian TV journalism, one sometimes gets the impression that the politicians are the only ones who get access to the news and they have a position on every topic. Hence, in the news items that are the subject of analysis, there are almost no other actors than politicians, who have a position on every topic and every social problem, and unfortunately, very often they use their voice for daily political accusations and skirmishes with their opponents. Thus, every social topic becomes a topic of domestic politics (57 news items or 72.2% were related to domestic politics), and only a small number of news items were on the topics of culture, education or crime, corruption and social policy.

We note again in this report that the relationship between the political opponents is very often based on accusations that are not well-founded (60 or 61.9), but also on labelling, ridicule and insults.

This kind of obscene speech, political communication that is not based on evidence, but on insults, is becoming more and more common on the public scene. Politicians use it because in that way they speak the language that is close to the electorate and is often accepted and approved, while the media see in it a spectacle that will increase the viewership.

The media, especially their news editions, must not be a platform for such inappropriate speech, which contains nothing but a false spectacle and cheap populism.

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