

SUMMARY

DETERMINING

POLITICAL

HARMFUL

NARRATIVES

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Introduction

The seventh 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 May 2024 in which harmful narratives were identified. Additionally, the report includes an analysis on the manner these harmful narratives were addressed in the central news editions of 9 television stations and 11 online media outlets.

Regarding the May report, it is interesting, that the monitoring was conducted during the last days of the pre-election campaign for the second round of the presidential and the parliamentary elections which were held concurrently on 8 May, as well as during the post-election period when the results of the voting were presented, i.e. the Prime Minister of the new Government, and the negotiations regarding its future composition were already underway.

The Institute of Communication Studies (ICS) underscores that the candidates for president of the country were 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 the Albanians, Alternativa, DUI, Democratic Movement, VMRO-DMPNE, Levica, LDP, New Social Democratic Party, SDSM, and the 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).

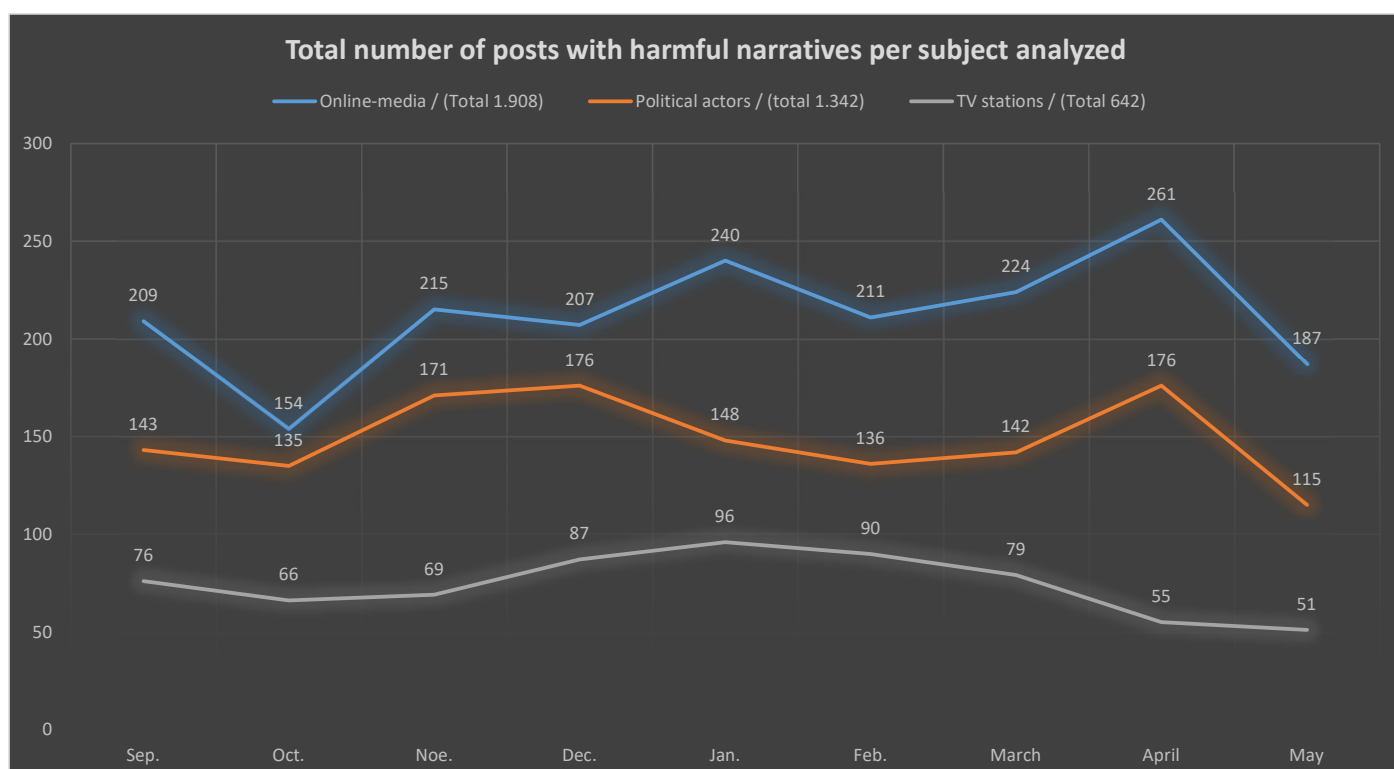
In similar fashion, as in the previous reports, the content and the scope of the harmful narratives propagated by the political actors, the intensity, the topics and the subjects towards which the negative messages are directed are empirically captured here. Hereupon, the report indicates the violations of [the standards and principles for non-discriminatory and transparent political communication](#) by the political representatives, as well as of [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, as well as regarding the media every fourth day of the month. More details on the methodological framework, samples and the monitoring dynamics, as well as details on the entire research process are available at: [HARM-TIVE](#).

The research Determining Political Harmful Narratives (HARM-TIVE) was 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 was conducted during 2023 and 2024. It was 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 the monitoring and the control.

This document is a summary of the May 2024 monitoring.

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



KEY FINDINGS

The monitoring of the communication of the political actors in May 2024 showed a record decrease in the harmful narratives compared to the previous months in which their rhetoric was monitored, which was mainly due to the end of the electoral process and a kind of post-election silence that occurred among some political parties after the announcement of the election results.

As a result of the decrease in the harmful rhetoric by the political actors, there was also a decrease in the harmful posts among the online media and the TV stations in May. It is noteworthy that this month the trend of continuous decreasing of the news items with harmful narratives culminates among the TV stations, i.e., there is the lowest number of harmful posts so far. It is an indication that the legal regulation to which they are subject during the election process has an impact on the judgment of the journalists and the editors who, during the official campaign, more diligently cleared the programme of the harmful rhetoric that was spread daily by the political actors.

The Levica on the throne, the DUI in the first three

Unlike the previous months, when the VMRO-DPMNE was consistently the party with the most harmful narratives identified, this month that primacy is taken by the **Levica with by far the most (25) harmful narratives in their public communication**, which is still a slight decrease compared to the previous period (in March 27 and in April 38 posts with harmful narratives). **The VMRO-DPMNE dropped to second place with 16** posts with harmful narratives (March and April each with 43 harmful posts, respectively). It is interesting that for the first time since the beginning of the monitoring, i.e., in the months from September 2023 onwards, **the SDSM was not among the (rst three parties with the most harmful narratives in May of this year**, which is due to the silence of this party after the announcement of the election results. The SDSM, with five posts with harmful narratives (29 in March and in April each, respectively) **took the fourth place** and ceded **the third place to DUI which was found to have six posts** with harmful narratives (in March 9 and in April 14 harmful posts).

When it comes to the individuals, i.e., the party leaders and the officials, **the most (16) harmful narratives were found on the Facebook page of the leader of the Levica, Dimitar Apasiev**, which is a significant increase compared to the previous two months (in March 9 and in April 7 harmful posts). **One harmful narrative** was also identified **at the leader Hristijan Mickoski, and none at the SDSM leader Dimitar Kovachevski. Kreshnik Bekteshi led the list of harmful posts among the DUI representatives with 10 such posts**, which is a noticeable increase compared to the previous month (2 harmful posts in April), followed by Artan Grubi (5) and Ali Ahmeti (3). An increase in the number of posts with a harmful narrative can be observed among one of the key spokespersons of the Alliance for the Albanians, the Minister of Justice **Krenar Loga (from 3 posts with a harmful narrative in April to 10 in May).**

The most common harmful narratives

When it comes to the types of harmful narratives, the political actors in May, as in the previous period, mostly **selected information in a biased manner (83 cases)**, which could lead the public to wrong conclusions. They then **undermined trust in the institutions (76 cases)** by making unsubstantiated claims of corruption and abuse of office and **harshly attacked and demonized the political opponents (33 cases)**. This month too, posts with **'extreme patriotism and nationalism', 'ethnocentrism', 'spreading panic and fear' and individual cases of 'hate speech' can be observed.**

A significant use of populist discourse and nationalism can be observed among almost all political actors. The nationalist rhetoric easily encourages strong emotions regarding the sense of belonging and identity, as well as the urge to defend one's own country, especially when the citizens are served rhetoric that the survival of the country is at stake.

European future and foreign influences

The SDSM continued with the same key message that they offer a European future and a better standard of living for all the citizens of the country, while the VMRO-DPMNE is the same party that ruled the country until 2016 and would only bring a regime, unruly spending of the citizens' money and deviation from the European path. The DUI and their pre-election coalition European Front continue to use the same pre-election rhetoric with the key message 'Yes for Europe, No for Russia' with accusations against the Vredi of vassalage to the VMRO-DPMNE and Russian and Serbian influence.

The VMRO-DPMNE finished its election campaign by mainly targeting the SDSM as a corrupt and incompetent Government that needs to leave. However, in the election campaign, and especially during the month of May, there was a harsher rhetoric towards the DUI, which along with the SDSM, were the main target

of the VMRO-DPMNE for attacks and accusations of corruption and crime. The Levica continued with harsh rhetoric towards the ruling parties the SDSM and the DUI, as well as towards the main Macedonian opposition party the VMRO-DPMNE. The Vredi coalition, although with a reduced number of public communications and posts with harmful narratives, continued to attack the Government and the DUI with the main ethnocentric message that they are the legitimate representatives of the ethnic Albanians in the country instead of the multi-ethnic European Front of Ali Ahmeti.

Low level of political communication

The conclusion of the analysis of the communication practices of the political actors in Macedonia this month is that the political communication in the country is at a low level, which was also feature of the previous months of the monitoring. The labelling, the insults and the smearing have become part of the regular communication of the political actors. The SDSM smeared the main political opponent VMRO-DPMNE, equating it with 'regime', 'darkness' and 'going back', which contributed to spreading fear in the society of a possible Government led by the VMRO-DPMNE. Concerning DUI, i.e., the European Front, messages with offensive content towards the Albanian opposition were recorded through the speeches of A. Hodja for whom 'The chicken remains a chicken even if it puts wings of an eagle', of Menduh Tachi who is 'an expert on swamps and bacteria like Vredi' and of Grubi for whom the representatives of the Albanian opposition are 'vassals of Mickoski'.

For the VMRO-DPMNE, the DUI leader Ali Ahmeti is a 'naughty child who cries for a toy that is not his', and the party members are 'the Ahmeti's commanders', whom are said that they 'did not five pennies in 2001, now they are millionaires' with haciendas like Middle Eastern sheikhs.' The Levica called the SDSM 'SDS', 'SDS of Our Country', as well as 'quislings', 'transitional kleptomaniacs'. For the Levica, the Vice Prime Minister Bojan Marichikj is a 'fat arse', and the Vredi, just like DUI, were labelled as 'neoballists'. Regarding the VMRO-DPMNE, the Levica used expressions such as 'fake patriots', 'DPMNE', 'neo-supremacists from DPMNE', 'unhinged vmroids', 'vmroid nits', 'vmroids', and they called the leader of the party Hristijan Mickoski 'duke' and 'Micika'.

The use of such terms by the political actors in the public discourse encourages the normalization of the use of offensive vocabulary on the public stage and in the public communication. When the offensive vocabulary is not condemned, its use is not restricted, after a long period it can be accepted as part of the general lexicon of the language, and thus the spread of harmful narratives and a low culture of the public speaking are enabled.

Party promotion through the state channels

It is noteworthy, that the frequent abuse of the official Facebook pages of the Prime Minister and the Ministers in the Government, who were also candidates in the parliamentary elections, continued for party communication and personal promotion in May. In addition to the harmful narratives identified by the DUI ministers Artan Grubi and Kreshnik Bekteshi, AA Minister Krenar Loga, SDSM Ministers Bisera K. Stojchevska and Ljupcho Nikolovski, many other posts with party pre-election content could be noticed, which mainly focused on populist narratives for the promotion of their own party, while criticizing the political opponents.

However, on the Facebook pages of other representatives of the Government, abuses can be observed for the promotion of their party activities within the framework of the pre-election campaign, as well as party communication following the election results. Such is the example of the Prime Minister of the Caretaker Government, Talat Djaferi, on whose official Facebook page, this month, there were posts with party communication from the election campaign, such as meetings with citizens and messages and audiovisual

content from pre-election rallies. Hence it can be concluded that at the end of the pre-election campaigns, most of the Ministers violated the Code of Ethics of Government Officials for Public Communication and misused their ministerial profile for posting party propaganda, instead of using it only for activities related to their work in the Ministry they manage.

‘Parasitic news’ and one-sided information in the media

May, as the last month of the nine-month monitoring of the online media, is characterized by a noticeable downward trend of news items with harmful narratives. **Among the online media, 187 news items with negative rhetoric were determined, which can be evaluated as a relaxation of the information space,** compared to the previous few months when the number of politically ‘harmful stories’ surmounted 200 to reach to 261 such news items in April. On the other hand, in the news editions on the TV stations **this month, 51 news items with harmful content were recorded, which is a record decrease** (55 ‘harmful news items’ in April and 79 in March). Although such a low number is surprising at the height of the election campaign, it must be emphasized that the TV stations (unlike the online portals) are subject to legal regulation that imposes special rules on informing, especially during elections.

Among the online media, the harmful narratives were mostly posted through the **Kurir portal (28 news items), which months ago had the largest number of news items with harmful narratives, followed by Vecer.mk (26), Nezavisen (22) and Tetova Sot (22),** which in the past period, occasionally changed their place on the scale or were replaced by others (Republika, A1on). **Among the TV stations, TV Alfa is again the medium with the highest number of news items with harmful narratives (12),** but unlike February (40) and March (35), in April and May this TV station also has a significant reduction of this type of news items. Following Alfa, **Alsat M and TV 21 are the next (8 news items each), then TV 24 (7) and TV Telma (5).**

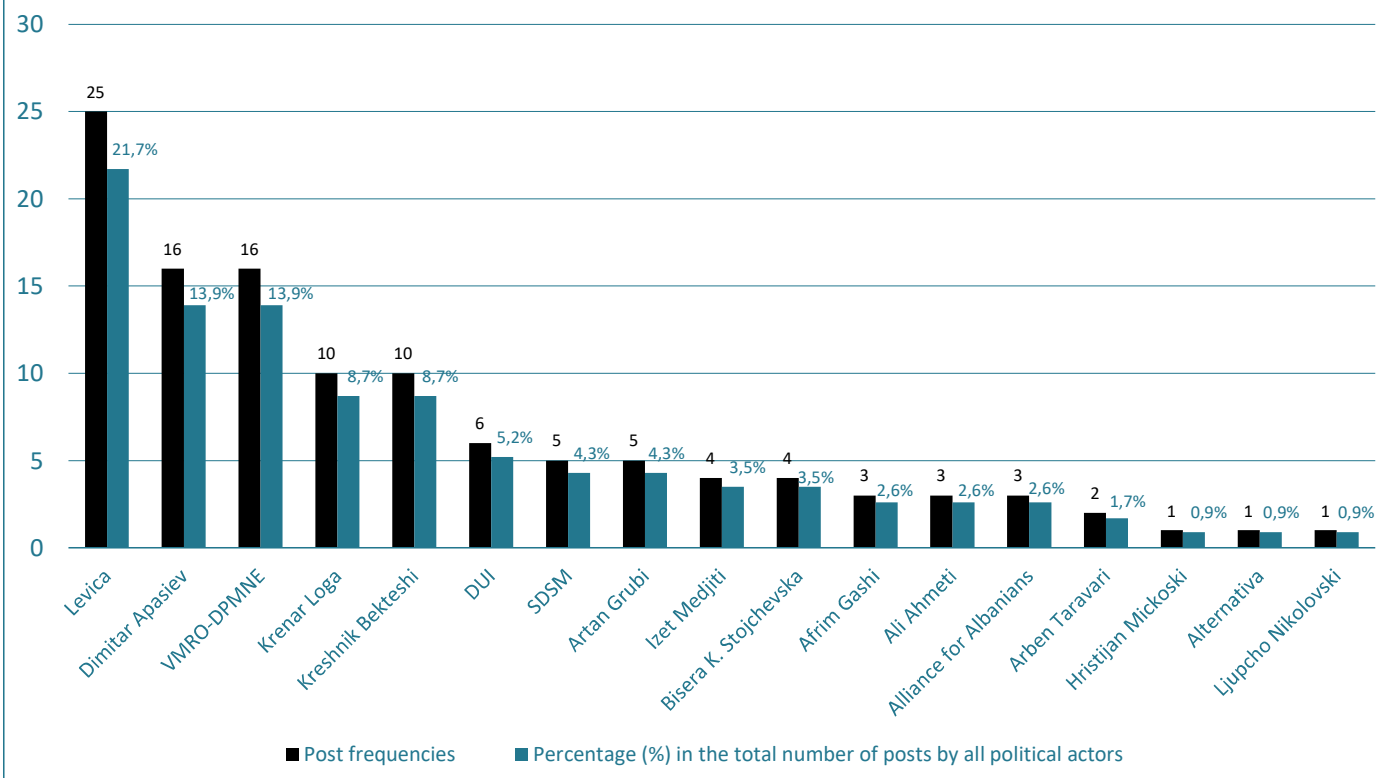
The three most common harmful narratives in the online media and the TV stations in May are ‘biased selection’, ‘undermining trust in the institutions’ and ‘fomenting division’.

Among the online media, it is notable that the speeches of the politicians, their posts on social networks, and pseudo-events dominate as an occasion for information, which indicates that there is a lack of proactive and authentic journalistic information and research, behind which there is the author-journalist, transparent and responsible. This contemporary wave of media politicization dictated by the invasive and sophisticated political communication, or as new media theorists call it ‘parasitic news,’ is flooding the online space, overriding traditional ethical principles and practices. It is specific for the both types of media that one-sided information and reliance mostly on one source of information continue to dominate.

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

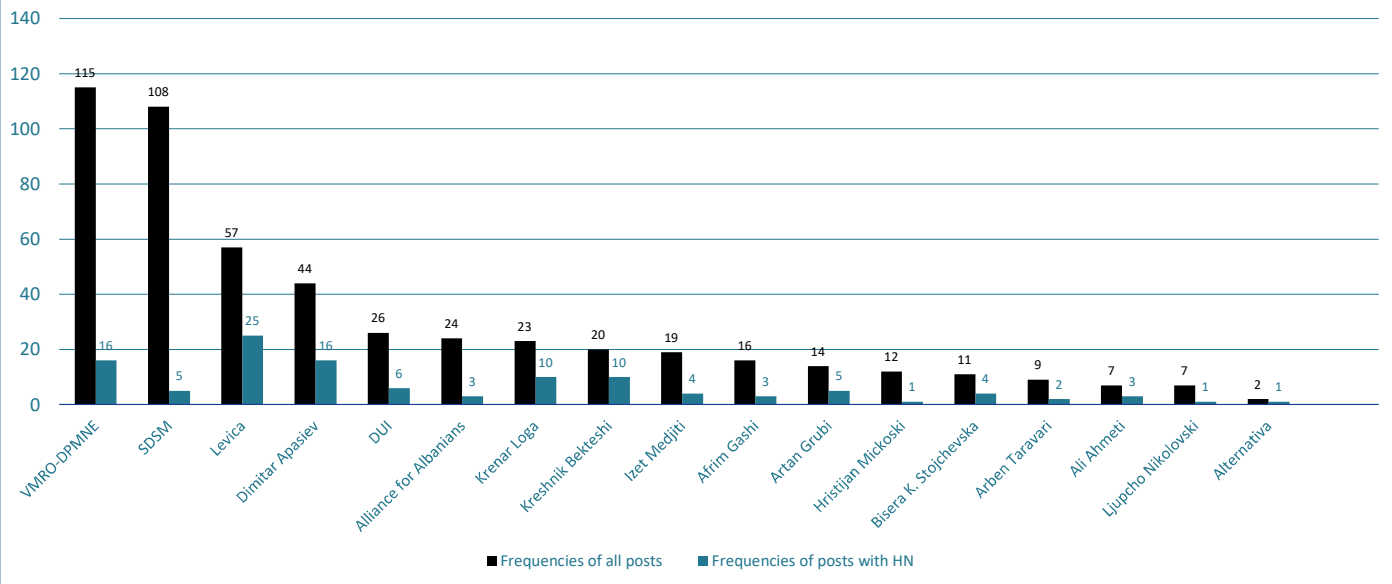
In the period from 1 to 30 May 2024, a total of 115 posts containing a harmful narrative were identified on the websites and on the Facebook pages of the political actors (61 harmful narratives less than April and 27 less than March).

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



Taking into account the total number of posts compared to the number of posts with a harmful narrative, on each of the monitored communication channels of the political parties and their leaders, it can be noted that the percentage of harmfulness in May is the most pronounced on the channels of the Alternativa and the Levica parties, as well as the Facebook profiles of the Minister of Economy from DUI Kreshnik Bekteshi and the Minister of Justice from the Alliance for the Albanians, Krenar Loga. The communication channels with the lowest percentage of harmfulness in May are the SDSM and the VMRO-DPMNE leader Hristijan Mickoski.

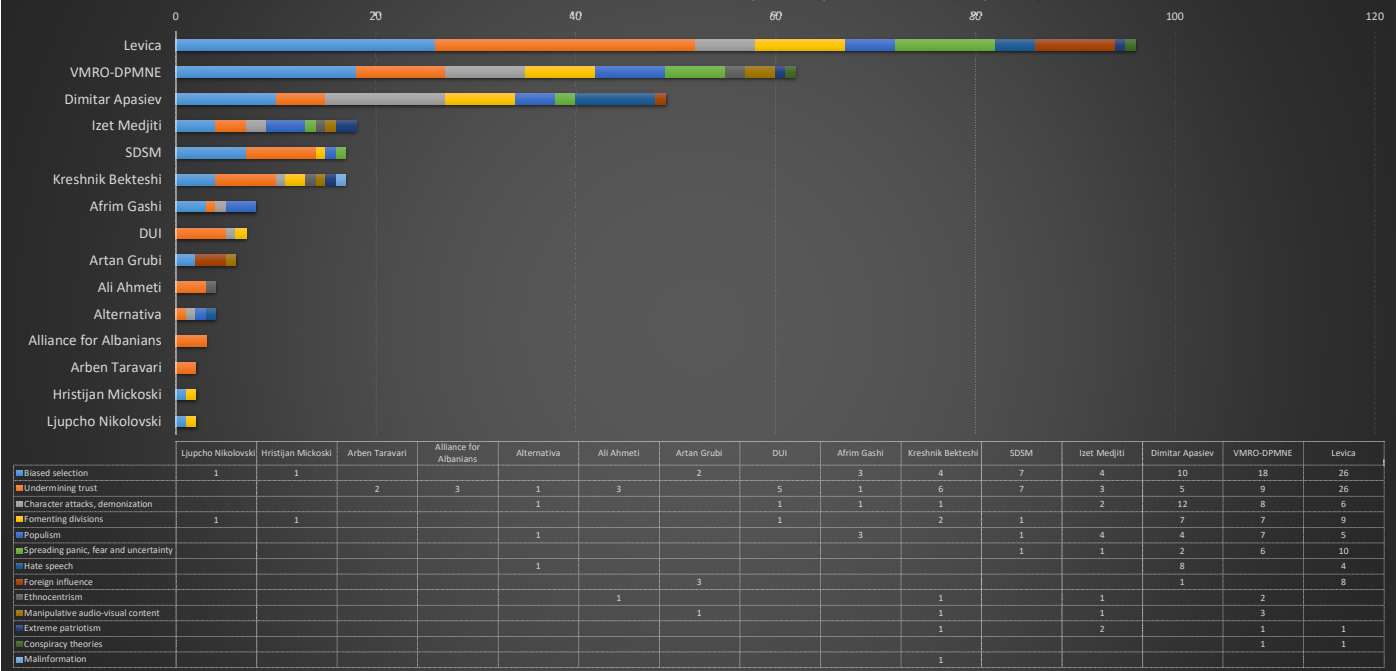
Table 2. Prevalence of posts with harmful narratives in the total number of posts on FB profiles of political actors (May 2024)



In view of the pre-election atmosphere, **the most common topic**, as in the previous months of the monitoring, was **the domestic politics**, this time reaching a record number of 100 out of 115 posts with harmful narratives, or 87 percent of the total number of identified harmful posts. Other topics dragging through the pre-election harmful rhetoric were crime and corruption, which were used for unsubstantiated attacks on the political opponents.

When it comes to the kinds of harmful narratives, the political actors, in addition to being the most biased in their selection, often undermined trust in the institutions by making unsubstantiated claims of corruption and abuse of office, and harshly attacking and labelling the political opponents. The SEC (State Election Commission) is a more frequently attacked institution in the post-election period, especially by the DUI and the European Front.

Table 3: Prevalence of harmful narratives in the posts of political actors (May 2024)



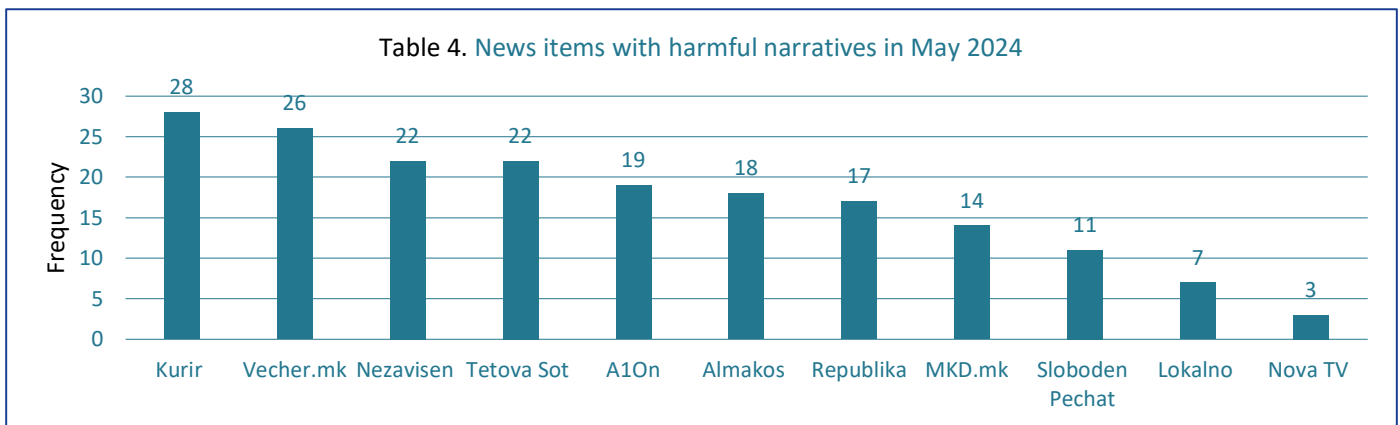
2. Monitoring of the media reporting on the political actors

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

Among the online media in May, 187 news items with sentences, paragraphs, phrases with negative rhetoric were noted, which is far less compared to the previous analysed month (April - 261 news items), but also compared to other analysed months during the nine-month monitoring with the exception of October, when the lowest number of news items with harmful narratives was determined (154 news items in total). It is remarkable that out of a total of eight days in May in which the posts on the online media were monitored, the news items with harmful narratives were the most represented precisely in the first two days of the monitoring (2 and 6 May with a total of 104 news items), when the election campaign was still in progress.

Frequency of Harmful Narratives in Online Media

The domestic politics was once again an indispensable topic in the reporting of the portals concerning the political actors (in 150 news items, or 80.2% of the analysed 187 news items), and even unique for a large part of them (Tetova Sot, Almakos, Sloboden Pechat, Nezavisen, MKD.mk). This topic was mostly 'processed' through short statements, expressed views, parts of speeches or interviews of the politicians or the political parties' press releases. It is a constant that had been followed by the monitoring for the entire past nine-month period.



However, the reduced total number of news items with harmful narratives did not affect their structure. The reported speeches of the politicians (71 news items) and party press releases (44 news items) continued to dominate the genre, which together with the reported Facebook statuses of the political entities and parts of their interviews for other media (14 news items) cover 2/3 (or 69%) of all analysed news items.

The political actors in the analysed news items

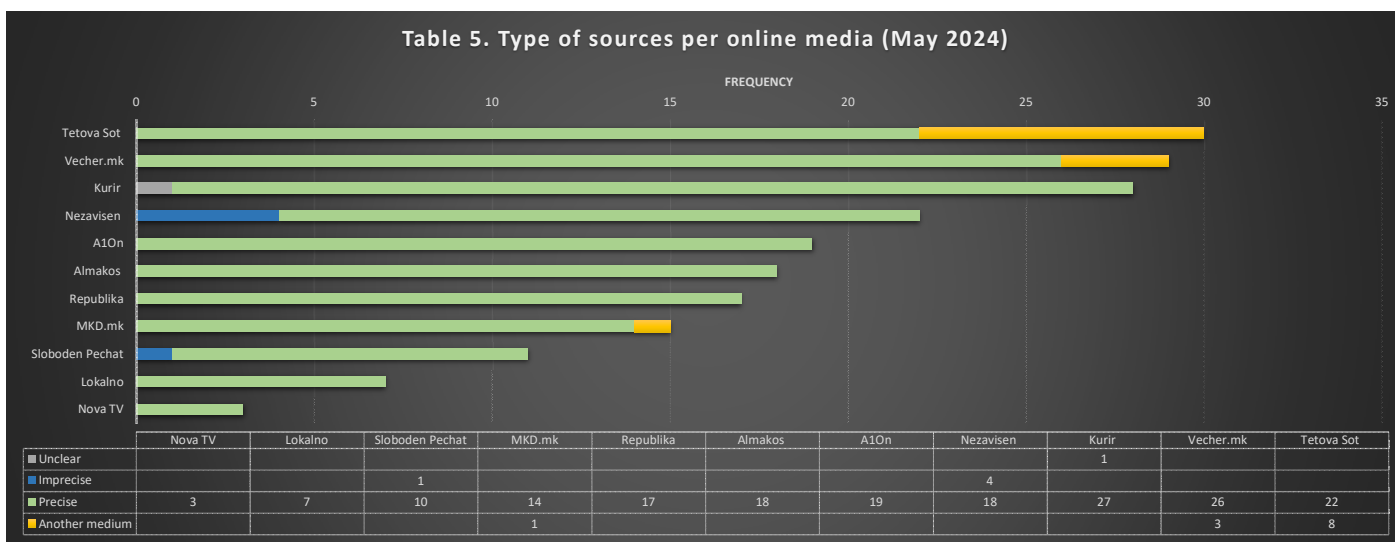
In the online media's reporting on the political entities, both in the previously monitored months and now, two (22.9%) or three (23.9%) entities were most often apostrophized, the collective actors, i.e., the political parties, and even then the individual ones, i.e. the politicians, dominated. At the top was the DUI (i.e., the

European Front), followed by the VMRO-DPMNE, the SDSM and the VREDI, while regarding the individuals, the president of the VMRO-DPMNE, Hristijan Mickoski, and the president of the DUI, Ali Ahmeti.

The media representation of the political actors differentiated from portal to portal, but directly related to the actors, i.e., whether they were individual or collective. The collective actors (the government, the political parties) were mostly discussed in the context of the topic, while the individual actors were usually quoted, and less often their statements, speeches, performances were paraphrased, or placed in the context of the topic.

Journalistic (un)professionalism

The image of the manner the online media ‘pack’ information/news items with harmful narratives and this month, as all previously monitored, had a standard format dominated by one-sided information, relying mostly on one source of information, consulting usually of one side of the story, absence of the author of the news items, unmarked visualization, everything contrary to the professional journalistic values and standards. In particular, in May, out of a total of 187 news items analysed, 173 news items were determined in which the portals rely on only one side in reporting the event or the problem. Examples of these were all the news items in Republika, A1On, Tetova Sot and MKD.mk, while in the rest, Kurir, Vecer.mk, Almakos, Nezavisen, Sloboden Pечат, incidentally one or two news items where two/more sides were presented, could be noticed.

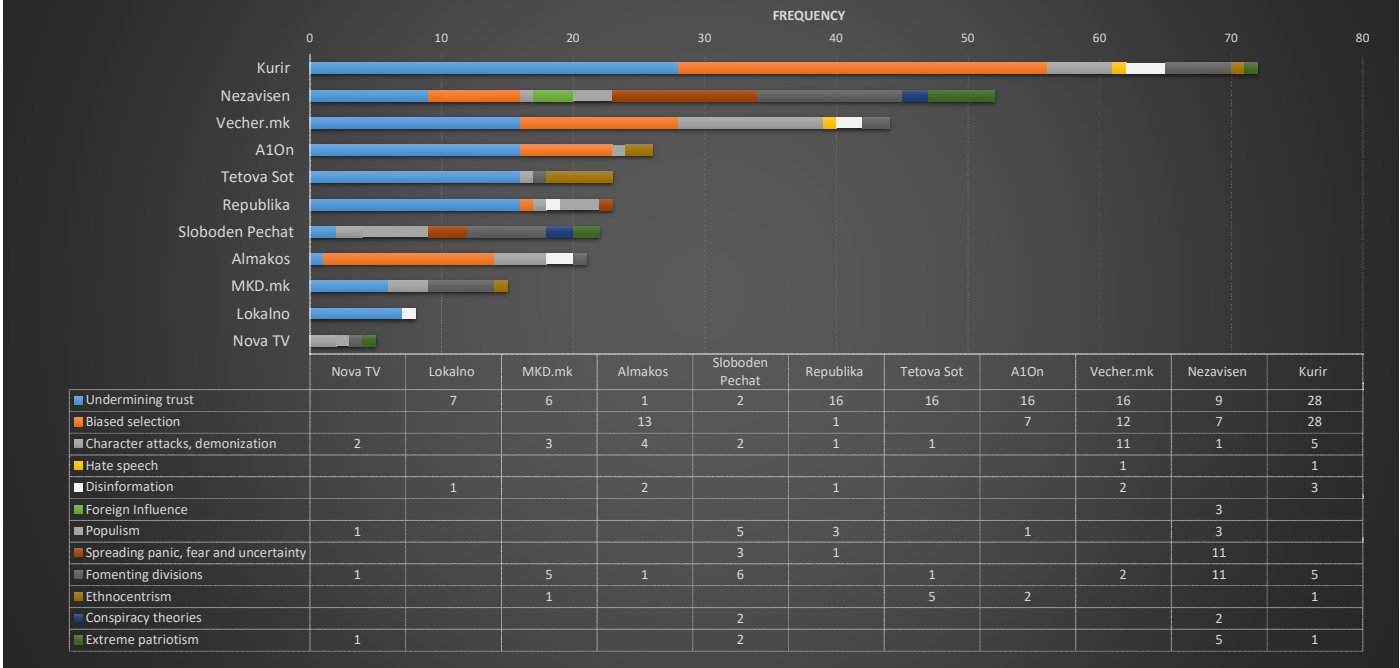


This is followed by the practice of the portals mostly relying on one source of information. Hence, there is repetition, out of the analysed 187 news items with harmful narratives, 167 were with one source of information (89.3%). In Republika and A1.on, all news items had only one source of information, while in other portals (mainly Vecer.mk, Kurir, Tetova Sot, Almakos, Nezavisen, MKD.mk) one or two news items with 2/ 3 and more sources could be noted.

Dominant harmful political narratives

The number of 187 news items with harmful narratives, i.e. 311 posts (words, phrases, paragraphs, sentences) whose main creators are the politicians and the political parties, is large in itself, though, seen in relation to the past monitored months, when there was a constant upward trend (reaching 261 news items with harmful narratives and 482 posts in April), is slowly relaxing the public information space. When it comes to the types of harmful narratives, the stories in May concentrated on the claims of corruption, non-transparency/ non-accountability, unprofessionalism, abuse of office without any attempt to substantiate them, as well as the accusations of the political opponents with unverified or hard-to-verify findings (128 cases).

Table 6. Prevalence of harmful narratives in the news items in online media in May 2024



The defamation (by means of words, phrases) of certain groups of people in order to foment divisions between ‘we’ and ‘you’ (33 cases), as well as labelling, ridicule and gross disrespect of other persons, the political opponents, the officials, the media workers, the civil activists (30 cases) are far behind them.

2.2. Monitoring report on the TV stations coverage for May 2024

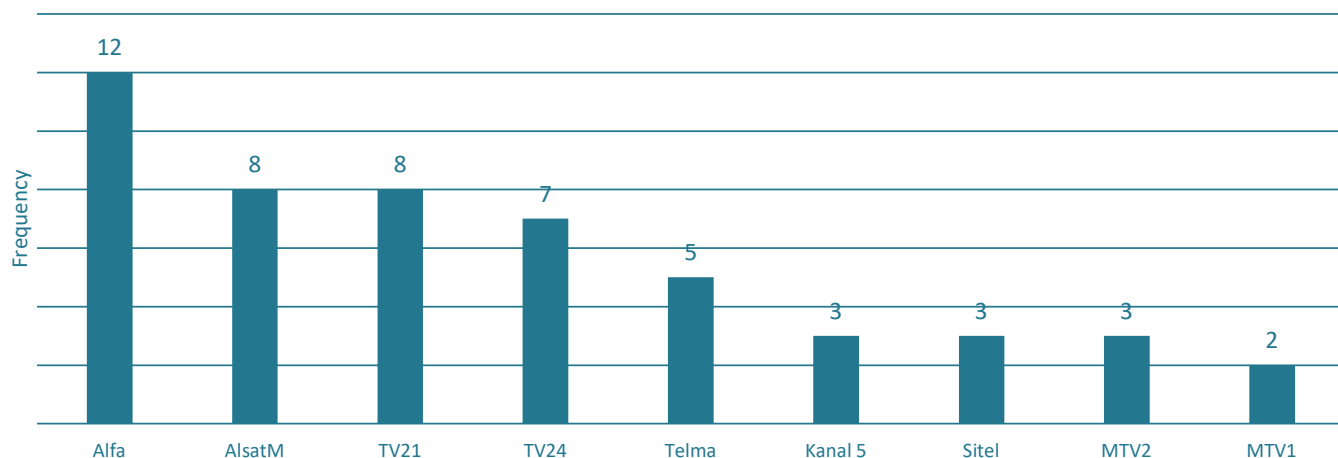
In May 2024, the last month of the HARM-TIVE research, the central news editions of 9 TV stations in the following 8 days (2, 6, 10, 14, 18, 22, 26 and 30 May) were analysed. During the analysis, a total of 51 news items or 6.3 news items per day were registered that contained one or more harmful narratives, which is the least since the beginning of the research until now.

The most common harmful narratives are undermining trust in institutions (29), biased selection (19) and fomenting divisions (13), and TV Alfa again leads with harmful narratives among television stations.

Frequency of harmful narratives among TV stations

The decreasing trend of the harmful narratives in the news editions on the TV stations continued in the last month of the research, when only 51 news item with harmful narratives or 6.3 items per day were registered. As stated in the April report, it is obvious that the clear legal framework covering the electronic media, as well as the monitoring carried out by several domestic and international organizations, affect the manner the TV stations inform and cover the elections.

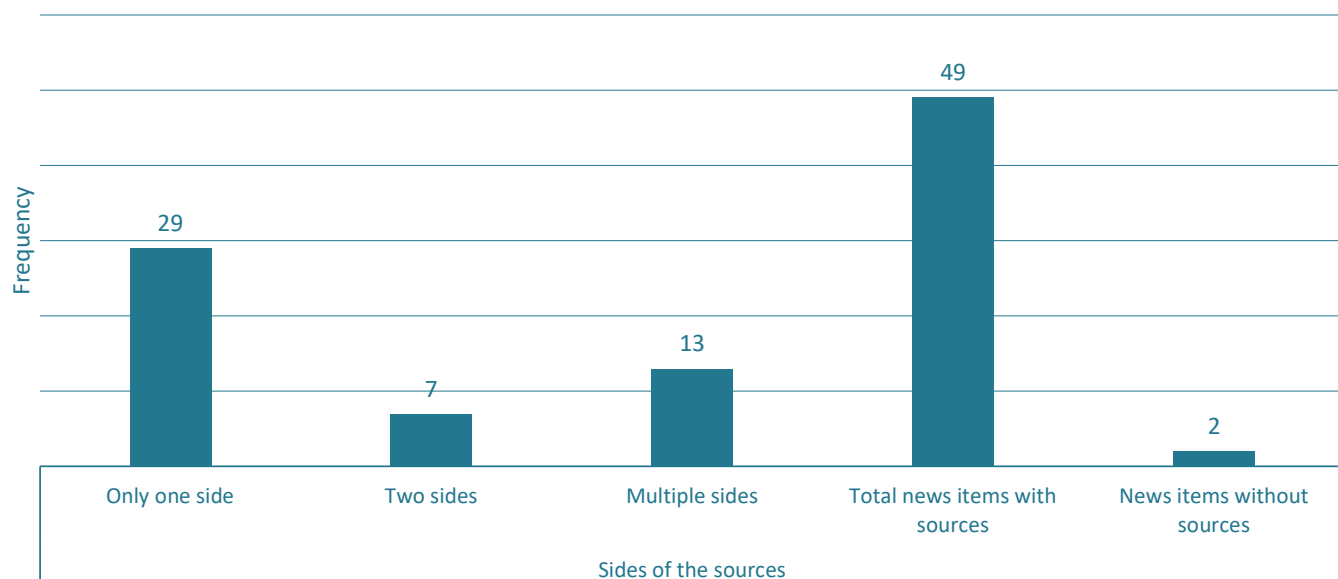
Table 7. Prevalence of news items that contain a harmful narrative according to TV stations in May 2024



The most posts with harmful narratives were registered on 6 May (14 or 27.5% of the total number of news items), which is not surprising considering that it was right before the election silence and before the second round of the parliamentary elections that took place on 8 May. When it comes to the topics of the news items, just as before, topics regarding the domestic politics dominate (46 or 90.2%), and only 2 topics were related to healthcare and economy, and 1 to corruption.

Regarding the sources of the news items with harmful narratives, the analysis showed that 22 (43.1) had only one source, 11 (21.6%) contained two sources, while 16 (or 31.4) had three or more sources. In the case of two news items, the sources cannot be distinguished at all. Most often the sources were clear and precise (48 or 94.1%), while only 3 (5.9%) were imprecise and 1 (2.0%) was unclear. The situation is similar when it comes to the sides in the news item, 29 had one side (or 56.9% of the news items), 7 (13.7%) had two sides and there were 13 news items with multiple sides (or 25.5%).

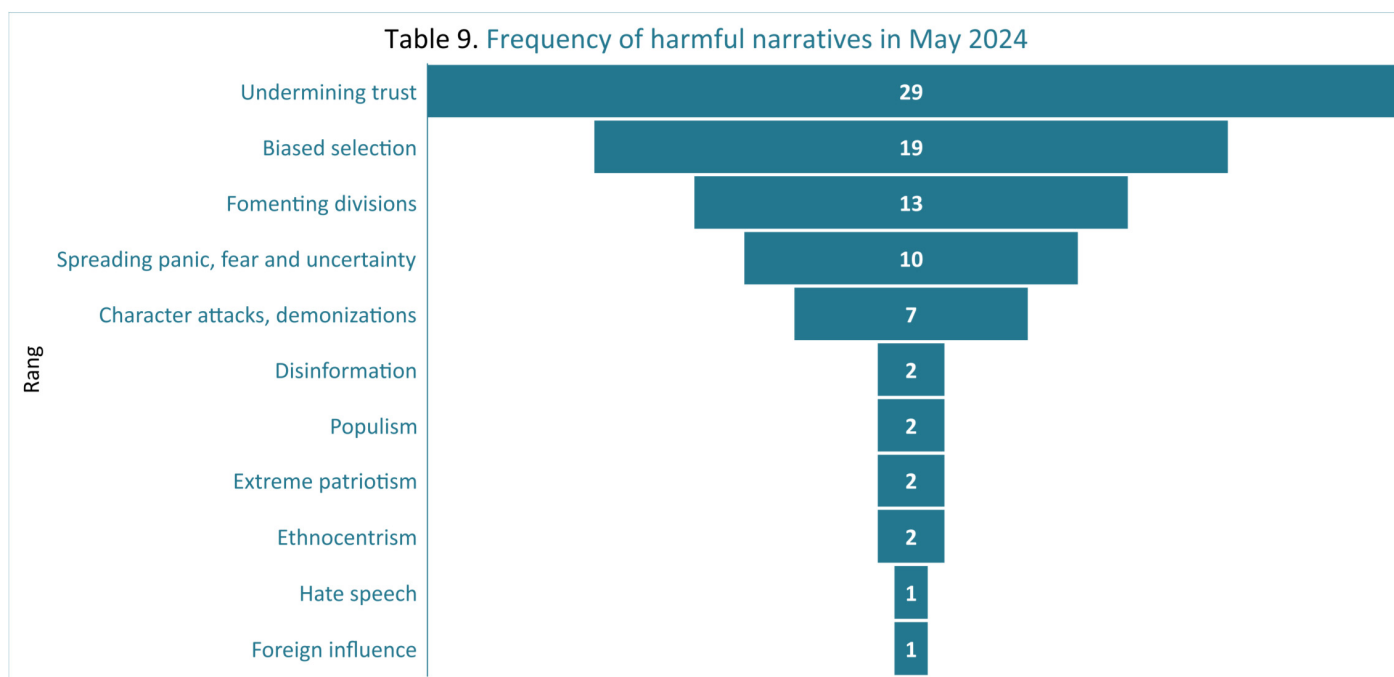
Table 8. Frequencies of representation on the side of the sources in the news items that have harmful narratives (May 2024)



Although one-sidedness is still a striking feature of the news items we analyse, we still observe a decrease in this context, especially compared to the previous month, April, when 35 news items (or 63.6% of the total number) were one-sided.

The most common harmful narratives

In May, 51 news items and a total of 88 harmful narratives were registered, i.e., 1.7 harmful narratives per news item. This month, the most common harmful narrative was undermining trust (29 cases), followed by biased selection (19). These two dominant harmful narratives were followed by fomenting division (13), spreading panic (10) and character attacks, i.e. demonization (7).



Such harmful narratives are the result of statements (more often) by the political actors or (less often) by the journalists which were used for accusation corruption, non-transparency, non-accountability, unprofessionalism, abuse of office, but without evidence and support for those claims (30 such cases or 49.2%), equally important statements that smeared a certain group of people in order to foment divisions and discords (16 or 26.2%), as well as statements with insults, labelling and demonization of the political opponent (7).



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
(May 2024)

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ШТЕТ-НА

