

# SUMMARY

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## Introduction

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

The specificity of the March report is that since the monitoring began in September 2023, for the first time the presentation of data is for an interval of one month. The key purpose for the reduction of the previous practice of [bimonthly reports](#) for the presence of harmful narratives in public discourse is the activities of political actors related to the pre-election campaign for the presidential elections, for which 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 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 Facebook 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 subject to monitoring

**The media sample includes the monitoring of 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, Vecher.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); TV 21 (private, in Albanian language).

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

The dynamic for monitoring the content of political actors is every consecutive third and fourth day of the month, and 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 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 in several phases during 2023 and 2024 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.

This document presents a summary of the monitoring in March 2024.

The entire research can be read at [HARM-TIVE](#).

## KEY FINDINGS

Monitoring the communication of political actors in March 2024 revealed that harmful narratives continue to be the main tool for winning public opinion and that in the run-up to the presidential and parliamentary elections, it is much easier for political actors to vilify political opponents than to offer concrete solutions to social problems through constructive public debate. They started the campaign early for the two election cycles with harsh rhetoric, and most of them used populist messages and vulgarized political vocabulary with a focus on belittling political opponents. On the other hand, monitoring of media coverage in March showed that online portals are diligently keeping pace with political actors and are increasingly supporting the spread of harmful narratives. In contrast, positive trends in reducing the number of content with harmful narratives are noted among television stations, which apparently are becoming more careful as election cycles approach and distill content that contributes to removing toxic rhetoric from broadcasting.

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

## DUI behind the leading trio

Similarly to [previous months](#), the most harmful narratives are from VMRO-DPMNE (43), then by SDSM (29) and Levica (27). DUI has seen an increase in harmful posts compared to previous months, and among the opposition parties of the ethnic Albanians in the country, the most harmful narratives were noted in Alternativa. The monitoring for March, as in the previous period, did not reveal posts with harmful narratives on the websites and Facebook pages of the parties LDP, New Social Democratic Party, and Socialist Party, as well as on the pages of their leaders.

Political actors most often developed harmful narratives to undermine trust in institutions through unsubstantiated claims of corruption and abuse of office (108 cases) and biased information selection (100 cases) that could lead the public to wrong conclusions, which is also a trend in previous months. In addition, one can note an intensified rhetoric of attacks on political opponents by labeling and ridiculing political opponents and denigrating other political parties (34 cases), then, inciting socio-political divisions (27) and populism (24), which mainly refer to pre-election narratives (through the promotion of their own ideologies and plans).

SDSM directs harmful narratives to VMRO-DPMNE, while the main opposition party mostly directs harmful narratives to the ruling SDSM and DUI. Levica directs harmful narratives towards SDSM and DUI as ruling parties, as well as towards VMRO-DPMNE. The European Union for Change, now expanded and united in the VLEN (WORTH) coalition, has as its main actor DUI, which criticizes the Albanian opposition.

## ***Reruns in the media***

In March, the Kurir media outlet stands out with the largest number of news items with harmful narratives (42 news items), followed by Nezavisen (35 news items), which breaks into second place for the first time. Then on the list are A1on (23) and Republika (21), who in the previous period were in first/second place. It is a case of media outlets that with small changes, are constantly at the top of the list in terms of the number of news items with harmful narratives in the past months. Of the televisions, TV Alfa is again the media outlet with the largest number of news items with harmful narratives registered, but also with this television, as well as with most of the ones that are part of the analysis (except TV Alsat M and TV Kanal 5, which have a very mild increase), a decline is noted. Unlike all other televisions, where the creators of the harmful narrative were usually the political actors, and the journalists just reported them without intervention, in Alfa the creators of these narratives were either only the journalist (3 cases) or the journalist together with the political actor (18 cases).

The most common harmful narratives in media reports are biased selection, undermining trust, character attacks and demonization, fomenting divisions, and disinformation.

## ***Sweeping problems under the carpet, leading politics***

In the communication of the political actors and consequently, in media reporting, domestic politics dominates as a topic, and other social topics such as the economy, corruption, health, judiciary, and others are much less represented. The monitoring showed that as many as 100 out of 142 posts or 70.4 percent of the total posts of political actors in which harmful narratives were identified refer to domestic politics, while other topics are represented by two to five percent of the total number of posts. Also, most of the TV news items with harmful narratives, as usual, are from areas related to domestic politics (57 or 72.2%), and other topics are much less common. The situation with the online media is similar, where domestic politics this time is overlapping with the presidential and parliamentary elections. Domestic politics, more or less, also dictates the narrative in the media space. That is, with the strengthening of the negative election campaign, the adverse rhetoric is also reinforced.

The impression is that in the media there is an omnipresence of political actors who are ready to speak on any social topic, trying to frame it in a daily political context and use it in their pre-election activities, and that no space is left for quality expert debates that actually should elicit quality ideas that the policy would implement.

## ***The most represented political actors in the media***

With TV stations, most of the time, as before, the main actors are the three biggest political parties (VMRO-DPMNE, SDSM, and DUI), the presidents of these parties or their prominent members. In March, the presidential candidates are often subject to articles with harmful narratives, more often Stevo Pendarovski and Gordana Siljanovska-Davkova than the rest. The presidential candidate Stevcho Jakimovski appears in several articles, but the reason is the published blacklist of the USA, not his candidacy.

In online media, it is noticeable that 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, much less, and some are rarely and sporadically present in the media space on the Internet.

## ***Populism and nationalism***

In March, the use of populism in the communication of political actors increased. Almost all parties present themselves as saviors and defenders of the people from political opponents who are working to destroy the state. SDSM presents itself as the only option for a European future, and DUI, through the use of populist discourse, promotes itself as pro-European and embodiment of the true values as a defender of the people. The Albanian opposition united in VLEN (WORTH) is promoted as a better option than DUI, which is on the side of the Albanians. Levica is trying to position itself as the only political option that is not corrupt and intends to protect national interests, and VMRO-DPMNE uses populism to claim to defend national interests, restore national dignity, and return the state back to the hands of the citizens.

It is noticeable that the Albanian parties have a tendency to promote their own political option as an option that works more for the Albanians, thus entering the trap of nationalism. Populism as a harmful narrative contributes to a blurred image in the public about what politicians actually do and what positions they have on certain issues, which makes it impossible for citizens to form a real picture of social developments and political offers, and thus to make an honest choice when exercising their democratic right.

## ***Profanity and insults***

The monitoring showed frequent use of insults and labeling in political communication in March, which leads to the vulgarization of public discourse in Macedonia. Thus, for Artan Grubi, the leader of Besa Bilal Kasami is 'Bill the Russian', Izet Medjiti is 'Izet the African', Afrim Gashi is 'Afrim doesn't even know where he's from because he's in awe', Arben Taravari is 'Arben TR, Arben Turkmenistan'.

On the other hand, the president of the state, Stevo Pendarovski, is a 'puppet' for the opposition, Arben Taravari from the Alliance for Albanians 'lost his marbles', Ali Ahmeti has 'lost his compass' or is a 'snail commander'. For SDSM, VMRO-DPMNE are anti-EU and a backward option, and according to VMRO-DPMNE, 'SDSM has been reduced to a servant and an accomplice in all scandals.'

Levica is a party that stands out with inappropriate labeling and insults toward political opponents. Among others, they call DUI a 'monster', and label President Stevo Pendarovski as a 'servant', 'vassal', 'puppet of Bulgarian politics', 'silent letter', 'servant of Kale'<sup>1</sup>, 'little politician', and 'careerist'. The leader of the party, Dimitar Apasiev, is not far behind in this kind of rhetoric, for whom VMRO-DPMNE are 'Vmroids', SDSM are 'Soros-sluts', and President Stevo Pendarovski is a 'louse'. This month Apasiev is noted for an attack and negative inappropriate labeling of a media outlet, that is, the television Kanal TV, calling it 'cheap television' and 'K[Anal] 5'.

## ***Abuse of official channels continues***

The monitoring of official communication channels of government representatives who are also party officials showed that they continue with the practice of using only one Facebook profile through which they communicate with the public about their activities, regardless of whether they are party officials or in the capacity of government officials. It is noted that government officials do not use harmful narratives, but the presence of posts in which ministers share partisan information is notable. Such examples were noted with the President of the Caretaker Government Talat Djaferi, with Bojan Marichikj, the First Deputy of the President of the Government, with the Minister of Justice Krenar Loga, with Slavica Grkovska, the Deputy of the President of the Government in charge of Good Governance Policies, with the Minister of Defence Slavjanka Petrovska, with the Minister of Foreign Affairs, Bujar Osmani, with the Minister of Interior, Panche Toshkovski, and with the Minister of Environment and Physical Planning, Kaja Shukova. More details regarding the unfitting content in the [full report](#).

The trend for government officials to use the official government Facebook pages for party-political activities is noted repeatedly during the monitoring period. Practicing this approach does not represent a professional approach to communicating with the public, given that on the official communication channels, government officials are expected to publish content related to the work of the government, the decisions it makes, the policies it creates, the laws it proposes and how it works in favor of the public interest and in favor of the citizens. With party promotion of the official Facebook profiles, the prime minister and ministers directly violate the principles of professionalism and impartiality in the communication of government representatives, and the government's Code of Ethics for public servants is also violated.

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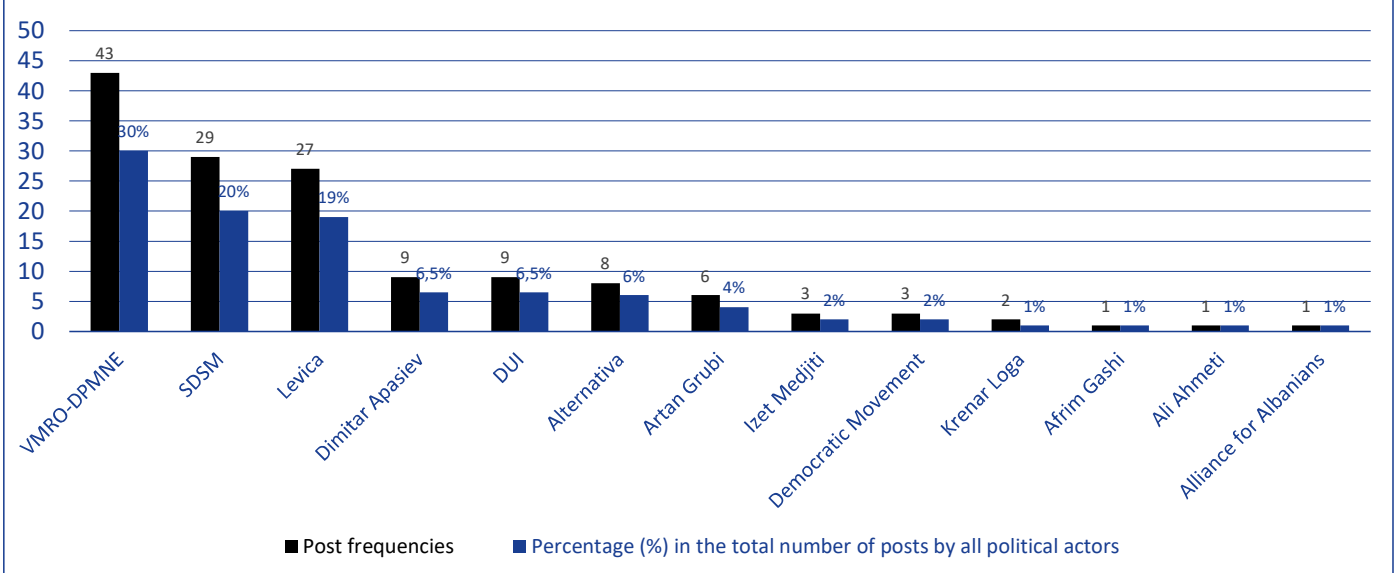
1 'Kale' is a term in Macedonian to denote the fortress Kale which is located in the centre of Skopje. The American Embassy in Skopje is located in its vicinity and the term 'Kale' is a jargon term used for the Embassy.



# 1. Monitoring of communication practices and narratives of political actors through their Internet and Facebook pages

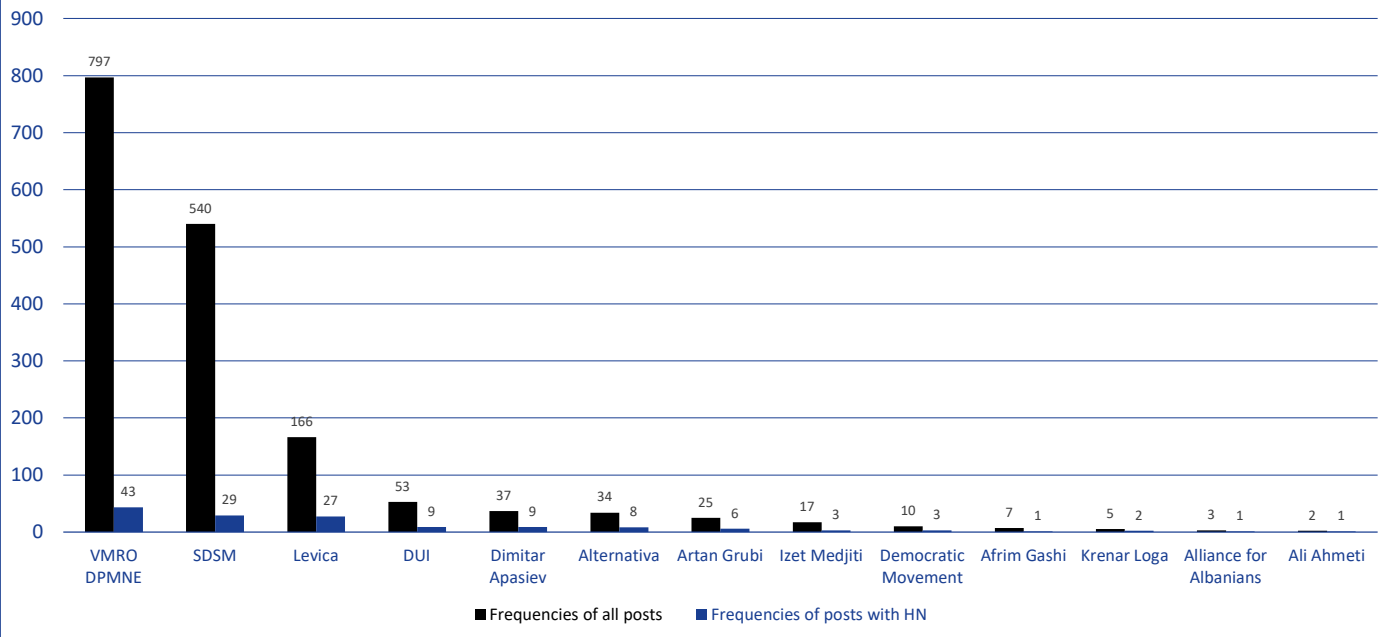
In the period 1-31 March, the monitoring of the websites and Facebook pages of political parties and their leaders identified a total of 142 posts with a harmful narrative. Of these, 60 were published only on Facebook, 36 were published only on websites and 46 were published on both communication channels.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

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



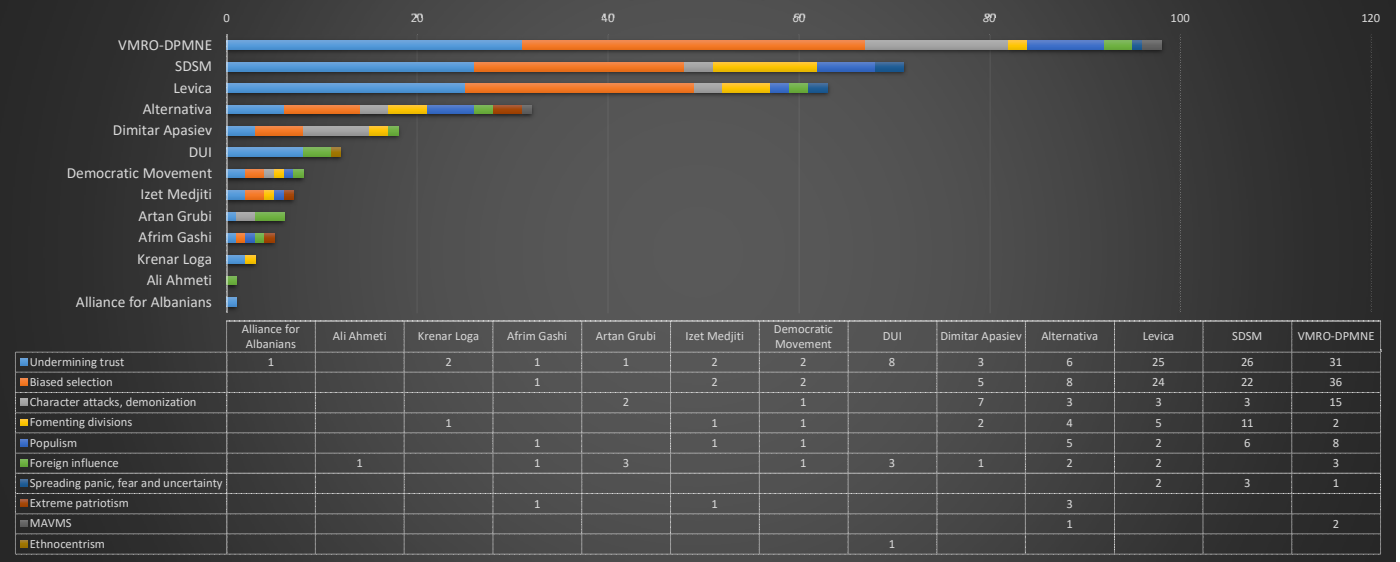
In this monitoring period no harmful narratives were identified by the leaders of VMRO-DPMNE and SDSM, Hristijan Mickoski and Dimitar Kovachevski, but by the leader of Levica, Dimitar Apasiev, nine harmful posts were noted, three by the leader of the Democratic Movement, Izet Medjiti, while by the leader of DUI, Ali Ahmeti and the leader of Alternativa, one post with a harmful narrative was noted.

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



In addition, if the total number of posts by these three parties is taken into account, only 5.4% of posts by VMRO-DPMNE and SDSM are harmful, while with Levica, with a significantly lower number of posts 16.3% of posts are harmful.

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



## Monitoring of media coverage of political actors

### Report on the monitoring of online media coverage of political actors

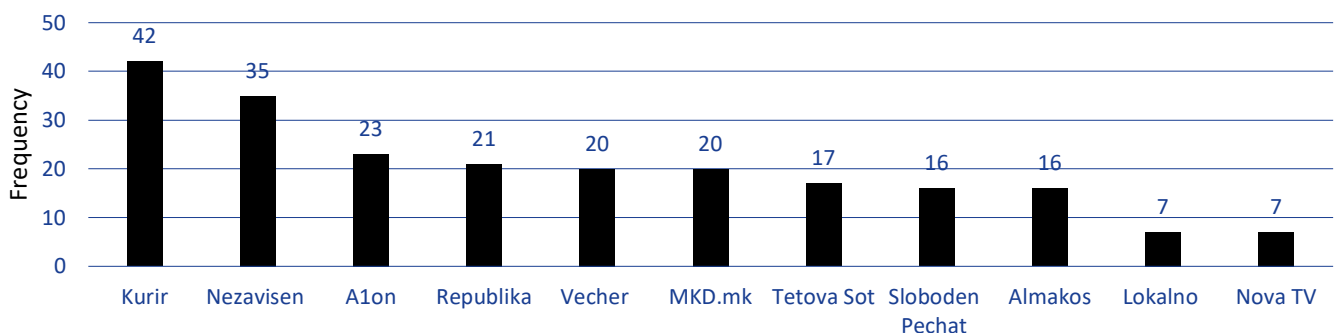
The monitoring of the online media in **March (conducted in eight days of the month) determined 224 news items with harmful narratives**, a number that continuously, in the last four months, has exceeded 200 such news items per month.

In terms of genre, the most numerous are party press releases (89 news items or 39.7%) and politicians' speeches (49 news items or 21.9%). Together with the reported 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.

### Frequency of harmful narratives in online media

Characteristic for March is the change in the order of the online media outlets with the least news items with harmful narratives. That is, in the previous analyzed months, Nova TV consistently has had the lowest number of news items with a harmful narrative, and it was joined by Sloboden Pечат or Tetova Sot, and this time, in addition to Nova TV, it is Lokalno.

Table 4. News items with harmful narratives



A dominant theme in all online media outlets, regardless of the number of news items with harmful narratives, is domestic politics. This is most noticeable in Sloboden Pечат (in 15 out of a total of 16 news items) and Nova TV (in 6 out of a total of 7 news items) where domestic politics is practically the only topic, while in Almakos domestic politics dominates with 13 news items (out of a total of 16), in Tetova Sot with 14 (out of a total of 17), and in 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 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. In the other portals, MKD.mk, A1on, Večer, and Republika, where half of the analysed news items informatively cover domestic politics, the number of topics in the field of economy, crime and corruption are not small.

The reason for publishing news items with harmful narratives is mostly pseudo and current events. There were identified 112 news items as pseudo-events (50.0%), that is, the press releases by political parties, press conferences, statements, and reactions by political actors (politicians, spokespersons, MPs, mayors, members of political parties). If to them are added news items created by guest appearances of political actors 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%). At the same time, the pseudo-events are the most numerous in the portals Kurir and Republika, followed by Večer and Tetova Sot, in Almakos they are the actual ones, while A1on balances between the actual 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 is social events/topics.

## **The 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%). In terms of the presence of political actors, the most present are the collective, that is, the political parties, and far less the individual ones. Thus, in the Kurir and Nezavisen portals with the largest number of news items with harmful narratives, VMRO-DPMNE dominates, and only then SDSM and the government, and from the individual ones, the presidential candidate Stevo Pendarovski, while in Nezavisen the president of SDSM, Dimitar Kovachevski, the president of VMRO- DPMNE, Hristijan Mickoski and the presidential candidate of VMRO-DPMNE Gordana Siljanovska Davkova. Večer underscores SDSM and DUI, and then Stevo Pendarovski, while in Republika the government is the most represented, then VMRO-DPMNE, and from the individuals Hristijan Mickoski and Stevo Pendarovski. Lokalno and A1on are dominated by two entities, VMRO-DPMNE and SDSM, in MKD.mk VMRO-DPMNE, DUI, and SDSM, while in Lokalno the only entities represented in the reports are VMRO-DPMNE and SDSM. VMRO-DPMNE and Stevo Pendarovski are most mentioned by Sloboden Pечат, while in Tetova Sot it is VMRO-DPMNE and DUI, and in Almakos - DUI, the government coalition and the VLEN (WORTH) coalition.

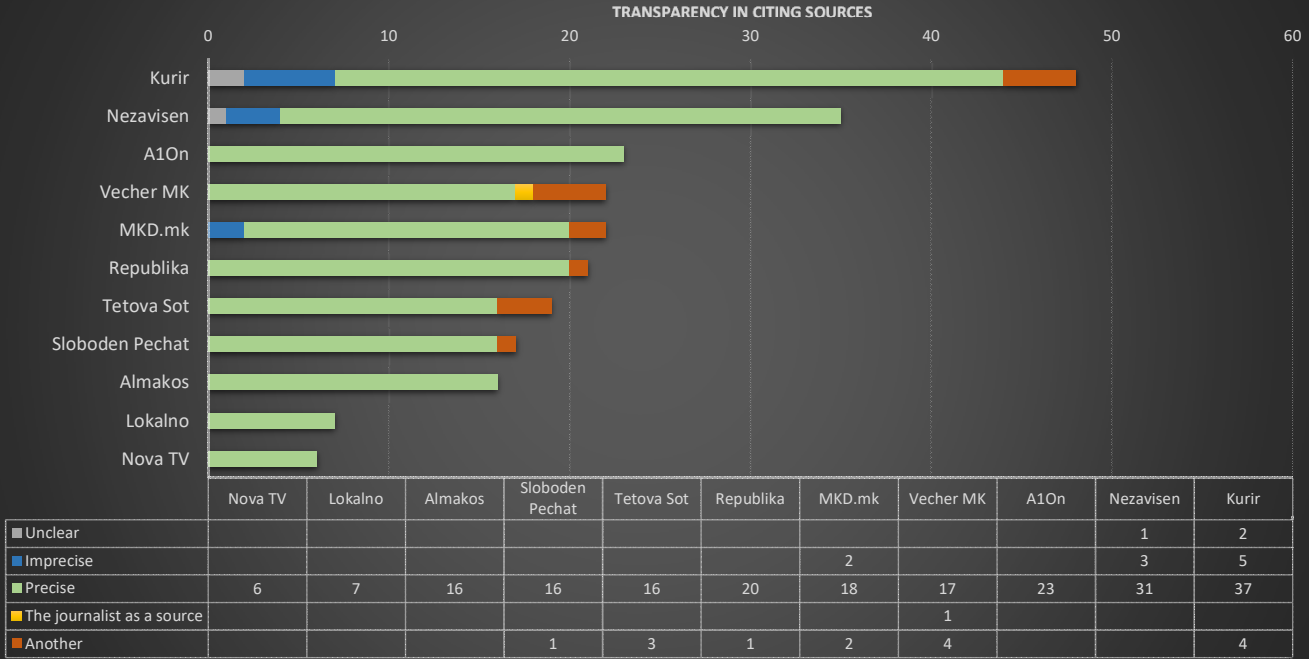
On the whole, as in previous analyses, the most present political entity in online media with articles with harmful narratives is the opposition VMRO-DPMNE, followed by SDSM. From the politicians, it is the president and presidential candidate Stevo Pendarovski followed by Hristijan Mickoski, the president of VMRO-DPMNE.

## **Journalistic (un)professionalism**

One-sided reporting is a constant in online media. This month as well, the monitoring determined that there is almost no portal in which, apart from **one side (and such are 191 news items or 88.8%)**, two or more sides are consulted. In Večer, 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 items each with two sides consulted, and Sloboden Pечат and Nezavisen with both two and more sides.

The picture is the same when it comes to the source of information, i.e. the online media mostly **rely on one source (179 news items), which is mostly accurate (207 news items)**, and vague or imprecise sources are rare, which is in direct correlation with dominance of news items from the reported party press releases and politicians' speeches. In Tetova Sot, Nova TV, Lokalno, and A1on, the one and only source is the main actor appearing in the news item. Some unclear or imprecise source is found at Kurir, and Nezavisen, while Večer, Kurir, Tetova Sot, and MKD.mk also have sources (albeit few) from other media, mostly from television stations, but also newspapers and news agencies.

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

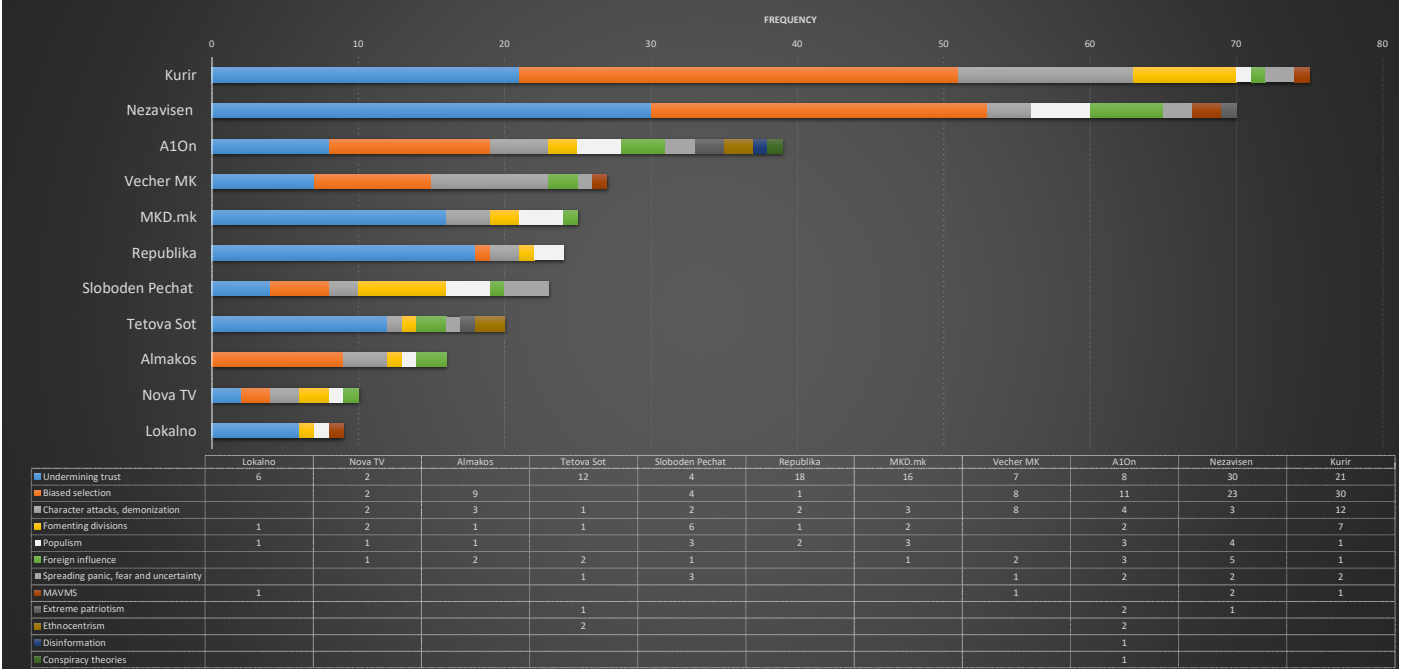


As for the **visualization**, there is no portal without a photo, either current or archival, often and more, but usually, they are unmarked, except Sloboden Pечат where a description of the photo and the source is given, and occasionally in Nezavisen with the name of the photojournalist. Kurir stands out with the largest number of archival and current photos as well as video statements.

### Dominant harmful political narratives

This month, 224 news items with harmful narratives and 338 posts (words, sentences, formulations, paragraphs, titles of articles) were determined. This is most noticeable in the Kurir, A1on, and Nezavisen portals.

Table 6. Harmful narratives in online media coverage in March 2024



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 political opponents (149 cases), as well as on the use of negative words, labelling, ridicule and gross disrespect of other persons (40 cases). These are news items that undermine the integrity of the institutions, with biased selection and attacking, demonizing a certain person, permanently present in the entire monitored process in online media.

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

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

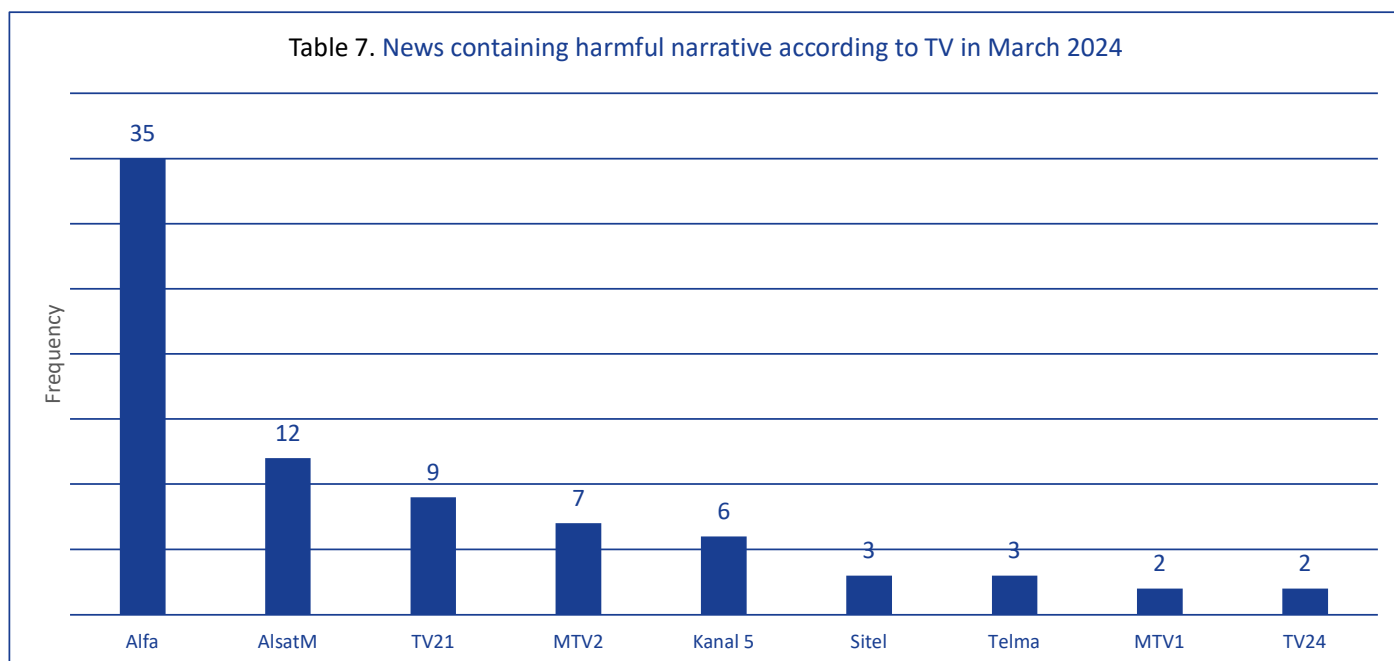
The most common harmful narratives, as before, were biased selection (53) and undermining of trust (47). TV Alfa is again the television station with the most reports with harmful narratives.

### Frequency of harmful narratives among TV stations

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

At a time when election campaigns are becoming more intense and aggressive, the reduced number of items containing harmful narratives may mean that television stations in their central news editions are becoming more cautious about the way they report, and harmful narratives are much more noticeable in the online space.

Table 7. News containing harmful narrative according to TV in March 2024



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

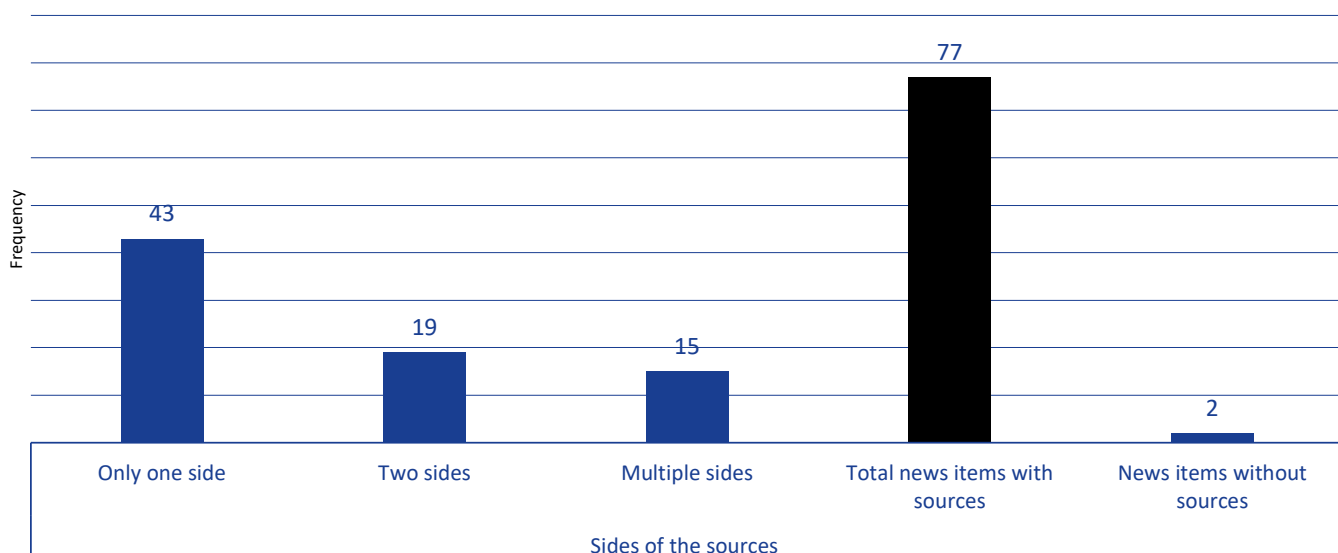
Most of the news items, as usual, are from areas related to domestic politics (57 or 72.2%). Other topics, such as the economy (6 or 7.6%), justice (5 or 6.3%), corruption (3 news items or 3.8%), etc., are much less frequently noted.

Parliamentary and presidential elections (35 news items) are the most numerous topics in articles with harmful narratives. Apart from this dominant topic, in March several news items were also related to putting the new persons on the blacklist published by the USA, then the selection of candidates in the Academy of Judges and Prosecutors, the technical problem in REC Bitola, the financing of cultural projects, etc.

Most often, as before, the main actors are the three largest political parties (VMRO-DPMNE, SDSM, and DUI), the presidents of these parties or their prominent members. In March, the presidential candidates are often seen in articles with harmful narratives, more often Stevo Pendarovski and Gordana Siljanovska-Davkova than the rest. The presidential candidate Stevcho Jakimovski appears in several articles, but the reason is the published blacklist of the USA, not his candidacy.

Articles with harmful narratives, as usual, are one-sided (43 or 54.4% had only one side), and much less often they offer two sides (19 or 24.1%) or three or more sides (15 or 19%). The largest number of news items in which only one side is represented is found in TV Alfa (26 or 78.8% of the news items), but also in Alsat M (7 or 58.3%)<sup>2</sup>.

**Table 8. Frequencies of representation on used sources in the news items that have harmful narratives (March 2024)**



<sup>2</sup> At MTV 1 and TV 24, 50% of one-sided reports are found, but considering that only 2 reports with harmful narratives were registered at these TV stations, we cannot draw a conclusion which would be based on sufficient data.

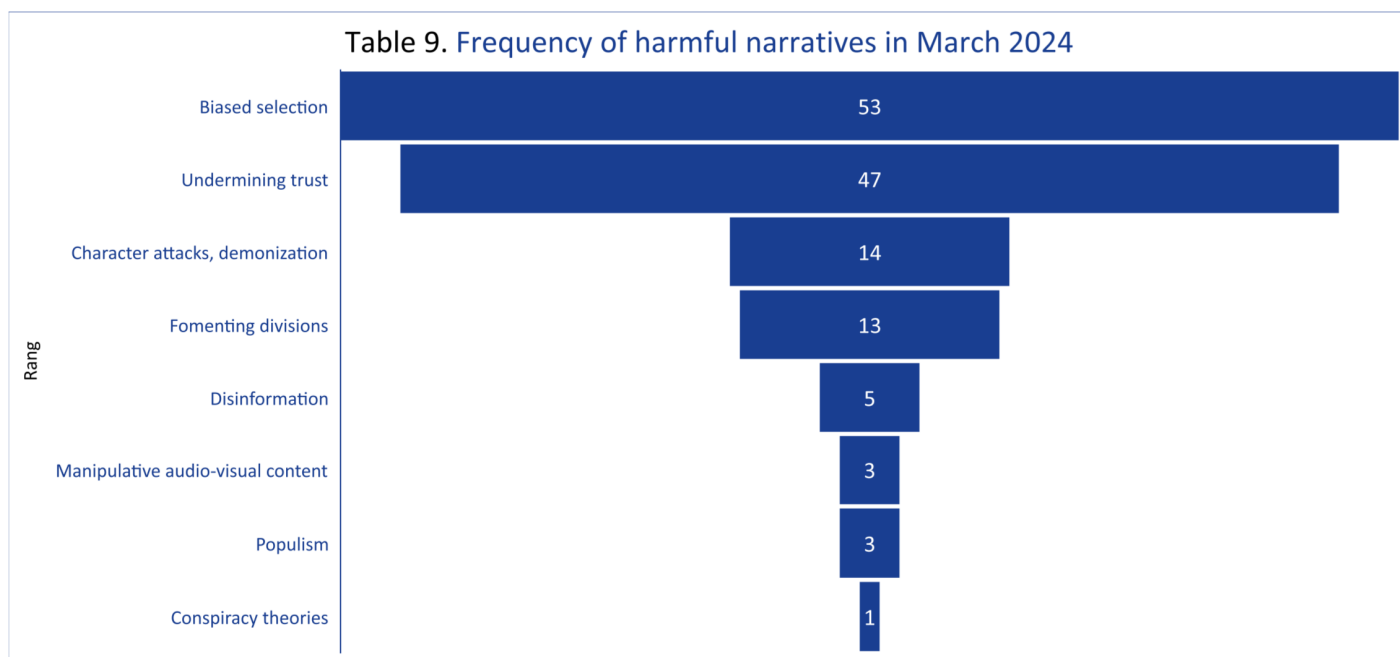
However, such one-sidedness is not always related to the bias of the TV stations, and sometimes it supports the thesis that instead of analysing complex social issues more seriously, journalists present the events through the political statements of the parties given at the organised pseudo-events. We find news items with only one side at all the TV stations that are part of the analysis.

## **The most common harmful narratives**

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

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

Such news items created a total of 139 harmful narratives, the most common of which are biased selection (53), undermining trust (47), character attacks and demonization (14), fomenting division (13), and creating disinformation (5).



During this period, there are many accusations of crime, negligent and unaccountable work, but instead of serious evidence, political actors often use the 'he said/she said' techniques, and the very next day, they replace one topic with another.





British Embassy  
Skopje



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**ШТЕТ-НА**

