

SUMMARY

DETERMINING

POLITICAL

HARMFUL

NARRATIVES

Title of the publication:

Determining Political Harmful Narratives (HARM-TIVE)

Publisher:

Institute of Communication Studies
St. Jurij Gagarin 17-1-1, Skopje
<https://iks.edu.mk>

About the Publisher:

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Edition:

ResPublica 

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Original title:

Мерење на политички штетни наративи - ШТЕТ-НА

Graphic design:

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Technical editing:

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Place and date:

Skopje, 2024

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Introduction

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

The specificity of the April 2024 report is that the monitoring was conducted during the pre-election campaign period for the presidential and the parliamentary elections. The first round of voting for the presidential elections was on 24 April 2024 and the second on 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, and 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 outlets: 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).

In similar manner, 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. Thereto, 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 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.

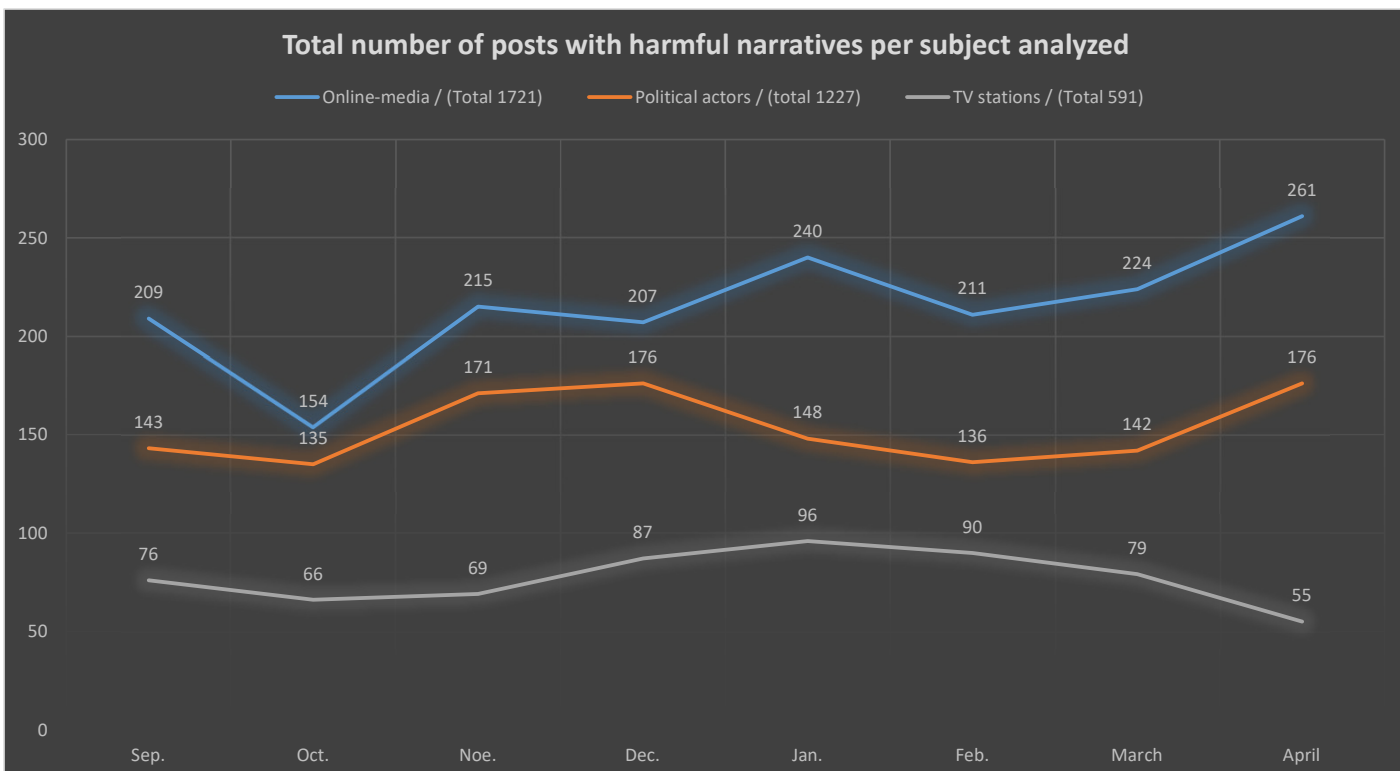
This document is a summary of the April 2024 monitoring.

The entire research can be read [HERE](#).

KEY FINDINGS

The monitoring of the communication of the political actors in April 2024 showed that they increased the dynamics of the use of harmful narratives during the campaign for the presidential and the parliamentary elections. In addition to the established practice of the previous period to smear and label the political opponents without evidence and to distort reality by selecting information, during the campaign they frequently resorted to rhetoric to spread fear, panic and insecurity and flirted with nationalism and ethnocentrism.

The only goal of such harmful methods is to win more votes by vulgarizing the political debate and win over the citizens by messing around with their national feelings instead of offering tangible and quality solutions to real everyday problems. During April, the political actors had a huge help in spreading harmful narratives from the online media, which broke records in harmful posts forgetting the journalistic rules and reporting standards during elections. On the other hand, the positive trend of reducing the number of news items with harmful narratives than the previous period can be observed in the television stations, which shows that the regulation under which they are subject during the election cycles probably affects the awareness of the journalists and the editors for whom the filter has worked to clean the harmful rhetoric that the political actors have put out.



VMRO-DPMNE is again on the pedestal, Levica took the second place

VMRO-DPMNE, as in all [previous months](#) is the political party with the most identified harmful narratives (43 posts), which is the same number as in March. It is novelty that this time the Levica took the second place with 38 posts with harmful narratives. The SDSM, which in the past months of the monitoring was regularly ranked second, was in the third place with 29 posts with harmful narratives in April.

During April, DUI continued to increase its harmful posts (14), and among the opposition parties of the ethnic Albanians in the country, united in the pre-election coalition Vredi (alb. Vlen), more posts with harmful narratives were observed on the Facebook pages of the party leaders in the coalition and a slight decrease in the posts with harmful narratives on the websites of Alternativa (3) and the Democratic Movement (1). Izet Medjiti, the leader of the Democratic Movement and part of the Vredi Coalition, leads the way with ten posts with harmful narratives among the party leaders. He is followed by Dimitar Apasiev from Levica, with seven posts with a harmful narrative, whereas the leader of Alternativa, Afrim Gashi has six posts containing harmful narrative.

The most common harmful narratives

With reference to the types of harmful narratives, the political parties in April, as before, often biasedly selected information that could lead the public to wrong conclusions (143 examples) and developed harmful narratives to undermine trust in the institutions (114) by presenting unsubstantiated claims of corruption and abuse of office. A third commonly identified harmful narrative is the demonization of the political opponents through harsh attacks and labelling (51).

Harmful narratives for inciting socio-political divisions are almost as often observed, but compared to [March](#), a reduced number of harmful populist narratives can be underlined (27). In terms of populism, Levica stands out whereas in its rhetoric turns into hate speech in two cases. This month there is an increasing number of harmful narratives that spread panic, fear and insecurity (15), mostly from Levica, SDSM and VMRO-DPMNE.

Self-promotion and accusations

The political parties in Macedonia in the pre-election period, without exception, used rhetoric of self-promotion when communicating with the public. It is dominated by platitudes that they are the saviours of the Macedonians, or, the Albanians, and that they are the genuine protectors of the national interests of one or the other nation. Arguments follow regarding who is 'good' and who is 'evil', who is pro-European integration, who is close to the foreign influences and the cherry on top is the debate over the question of who is more honourable, i.e., who is in favour of a real fight against corruption.

The Social Democratic Union of Macedonia - SDSM largely maintained the rhetoric that they are the option that offers the citizens prosperity, stability and membership in the European Union, and the accusations were mainly aimed at VMRO-DPMNE and the presidential candidate Gordana Siljanovska-Davkova. DUI founded its campaign for the presidential and parliamentary elections on the thesis 'Yes for Europe, no for Russia', promoting itself as the bearer of the European idea in Macedonia. The party was critical of the Albanian opposition, which attacked it for not caring enough about the interests of the Albanians and not representing the majority of the Albanians in the country, as well as for working under Russian influence. In addition to the Albanian opposition as the main political opponent of DUI, in the election campaign there was also a harsh rhetoric towards VMRO-DPMNE.

Similarly, as in the past months, the identified harmful narratives of VMRO-DPMNE were mainly aimed at SDSM and the presidential candidate for a second term, Stevo Pendarovski, but also at DUI, emphasizing the 'criminal power of SDS and DUI', while presenting themselves as saviours and defenders of justice and the people. The focus of the bloc of opposition parties of the Albanians united in the Vredi coalition remained the criticism of DUI and the European Front coalition. There is a narrative where DUI is portrayed as a collaborator of Serbia against Kosovo and additionally as a party with anti-European engagement. The Levica party and its leader Dimitar Apasiev in April continue to present themselves as saviours and defenders of the people and identity, while attacking and criticizing SDSM, VMRO-DPMNE and DUI.

Insults, labels and profanity

The political actors in Macedonia during the election campaign during April continued to vulgarize the political debate and used insults and labels to disparage the political opponents. The SDSM used the pejorative name 'VMRO-MVRO' for VMRO-DPMNE, claimed that it was 'the same party/regime of Nikola Gruevski' and mentioned the former leader of VMRO-DPMNE Nikola Gruevski as 'Mickoski's mentor'. According to DUI, however, 'Izet Medjiti and other derivatives of Moscow want to present the Albanians as a criminal and corrupt factor at any cost' and 'corruption has a name, Izet Medjiti and the Municipality of Chair'. Artan Grubi has a significant share in the statements with harmful narratives coming from the senior officials of DUI, whose communication often contains political discourse full of irony, cynicism, but also ridicule of the political opponents who are 'mercenaries in the 'Albanian' opposition'.

VMRO-DPMNE referred to SDSM as 'SDS' and 'DUI servants', Krenar Loga is 'the bell boy from Alliance', the consultant Asaf Eisin is a 'rascal' and 'creator of forgeries and fake news', and Stevo Pendarovski is a 'source and supporter of corruption in Macedonia and far from an honest person'. The labelling by Vredi representatives was aimed at DUI using the phrases 'corrupt DUI', 'DUI Lottery', 'Ahmeti clan' etc. The Levica called SDSM 'fake social democrats', 'bourgeois party', and VMRO-DPMNE 'fake opposition', 'bourgeois party', 'fake patriots', and 'millionaires'. Moreover, the Levica called DUI and SDSM 'mafias', and DUI named them 'UCHKI', 'neobalists' and 'secessionists'. For the Levica, Maksim Dimitrievski is a 'newly composed patriot', Sanja Lukarevska from SDSM is an 'impersonal politician', and the leader of VMRO-DPMNE Hristijan Mickoski is 'the most uncharismatic leader'. In this regard, the leader of the Levica, Dimitar Apasiev, for whom Stevo Pendarovski is 'Schizo', Dimitar Kovachevski is 'flabby', Timcho Mucunski is 'incompetent, favoured child, shallow', Hristijan Mickoski - 'Zhnicko', and SDS, DUI and DPMNE are 'usurping and criminal parties'.

Abuses of official Government channels

In the period of the election campaign, it is noticeable that the Facebook profiles of the Ministers in the Government who were simultaneously candidates in the election process were actively used for the promotion of their activities within the campaign, thus abusing the use of official Government communication channels for personal promotion and party needs. Regarding the Minister of Foreign Affairs, Bujar Osmani, it is noticeable that most of the posts are related to his candidacy for president of the state, as well as posts for the promotion of DUI and their campaign. On the Facebook profile of the Minister of Culture Bisera Kostadinovska-Stojchevska, there was also communication for the purposes of the election campaign. In terms of harmful narratives, the use of populism can be noticed; a discourse by which one's political option is highlighted as better than that of the political opponent.

On the Facebook profile of the Minister of Agriculture, Forestry and Water Management, Ljupcho Nikolovski, there were posts concerning the success in the agriculture. Biased selection, deliberately not conveying the full picture, and populist discourse to promote one's own ideology as better than that of the political opponent were used in the posts, hereupon general statements to say that conditions are better without giving specific data, were used. In addition to the above examples, the Minister of Justice Krenar Loga intensively used his official Facebook profile as the Minister of Justice to communicate statements and positions of the Alliance for Albanians led by Sela, i.e., to promote his party. Criticisms of the Albanian opposition, criticisms of VMRO-DPMNE can also be found on the profile. The posts are texts, photos, video clips or links to his media appearances or to the leader of the Alliance for Albanians Ziadin Sela.

In the media - negative track records and positive trends

The trend of increasing pace of production of news items with harmful narratives in the online media (which is constantly on the rise from month to month) culminates with the most observed such news items in April during the pre-election campaign. Nevertheless, in April, the TV stations had the least harmful news items since the beginning of the research so far. What must be noted in this context is that the information of the television stations, and especially of the public broadcasting service, during the election processes, is regulated by the Law on Audio and Audiovisual Media Services but also by the Election Code, while online media are self-regulated, which obviously does not contribute to the desired application of the basic journalistic principles and standards in the reporting.

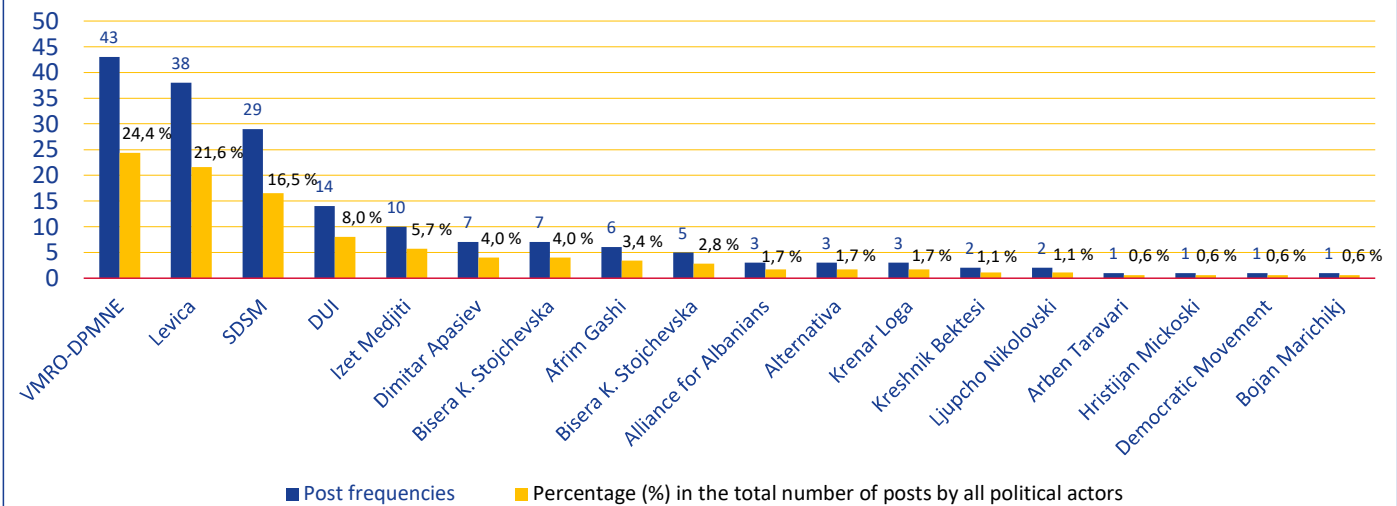
The portal with the largest number of news items with harmful narratives in April is Kurir (54 news items), which in the previous months (February and March) was at the top of the 'ladder', followed by A1On (33), Vecer.mk (29), Almakos (28), Republika (27). Likewise, this time, as previously, Nova TV has the lowest number of news items with harmful narratives (4 news items). Nonetheless, among the TV stations, the most news items with harmful narratives were recorded on TV Alfa (14), in spite of this television also saw a drastic drop (40 in February, 35 in March), which is distinguishing for most TV stations in April. 21 eight news items were recorded with harmful narratives on TV 21; seven were registered on Kanal 5, Alsat-M (6), MTV 1 and MTV 2 (5 each), Sitel (4) and on TV Telma and TV 24 three news items each with harmful narratives.

The political actors appear as the main source of harmful narratives in the news items of the media, whose main characteristic continued to be one-sided information. Hence, it is not surprising that the media reports are dominated by harmful narratives that undermine trust in the institutions, biased selection, character attack and demonize a certain person and foment division, fear and insecurity, and which were often used by the political entities as well. It is fascinating that in the past period the online media have seen a continuous and significant increase in the harmful narrative 'spreading fear, panic and insecurity' (February-4, March-11, April-23) and there was a slight monthly increase in posts with nationalism (March -4, April-12) and with ethnocentrism (March-4, April-8).

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

A total of 176 posts with a harmful narrative were recorded on the websites and the Facebook pages of the political parties and their leaders in April, which is an increase of 34 posts compared to the previous month. Of these, 69 were posted only on Facebook, 62 were posted only on websites and 45 were posted on both communication channels.

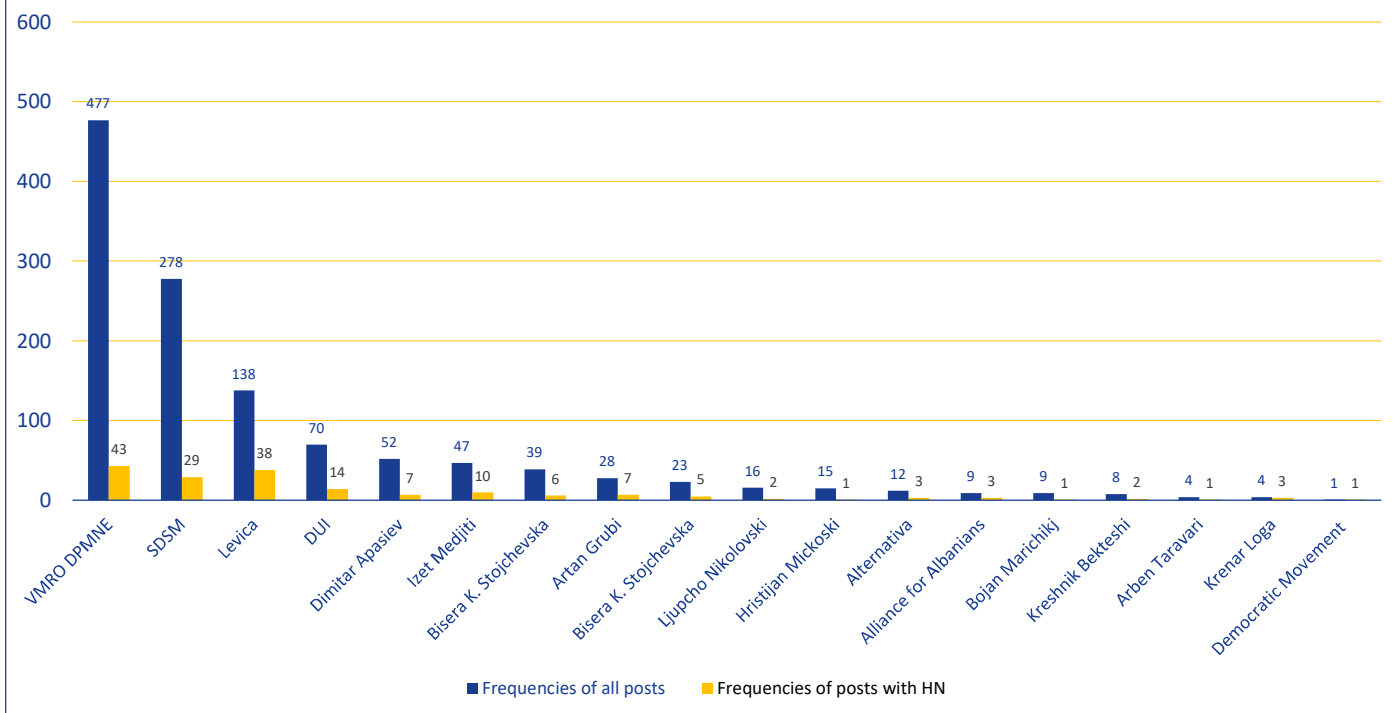
Table 1. Prevalence of posts with a harmful narrative according to political actors (April 2024)



It can be concluded that the trend of more frequent harmful communication through Facebook compared to the websites and repetition of the same posts on both channels, continued. However, unlike March (36 harmful posts), in April there is an increase in the dynamics of harmful narratives on the websites.

In April, harmful narratives were not identified by the leaders of SDSM Dimitar Kovachevski and DUI Ali Ahmeti, but one harmful post was noted by the leader of VMRO-DPMNE, Hristijan Mickoski. As in previous months, the monitoring for April did not show any posts with harmful narratives on the website and Facebook pages of the LDP, New Social Democratic Party and Socialist Party, as well as on the pages of their leaders.

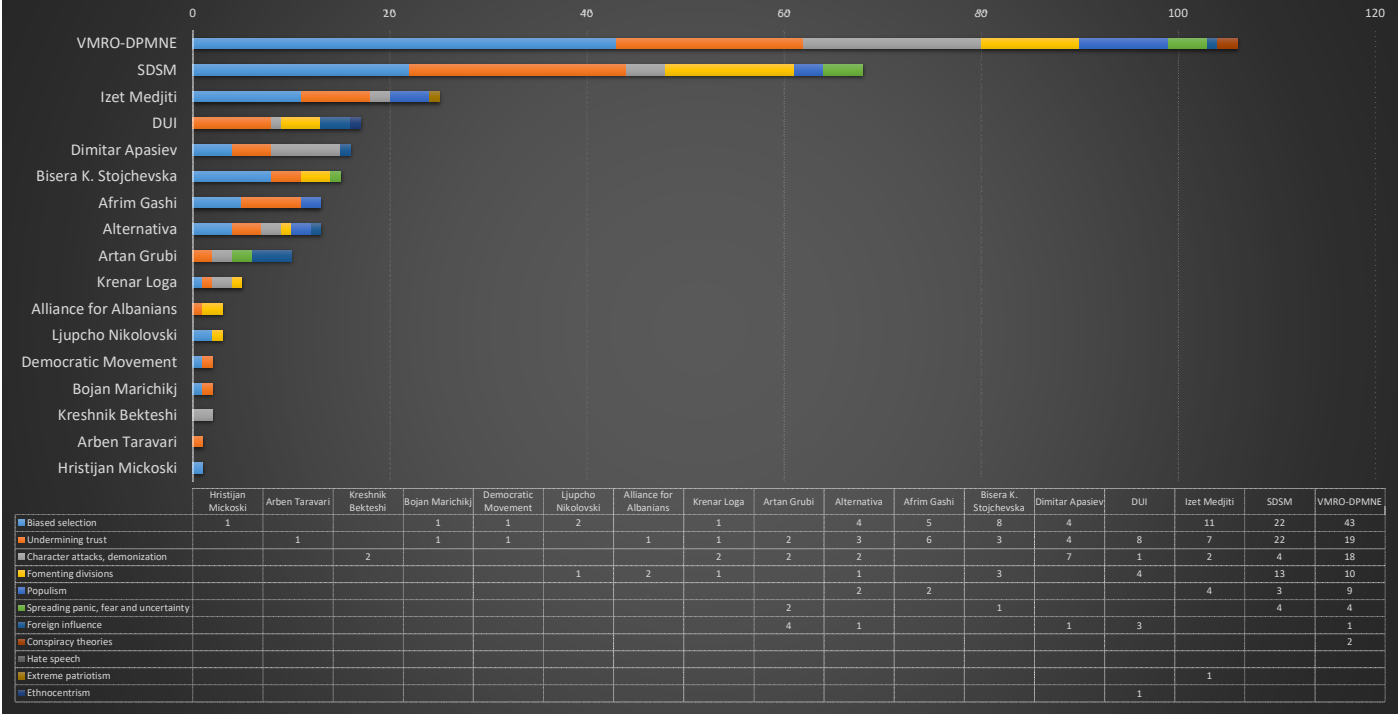
Table 2. Prevalence of posts with harmful narratives in the total number of posts on FB profiles of political actors



The most common theme for which harmful narratives were identified is domestic politics (148 out of 176 posts or 84.1 percent), while crime and corruption were represented by about four percent, economy and foreign policy were represented by about two percent, and healthcare and other topics had one percent prevalence. It is interesting that the domestic politics continuously appears as the main topic in the creation and dissemination of harmful narratives during all months of the monitoring.

When it comes to the types of harmful narratives, harmful narratives regarding negative foreign influences were observed among the political parties in April with less intensity than before, only this time two harmful narratives about conspiracy theories were also observed at VMRO-DPMNE. Ethnocentrism and nationalism can be identified in DUI' posts, which was mostly aimed at VMRO-DPMNE and their leader Hristijan Mickoski, as well as through the promotion of their own party as the only representative of Albanians in Macedonia. The nationalism of Izet Medjiti, i.e. the Vredi coalition, was represented through the messages they sent to DUI in which they promoted themselves as the only option that rightly cared about the Albanians in Macedonia, which promoted the Albanian interests, instead of the ruling DUI.

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



2. Monitoring of the media coverage of the political actors

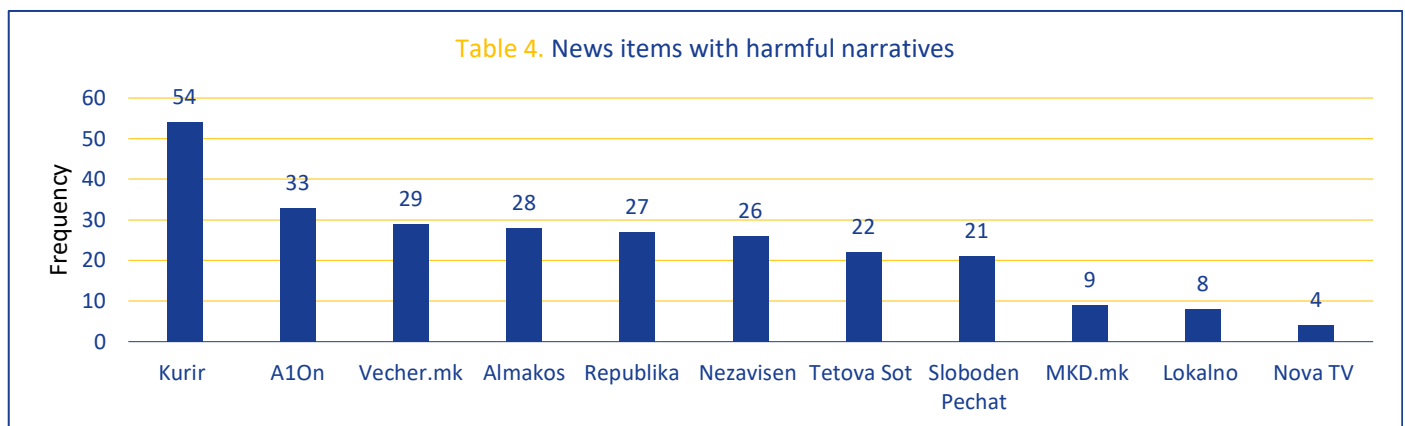
2.1. Monitoring report on the online media coverage of the political actors

The analysis of the online media (performed seven days a month) determined 261 news items with harmful narratives, the highest number since the beginning of the research. The portals posted the largest number of news items with harmful narratives on 4 April (47) with the start of the election campaign, and the least on 24 April (17 news items) on the day of the presidential elections.

In terms of content, the largest number of analysed news items with harmful narratives are the hybrid genre forms, the reported speeches of the politicians (111 news items, i.e. 42.5%) and the reported press releases of the political parties (62 news items, i.e. 23.8%) which together with the reported Facebook statuses of the political entities and their statements (8 news items, i.e. 3.1%) make up 2/3 (or 69.4%) of all analysed news items with harmful narratives.

Frequency of Harmful Narratives in Online Media

An essential topic in all online media is the domestic politics (in 239 news items or 91.6%), translated into the campaigns for the presidential and parliamentary elections. It is even unique in some of them, such as Nezavisen, Lokalno and MKD.mk, where all analysed new items with harmful narratives are related to the election political campaign. In all other portals, Almakos, Vecer.mk, Republika, Kurir, Tetova Sot, A1on, Sloboden Pечат, rarely and incidentally, with two to three news items, foreign policy, economy, justice and crime are added to the main topic.



Narratives that attack and blame the political opponents, their programmes, their personality, values, the previous work, regardless of whether the posted information was correct or not, dominated in terms of content; the public office holders, the media workers, the civil activists were labelled and ridiculed; words, phrases were used that smeared certain groups of people and fomented division into 'we, us' and 'you'.

It is striking that in contrast to the previous dominance of 'short' party press releases or views/statements of the political entities, this time the reported speeches of the politicians are 'richer' in scope/content and visualization/photos, videos, but by default without the author of the news item and signature under the

photos presented. At the same instant, the practice of ‘creating’ multiple news items concerning the same event is not left out, but this time instead of ‘quoting’ or retelling parts of interviews of the politicians from television shows, parts of the speeches of the political actors at rallies/gatherings were used.

The political actors in the analysed news items

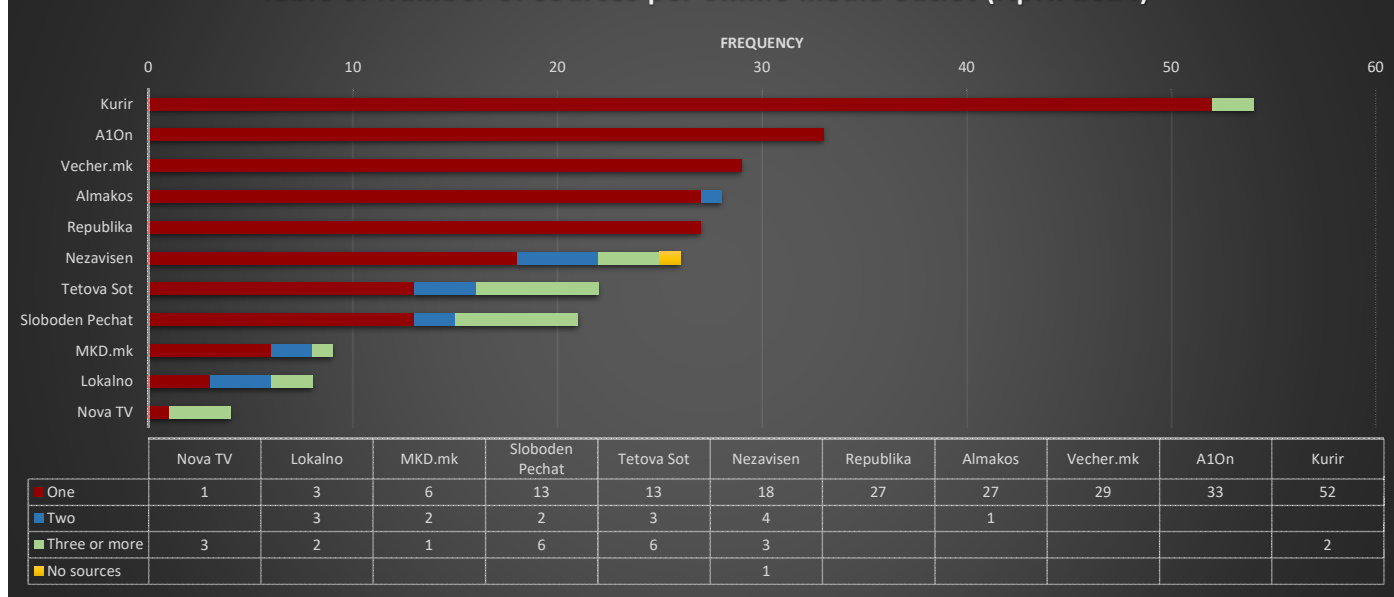
The news items with harmful narratives abound with numerous political actors in all analysed online media. The most numerous are those with two (57 or 21.8 %) and three (57 or 21.8 %) actors. This month, the individual, i.e., the politicians dominate, and far less the collective, i.e., the political parties. Cumulatively, the president of VMRO-DPMNE, Hristijan Mickoski, is at the top, followed by the presidential candidates Stevo Pendarovski and Gordana Siljanovska-Davkova, and from the collective VMRO-DPMNE, then DUI and SDSM.

The media representation of the political entities, regardless of whether they are individual or collective, differs on different portal. However, most of the time the actors were quoted and discussed in the context of the topic being reported on, especially in Almakos, Republika, Lokalno, Nezavisen, A1on and Nova TV. The next ones in the row were Tetova Sot, Kurir, MKD.mk and Sloboden Pечат, who practiced quoting the actors, paraphrasing them and discussing the actors in the context of the topic. Only Vecer.mk, as previously, talked about all the actors represented in the news items in the context of the topic and all of them were negatively evaluated by some other actor.

Journalistic (un)professionalism

Continuously from month to month, the online media unilaterally inform, and this time it was noted in 232 news items out of the total analysed 261 (or 89.2 %). Such were all the news items analysed (with harmful narratives) in Vecer.mk, Republika, A1on, while in Kurir, Almakos and MKD.mk one or two news items with two/more parties consulted, were incidentally noted. As regards to other portals, such as Tetova Sot, Nezavisen and Sloboden Pечат, the number of news items with two/more side ranges from five to seven such news items.

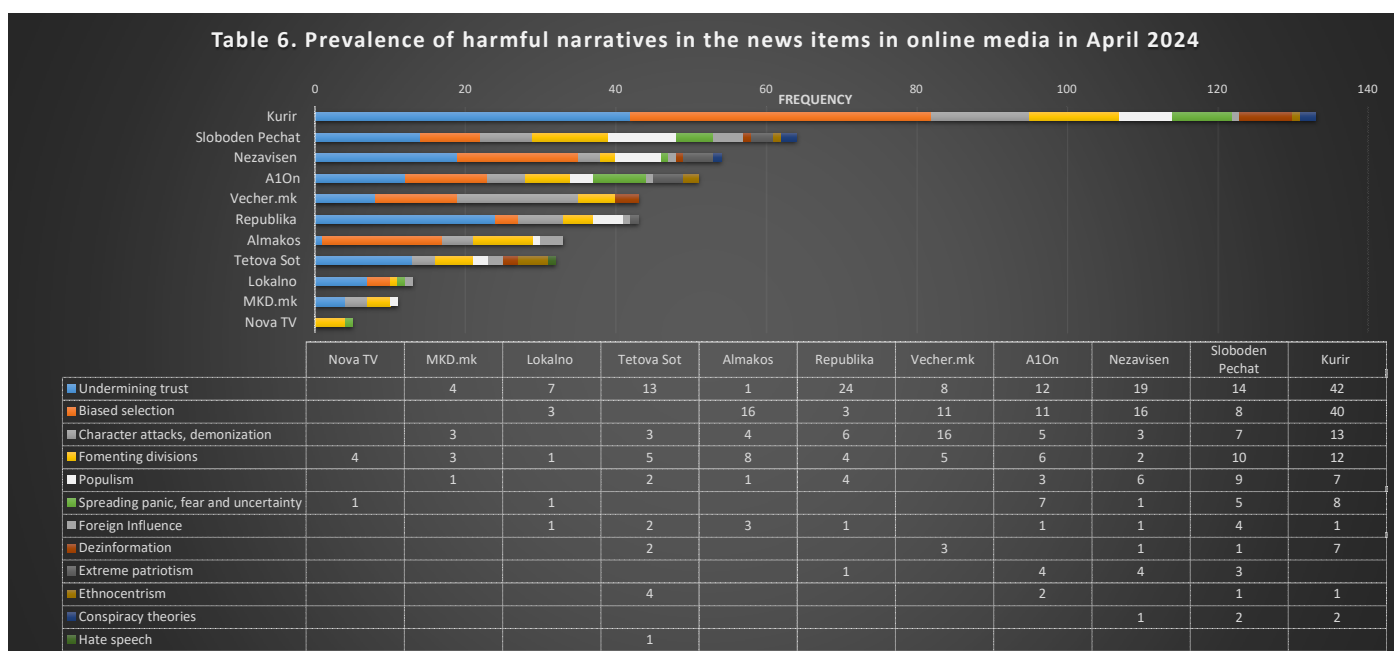
Table 5. Number of sources per online media outlet (April 2024)



Concurrently, reliance on one source of information is often a constant while informing, i.e., 222 such news items (or 85.1%) were determined. In Vecer.mk, Republika and A1on, all analysed news items were as mentioned, while in Almakos there was only one news item with two sources, and in Kurir two news items with three or more sources. Among the other portals, Tetova Sot had 9 news items (out of a total of 22) with two/three and more sources, Nezavisen had 7 such news items (out of a total of 26), and Sloboden Pechat 8 news items (out of a total of 21) with two/three and more sources.

Dominant harmful political narratives

In the serious number of 261 news items with harmful narratives (with as many as 482 indicators - sentences, phrases, paragraphs), the Kurir portal had the most (54 news items). Then following ones are A1on, Vecer.mk, Almakos, Republika.



The focus is again on allegations of corruption, transparency/non-accountability, unprofessionalism, abuse of office without attempting to substantiate the claims, as well as unverified/hard-to-verify findings as a basis for accusing the political opponents (162 cases), labelling, ridicule and gross disrespect of other persons - the political opponents, the public office holders, the media workers (60 cases) permanently present in the entire monitored process, and this time also the use of words and phrases that smear a certain group of people in order to cause division and discord between 'we and you', 'us and you' (60 cases).

2.2 Report on monitoring the reporting of TV stations for April 2024

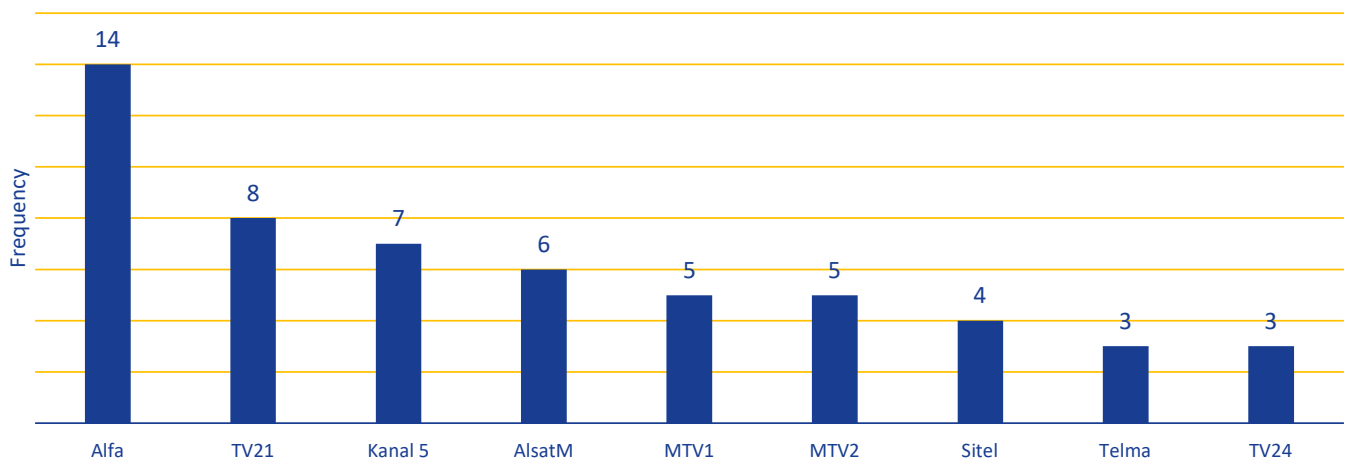
In April 2024, the news items in the central news editions of nine TV stations were analysed and in the seven days of the analysis (4, 8, 12, 16, 20, 24 and 28 April), 55 news items containing harmful narratives were registered. Since the beginning of the research, this is the lowest number of registered news items, with less than 8 (7, 8) news items per day.

The most common harmful narratives were biased selection (28) and undermining trust in the institutions (24), TV Alfa again was on top of the list with harmful narratives among the television stations.

Frequency of harmful narratives among TV stations

The trend of decreasing harmful narratives in the news of TV stations, which was observed in March (79), continued in April, with the lowest number of recorded news items ever (55). Such a low number among TV stations is due to the legal obligations they have according to the Electoral Code and the Law on Audio and Audiovisual Media Services and the monitoring carried out by the AAVMS, but also by various international and domestic organisations. It is obvious that the journalists in these media outlets have started to develop a greater awareness of the harmful narratives in the political discourse and do not give them space in the central news editions, as was the case in the previous months.

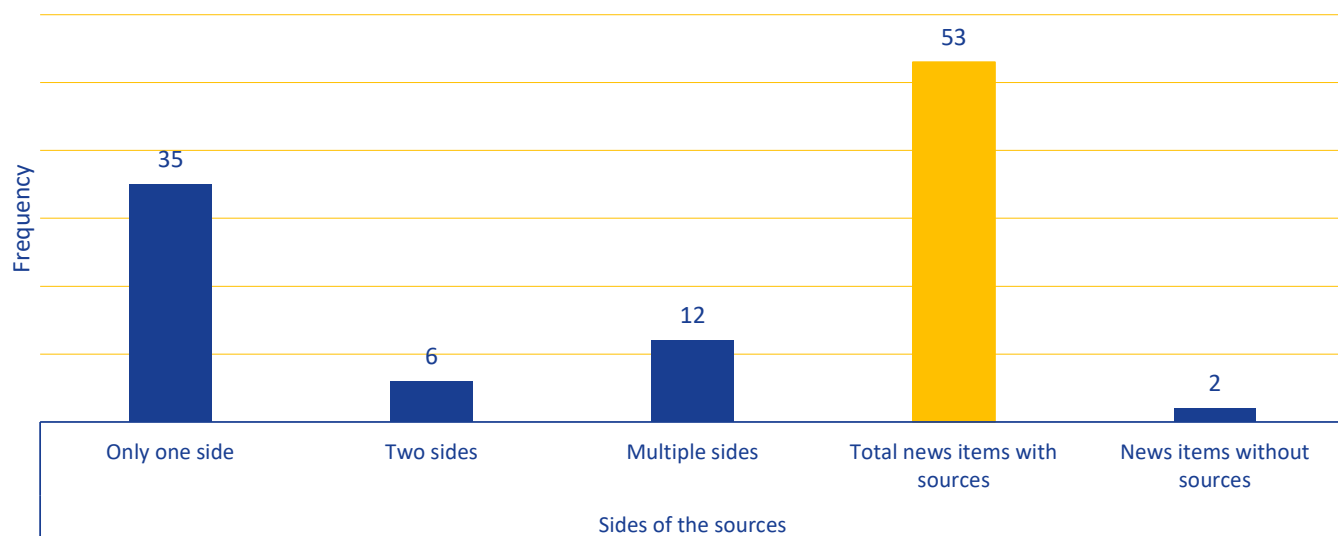
Table 7. Prevalence of news items that contain a harmful narrative according to TV stations in April 2024



The day with the largest number of such news items registered is 20 April (15 news items or 27.3%), and the day with the least is 24 April (2 news items or 3.6%), which is the result of the election silence. It is not surprising that the largest number of news items 48 (or 87.3%) were related to topics concerning domestic politics and a very small number had a topic from some other area, foreign policy and crime (2 news items each or 3.6%) and 1 news item related to healthcare, justice and economy each.

The news items with harmful narratives were more one-sided than previously, i.e. they presented only one side (35 news items or 63.6%). Only 6 news items (10.9%) had a second side, while 12 news items (21.8%) had more than one side. Two news items did not have any sources at all.

Table 8. Frequencies of representation on the side of the sources in the news items that have harmful narratives (April 2024)

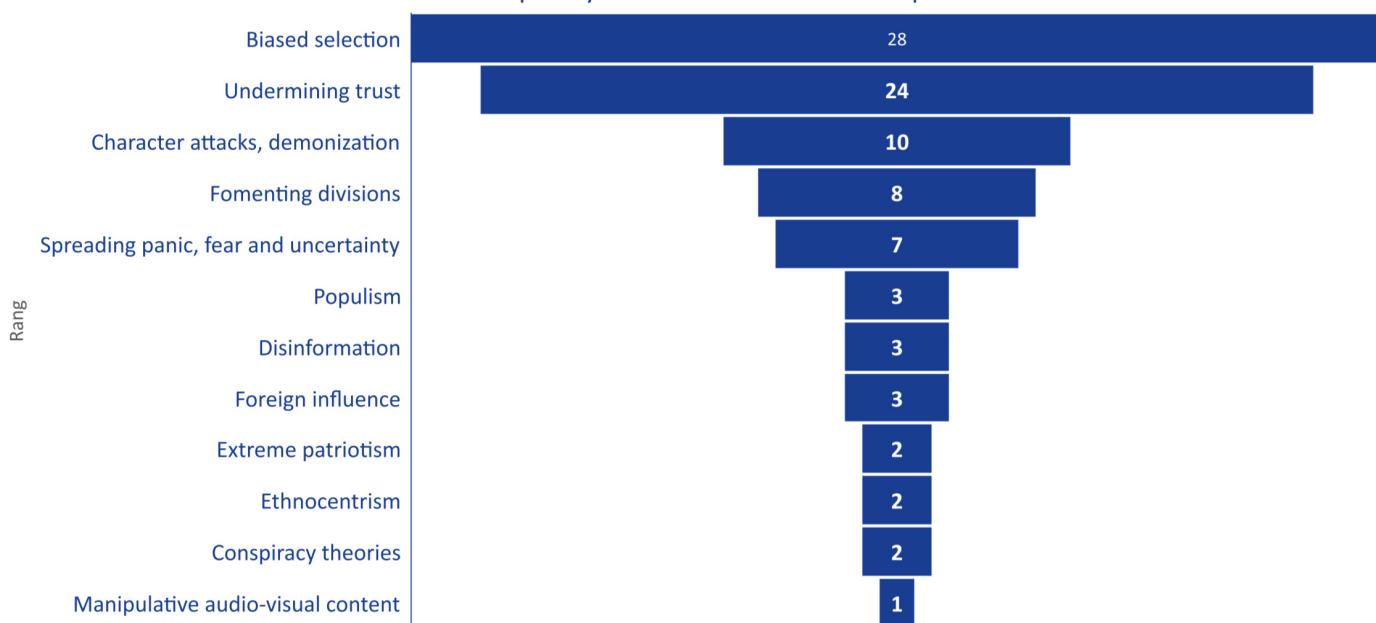


The largest number of news items in which only one side was presented in April were noted on the two public broadcasting service channels MTV 1 (5 or 100%) and MTV 2 (5 or 100%), followed by TV Alfa (10 or 83.3%), TV Sitel (3 or 75%) etc.

The most common harmful narratives

In April, a total of 55 news items containing a total of 91 harmful narratives were registered. The most common were biased selection (28) and undermining of trust (24), which is a feature of all previous months of the research. Then, the next ones were the news items where there were character attacks or demonization (10), fomenting divisions (8), spreading fear and panic (7), etc.

Table 9. Frequency of harmful narratives in April 2024



These harmful narratives are mostly the result of allegations of corruption, non-transparency, non-accountability, unprofessionalism, abuse of office, without substantiating those claims (30 such cases or 45.5%), but also insults, ridicule and labelling (10 or 15, 15 %), use of words and phrases that smear a certain group of people in order to foment division and discord (9 or 13.64 %), accusing a foreign entity of interfering in the internal affairs (4 or 6.06 %) and intentional failure to convey the entire image and omission of information (4 or 6.06 %).



British Embassy
Skopje



This research was conducted within the project 'Use Facts: Fact-Based Journalism for Raising Awareness and Countering Disinformation in the Media Space in North Macedonia' funded by the Government of the United Kingdom, with the support of the British Embassy Skopje. The opinions and views expressed in this content do not necessarily reflect the opinions and views of the British Government.

Monthly report
(April 2024)



ШТЕТ-НА

