DETERMINING HARMFUL POLITICAL NARRATIVES

Institute of Communication Studies

ШТЕТ-НА

DOI: 10.64370/HMQW3388

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:
Associate Professor Zaneta Trajkoska, PhD

Edition:
ResPublica

Authors:
Associate Professor Zaneta Trajkoska, PhD
Prof. Eleonora Serafimovska, PhD
Aleksandra Temenugova
Prof. Vesna Shopar, PhD
Prof. Marijana Markovikj, PhD
Bojan Georgievski, LL.M
Mihajlo Lahtov, MA
Mila Stamenova Burns, M.Sc
Assistant Tea Koneska-Vasilevska, MA
Darko Malinovski
Vladimir Delov

Editor:
Associate Professor Zaneta Trajkoska, PhD

Language editorial:
Prof. Simona Gruevska-Madjoska, PhD

Translation from Macedonian into English:
Stanka Radeva-Stameska, MA

Original title:
Мерење на политички штетни наративи - ШТЕТ-НА

Graphic design:
Tatjana Koceva Spirova

Technical editing:
Dejan Joveski

Place and date:
Skopje, 2024

Content

Introduction 4

Methodological framework 5

1. 1. Monitoring of the communication practices and narratives of the political actors through their Internet and Facebook pages 9

1.1. Report on the monitoring the communication practices of the political actors for October 2023 10

1.1.1. Communication practices of the political parties and their leaders 10

1.1.2. Monitoring of the communication of the members of the Government of the RNM through the official Facebook pages - october 2023 24

1.2. Communication practices of the political parties and their leaders for September 2023 26

1.2.1. Monitoring of the communication of the members of the Government of the RNM through the official Facebook pages – September 2023 35

SUMMARY 37

2. Monitoring of media coverage on political actors 39

2.1. Report on the monitoring of internet media coverage on political actors 39

Report for October 2023 40

Report for September 2023 48

2.2. Report on the monitoring of TV stations' coverage of political actors 51

October 2023 51

September 2023 60

SUMMARY 63

Introduction

The narratives are an incredible variety of genres, carrying articulate language (spoken or written), fixed or moving images, gestures, and their mixture. The narration is present in myths, legends, fairy tales, stories, novels, epics, tragedies, dramas, comedies, comics, news, and conversations. It exists in every age, in every place, in every society, it begins with the history of mankind and nowhere and never have there been people without narration. The political narratives are a "story of their own kind", especially if they carry a value-negative connotation.

The term *political narrative* is a term used in the humanities and political sciences to describe the way in which storytelling can shape fact and impact on understandings of reality. (Shenhav, 2006). In this sense, the political narrative is not only a theoretical concept, it is also a tool employed by political figures in order to construct the perspectives of people within their environment and alter relationships between social groups and individuals (Graef et al., 2018). Hence, political narrative is impactful in its ability to elicit pathos, allowing the narrative to be influential through the value it provides rather than the truth that is told (Polletta & Callahan, 2017).

Defined in the most general terms, harmful political narratives refer to stories, ideas or messages promoted by individuals, groups or political entities that have negative consequences for society, democracy or the well-being of individuals. These narratives can manipulate the public opinion, sow division, and undermine the principles of informed, rational, and critical decision-making in the political sphere.

In Macedonia's deeply politically polarized environment, in which media and information literacy are not sufficiently developed, with divisive political rhetoric, an insufficiently regulated online space, the harmful narratives can seriously undermine the democratic processes. In the Macedonian information space, the influence of the harmful narratives can further weaken the institutions of the state, tighten the relations between the communities, and discredit the progressive processes. For a long time, the public has been faced with increasingly "polluted" communicative ecology, i.e., with disinformation, incorrect information, malicious information, propaganda, hate speech.

In the absence of in-depth research that will reveal the scope, sources, patterns, and elements of the harmful content and narratives, the purpose of this research is to offer comprehensive empirical material on the content, scope, and prevalence of the harmful narratives.

The research "Determining Political **Harm**ful Narra**tive**s" (HARM-TIVE) was 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 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.

The main research problem is the recognition and designation of the harmful political narratives in the public political communication of the political parties and the politicians with the public in Macedonia, as well as the method of media reporting on them, i.e., the method of their reporting and dissemination in the media sphere. The research starts from the **basic research question**: Are the harmful political narratives created and how are the harmful political narratives created and spread in Macedonia? The goal is to investigate whether and how the political actors in Macedonia create, share and use harmful narratives, as well as which and what is the role of the media in reporting these narratives, i.e., whether they apply professional and ethical journalistic values and standards.

The survey covers two segments

- Monitoring and analysis of the narratives created and shared by the political actors in Macedonia,
- Monitoring and analysis of media coverage of the political actors and the narratives they create and share.

A key variable in both segments of the analysis is the harmful narrative (link). Additional variables refer to the political actors and the political communication and to the media and media professional reporting.

While the analysis of the political parties and their leaders is focused on determining the dominant harmful narratives, rhetorical strategies and techniques, the media monitoring should give an answer to whether, on one hand, the media adhere to the professional and the ethical standards for accurate, fair and impartial reporting or, on the other hand, they unquestioningly follow the agenda dictated by the political actors.

The actors that are monitored and analysed within the research are taken into account because they are the creators of the dominant messages, the public discourse and the narrative, and it is that narrative that penetrates the media and through them it spreads to the entire public.

Methodological framework

The survey covers the time period from 1 September, 2023 to 31 July, 2024.

The levels of monitoring and analysis within the research include:

1. First (regular) level of analysis: following up – monitoring, control and analysis

– General periodic reports: general information from the overall monitoring is summarized every other month and presented in real time (while the research is in progress). As soon as the election campaign for the presidential and parliamentary elections in 2024 starts, monthly reports will be published.

Quantitative-qualitative content analysis, as well as (critical) discursive analysis, will be used for general periodic reports.

2. Second level of analysis

Within this level of analysis, ad hoc research is carried out on several topics that have proven to be extremely significant during the research period.

These are topics that were not foreseen throughout the year (predetermined topics), but they turn out to be very significant. During these ad hoc surveys, it is possible to apply additional data collection methods.

3. Third level of analysis: summary report

This level of analysis will be finalized with a monograph, i.e., a summary report of the entire 11-month research period. It will include an in-depth analysis and offer more data on the situation of harmful political narratives and the media coverage of them in Macedonia.

During the research, several methods and techniques are used, i.e. mixed methodology: quantitative-qualitative analysis through monitoring - observation, following up and analysis (based on pre-defined and established indicators) of the narratives of the political actors; critical discourse analysis – examining the language, rhetoric and framing strategies used by the political actors and the media in their communication materials, as well as the wider context; a case study of an event/s of particular importance for which the political parties create proven disinformation and/or harmful narratives. Also, special instruments were created for the purpose of the research (link).

Within the framework of the research, two types of parallel monitoring are carried out:

1. Monitoring of the communication practices of the political actors

The monitoring includes monitoring and analysis of the narratives on: (1) official websites and official Facebook pages/profiles of the political parties of the current parliamentary composition (2020-2024) that have more than one MP; and (2) the official Facebook pages/profiles of the presidents of the political parties and of the ministers of the current parliamentary composition with more than one MP. The subject of analysis are the posts of the political parties on their official websites and on their official Facebook pages/profiles, the posts of the leaders of the political parties on their official Facebook pages/profiles and the posts of the Prime Minister of the Government of the RNM, his deputies and the current ministers in the Government on their official Facebook pages/profiles. Monitoring is carried out every third and fourth day on all written narratives and visualizations.

The sample of the political parties includes the following entities: Alliance for Albanians, Alternativa, VMRO-DPMNE, Democratic Movement, Democratic Union for Integration (DUI), Levica, Liberal Democratic Party (LDP), New Social Democratic Party (NSDP), Social Democratic Union of Macedonia (SDSM), Socialist Party of Macedonia (SPM), i.e. their official websites, as well as the official Facebook pages/profiles of their leaders. The sample of the official Facebook pages/profiles of the ministers covers the current government composition, i.e. the Government of the RNM led by Dimitar Kovachevski, elected on 16 January, 2022[1]. Coalitions are not monitored as a separate political actor, unless the media content mentions some of the aforementioned actors.

1 Source: The Government of the RNM, link: https://vlada.mk/vlada-ministerstva (last accessed 20 December 2023).

As a basis for determining the harmful narratives propagated by the political actors, ICS was guided by a series of documents, guidelines and regulations of international and domestic institutions, internal acts of the political parties and ethical codes of conduct for appointed or elected persons, which determine the standards and the principles of non-discriminatory and transparent political communication [Joint Declaration on Freedom of Expression and Elections in the Digital Age 2020; 2021 Joint Declaration on Politicians and Public Servants and Freedom of Expression; Strengthened Code of Practice on Disinformation from 2022; Recommendation CM/Rec(2022)16 of the Committee of Ministers to Member States (Council of Europe); Code of Ethics for Civil Servants of the Government of the Republic of Macedonia; Code of conduct for SDSM officials and members [2]].

Hence, the standards to be followed in the political communication include that political actors have: an obligation to be transparent and accessible to the media; the obligation to represent the public interest in communication; obligation not to be a source and not to spread disinformation and unverified information; prohibition of using hate speech, prohibition of discriminatory speech and preservation of freedom of speech. For the purposes of the research, five principles were taken into account, the practice of which shall be monitored in the public communication of the political actors - political parties, as well as high party representatives, who are simultaneously appointed or elected persons: 1. principle of transparency; 2. principle of professionalism and impartiality in the communication of the government representatives; 3. principle of evidence-based communication; 4. principle of ethical communication; 5. principle of non-spreading of hate speech, discriminatory speech.

2. Monitoring of media reporting on the political actors

The monitoring includes monitoring and analysis of the media reporting on the narratives of the political entities on: (1) news editions (central, main news) of TV stations; and (2) news online media. The subject of the analysis by the TV stations are all news items in the central news in which the political parties (having two or more MPs in the current parliamentary composition), the leaders of these political parties, the Prime Minister of the Government of the RNM, the deputies of the Prime Minister and the ministers in the Government of the RNM (when they speak or are mentioned in the role of representatives of a political party). The monitoring is carried out every fourth day in the current month, by following the news from the beginning to the end and by selecting the news items in which at least one political actor is mentioned. The subject of the analysis in the online media is all information content in which at least one political actor is mentioned. Monitoring is performed every fourth day in the current month.

For monitoring the central news, the sample of public and private TV stations nationally and with the highest viewership [Data on the reach of the radio stations and the share in the total viewership of television stations (January-March); Data on the reach of the radio stations and the share in the total viewership of television stations (April-June)] consists of a total of 9 TV stations: 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), TV21 (private, in Albanian language). The online media sample (the selection criteria are: the readership, the editorial policy that refers to different political and social positions - using a method of purposive sampling, compliance with the membership criteria of the online portals in the Council of Media Ethics of Macedonia - CMEM and in the register of professional online media Promedia.mk, application in The Register of Broadcasters, Print Media and Electronic Media for Paid Political Advertising in the 2020 parliamentary elections) consists of a total of

2 From the desk analysis of political parties and their founding documents, strategies and various materials carried out in June 2023, only SDSM, of all the political parties of interest for the research, has a code of ethics and therefore it is taken into account in the context of this aspect of the research.

11 online media: Vecer.mk, Lokalno, Nezavisen, Sloboden pecat, A1on.mk, MKD.mk, Republika, Kurir, Almakos, Tetova sot, Nova TV.

All monitored online news media and TV stations registered and received compensation for paid political advertising in the last parliamentary elections in 2020, except MTV 1 and MTV 2, which are public service broadcaster.

As a basis for determining possible non-compliance with the professional standards, ICS in this research and in the media monitoring is conducted according to the valid regulations that regulate the work of the media (Article 16 of the Constitution of the RNM, the Law on Media, the Law on Audio and Audiovisual Media Services, the Law on Prevention And Protection Against Discrimination, the by-laws and the regulations of the Agency for Audio and Audiovisual Media Services), as well as according to the principles and guidelines of trade unions, media organizations and educational institutions: The Code of Journalists of Macedonia of the Association of Journalists of Macedonia; Guidelines for Ethical Reporting for Online Media (Application of the Code of Journalists in the Online Sphere) of the Council of Media Ethics of Macedonia; The values, professional standards and practices outlined in The Handbook of Public Interest Journalism of the Institute of Communication Studies; The Handbook for Journalists and Editors Recognise and Prevent: Journalistic Tools for Tackling Disinformation of the Institute of Communication Studies.

The following analysis is the first research report for September-October 2023.

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

The monitoring of the communication practices and narratives of the political parties is the first part of the research "Determining Political Harmful Narratives". It provides the primary quantitative and qualitative data on the manner in which the 10 political parties and members of the Government of the RNM communicate through their communication channels, namely their websites and official Facebook pages/profiles (of both the party and the leaders of the party). "Method of communication" means the most common communication practices and tools for communicating with the public (press conferences, press releases, politicians' speeches, posts on the social network Facebook, etc.). The second part of the monitoring is aimed at a critical discursive analysis of the language propagated by the politicians in the public discourse. In doing so, not only their speech and language in the narrower sense is analysed, but also the linguistic imprint they leave on social, cultural and communication processes. It is the "reality" constructed by the political actors against the established norms and standards for public communication (transparency; ethics; professionalism and impartiality in communication; communication based on evidence; nurturing the culture of speech and refraining from discriminatory speech). In the context of the research questions, the public political discourse is observed through the prism of the harmful narratives and the indicators that indicate their presence. Hence, the second part of the research is a subsequent process, i.e., the monitoring of the media reporting, which further investigates how these toxic narratives get their echo in the media environment.

This report contains the findings of the monitoring of the websites and Facebook pages of the 10 political parties and their leaders whose parties have at least two MPs in the 2020-2024 parliamentary composition: Alliance for Albanians, Alternativa, DUI, Democratic Movement, VMRO-DMPNE, Levica, LDP, NSDP, SDSM, SPM), as well as the 20 members of the Government of the RNM [3], observed in the period September-October 2023 (in reference to the selection of the sample and the methodological framework, see more on https://respublica.edu.mk/istrazhuvanje-shtetna/metodologija/).

The dynamics for monitoring the content of the political actors is "every consecutive third and fourth day of the month", i.e. days for monitoring are: 1, 4, 5, 8, 9, 12, 13, 16, 17, 20, 21, 24, 25, 28, 29 September (total 15 days), and 2, 3, 6, 7, 10, 11, 14, 15, 18, 19, 22, 23, 26, 27, 30 and 31 October (total 16 days).

The analysis below refers only to the communications of the above-mentioned political actors where harmful narratives have been identified (harmful narrative indicator/s). In order to avoid a double analysis of the quantitative data, in the case when political actors share the same posts on the Internet and on Facebook pages, the selection of the communication channel is applied in the monitoring, i.e., these same contents are analysed either from the posts on the Internet, or on Facebook pages. The monitoring does not analyse the audience comments shared on both communication channels.

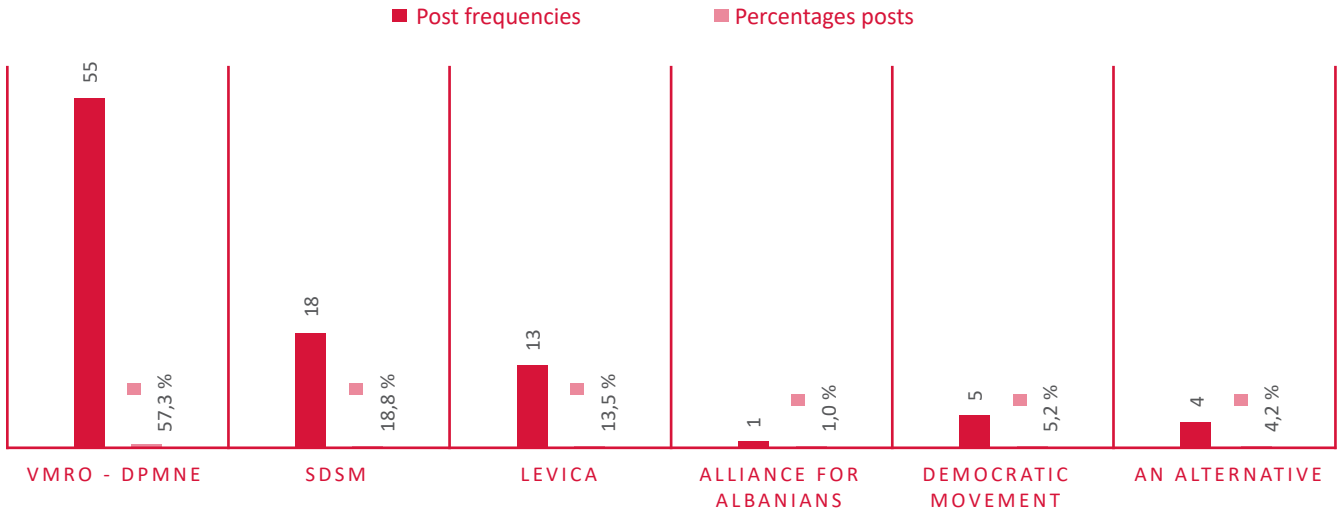
3 Government composition from January 16, 2022. Source: Government of the RNM, link: https://vlada.mk/vlada-ministerstva (last accessed 20 December 2023).

1.1. Report on the monitoring the communication practices of the political actors for October 2023

1.1.1. Communication practices of the political parties and their leaders

During October from monitoring the internet and Facebook pages of the political actors, a total of 136 posts with a harmful narrative were identified, of which 87 are on the parties' websites and a total of 49 posts on the Facebook profiles of the parties and the Government members.

Table 1: Representation of a website published with a harmful narrative by a political actor



In the monitored days, only four political parties (out of a total of 10) used harmful narratives in their communication through their website, and these are actually the largest and most active parties: the first is VMRO-DPMNE (55 posts), SDSM (18 posts), Levica (13 posts) and Alliance for Albanians (only 1 post).

Political actors with the most "harmful" Facebook posts are: Levica and the profile of the President Dimitar Apasiev (total of 19 posts), then VMRO-DPMNE and the profile of President Hristijan Mickoski (total of 12 posts), SDSM (5 posts), Democratic Movement and the profile of Izet Medziti (5 total), Alternativa (4 posts).

Regarding the Facebook communication of the Government Ministers, unlike their parent parties, they less often reach for harmful narratives. However, there have been sporadic cases where appointed officials have used access to the official communication channels of the institutions they manage for the promotion of party goals. Such harmful narratives were observed on the official Facebook profile of the Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Political System and Inter-Community Relations Artan Grubi, Minister of Justice Krenar Loga, Minister of Labour and Social Policy Jovanka Trenchevska, Minister of Culture Bisera Kostadinovska Stojchevska etc.

The analysis shows that the parties "produce" the most harmful narratives when they communicate through press releases, regardless of whether they are posted on the Internet or on a Facebook page (total (73), followed by press conferences (16), politicians' speeches (15) etc.

In party communication, the most harmful narratives are observed in the field of domestic politics (80 in total) and the economy (17). Specifically, regarding the domestic politics, the parties were most often blamed when it came to the topics of European integration, constitutional amendments, the Amnesty Law, amendments to the Criminal Code, upcoming elections and inter-party relations. Other topics that emerge in the communications of the parties this month are corruption, crime; especially allegations of crime in the business of games of chance, and in the area of the economy, the price policy and the rise of VAT, the scandal with the Oncology Clinic, etc. were discussed.

It is interesting that during October there are several dates with amplitudes of increased presence of harmful narratives. So, for example, on 18 and 19 October, the political actors (both from the Government and from the opposition) communicated on the topics of the Oncology Clinic scandal, the amendments to the Criminal Code, the constitutional amendments, and the following elections in the country emerged as a topic (25 posts in total). Almost the same topics were "inspiration" on 2 October (9 posts). Harmful narratives on this day can be seen in the communication of SDSM, which accuses VMRO-DPMNE of being an anti-Western party, and VMRO-DPMNE, which criticizes SDSM for the Amnesty Law. On the same day, the press conference of Alternativa is also observed, and the press conference of the spokesperson of VMRO-DPMNE, Naum Stoilkovski, both accusing the Deputy Prime Minister Artan Grubi of involvement and corruption with the business of games of chance, and the Levica party have harmful narratives in a statement about the Oncology Clinic.

Harmful narratives in the communication practices of the political parties

In the posts on the websites of the political parties, the harmful narratives are most prevalent in posting of unverified findings, which is observed in 78 or 89.7% of the posts, as well as claims of corruption, which are present in 67 posts of the posts. Similarly, in Facebook posts with a harmful narrative, claims of corruption (38 posts) and posting of unverified findings (37 posts) are the most common. Less represented (both on the Internet and on Facebook) in October are the promotion of one's own ideologies, labelling and ridicule, the deliberate failure to convey the full picture and words and formulations that denigrate a certain group.

Table 2: Representation of Indicators in Internet Posts

No.	Indicator	Frequencies	Percentages
1	Allegations of corruption, non-transparency/unaccountability, unprofessionalism, abuse of official position without attempting to substantiate those allegations	67	77 %
2	Unverified findings (or findings that are difficult to verify) are used as a basis for accusing political opponents	78	89,7 %
3	Misuse of information of a private nature or personal tragedies, disability, social status, marital status of one's political opponents to achieve one's own goal	0	0
4	Labelling, ridicule and grossly disrespecting other persons (media workers, civil activists, political opponents, public office holders...).	31	35,6 %

5	Speech that insults a certain group or justifies hate speech against a certain group, based on race, skin colour, origin, national or ethnic affiliation, sex, gender, sexual orientation, gender identity, belonging to a marginalized group, language, nationality, social background, education, religion or religious belief, political conviction, other beliefs, disability, age, family or marital status, property status, health status, personal capacity and social status or any other grounds.	0	0
6	Deliberately not conveying the full picture of the "event", deliberately omitting information that refutes the position of the one presenting it.	30	34,5 %
7	It is claimed to be true that political opponents/public institutions are manipulated by behind-the-scenes (secret) powerful groups (e.g. Freemasons, etc.) without presenting any facts or evidence, or using sources that lack any credibility or authority in the field.	0	0
8	Use of sentences, phrases that accuse a foreign entity (or entities) of interfering in the internal affairs of the state, contrary to the interests of the state, which, in fact, is a violation of the democratic processes.	3	3,4 %
9	Use of words and phrases that denigrate a certain group of people in order to cause division and discord between us/we/our and you/your. Usually we/our is good, positive and desirable and you/your is bad, negative and undesirable.	16	18,4 %
10	Use of words and phrases that insult, belittle, ridicule a person and/or group based on their gender and/or sex.	0	0
11	Use of words that insult, discredit, defame a group of people (foreigners) with the aim of causing fear, rejection and distancing from them, even causing certain behaviour towards that group.	2	2,3 %
12	Use of sentences, words, phrases that glorify one's own ethnicity and all others are less important, valuable, or worthy.	0	0
13	Images, videos, and audio recordings that are created to mislead the public into believing that something is real and true, but it is not (and can be proven false).	0	0
14	Words/sentences that explicitly or implicitly, directly or indirectly promote one's ideologies/activities/behaviours as something that benefits the people/the masses/the common "honest man", humanity... while the ideologies/activities/behaviours, the characteristics of political opponents are promoted as something that serves a certain small elite group of people, which does not reflect the will of the people.	42	48,3 %

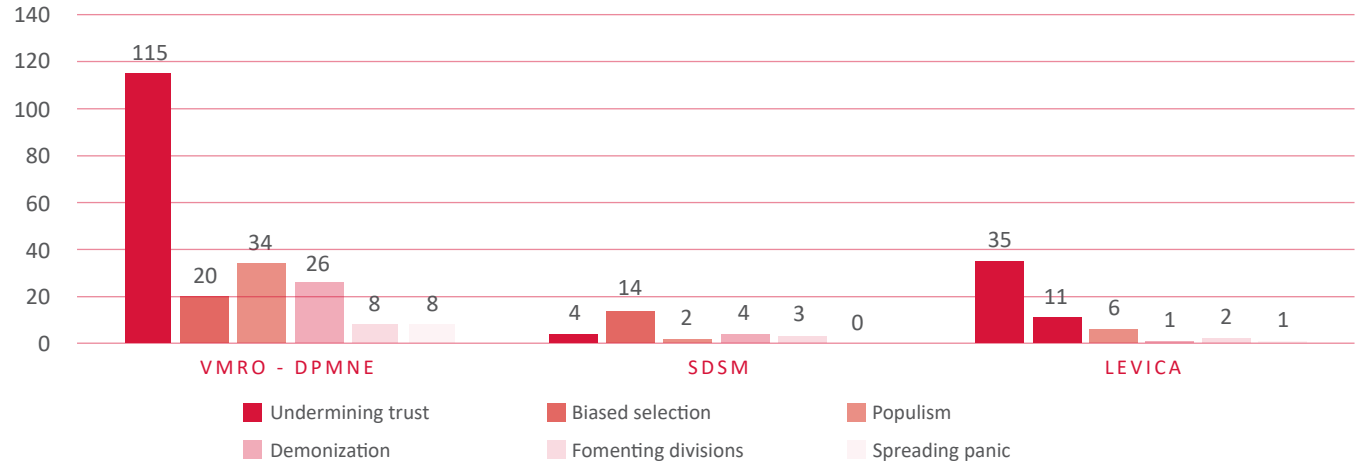
On the websites of the political parties, in almost all the posts of VMRO-DPMNE, SDSM and Levica, Indicator 2 is noted, i.e., unverified findings or findings that can hardly be verified, which are used as a basis for accusing political opponents. In all posts of the Levica and in almost all of VMRO-DPMNE, Indicator 1 is noted, i.e. claims of corruption, non-transparency/non-accountability, unprofessionalism, abuse of official position without an attempt to substantiate those claims. Additionally, in the only post with a harmful narrative identified by the Alliance for Albanians, only those two indicators were noted.

In the Facebook posts, the same two indicators are the most common among all political actors, but labelling, mockery and gross disrespect of other persons, deliberate failure to convey the full picture of the "event", deliberate omission of information that refutes the position of the one who to the one who says them and using words that explicitly or implicitly promote one's own ideologies/activities/behaviours as something that benefits the people and humanity, while the ideologies/activities/behaviours, characteristics of the political opponents are presented as something that does not reflect the will of the people.

In the Facebook posts, it is also noted that images, videos and audio recordings are used that are created in order to mislead the public that something is reality and true, but it is not (and whose falsity can be proven), in order to develop harmful narratives with manipulative audiovisual content, biased selection, character attacks and demonization, as well as spreading panic and fear.

From Table 3, which shows the representation of harmful narratives in the posts on the websites of political parties, VMRO-DPMNE, in its total of 55 posts, used narratives 115 times to undermine trust in the institutions without evidence, while 34 times it posted a populist narrative and less often it used the harmful narrative of demonization of political opponents and biased selection, moreover an attempt to incite divisions and spread fear and panic was also noted 8 times. Similarly, in its 13 posts, Levica mostly uses narratives aimed at undermining trust in the institutions (35 times), as well as biased selection of information when presenting information about certain situations and processes to the public (11 times). In addition, the Levica is also less likely to promote harmful narratives of populism, demonization, divisiveness and spreading panic. In the 18 posts on the website, SDSM the most often (14 times) uses narratives with selective presentation of data about an event that seems to confirm a position, while ignoring other data that refutes that position, and less often it posts narratives to undermine trust in the institutions, demonization, inciting divisions and populism, and once a narrative with the spread of panic and fear was also observed. In the Facebook posts of the political actors, the same trend is evident.

Table 3: Representation of the representation of harmful narratives in the posts of the political parties



The monitoring also provides an analysis of the attitude of the political actors towards the entities for whom the communication message is intended or they speak about them (variables are: negative, positive, neutral or ambivalent). In almost all posts with a harmful narrative, SDSM primarily speaks negatively about VMRO-DPMNE and the leader Mickoski, while it rarely speaks negatively about Levica. VMRO-DPMNE mostly speaks (negatively) about the Government and the Prime Minister and SDSM leader, Dimitar Kovachevski. Other actors who are negatively talked about in the VMRO-DPMNE communication are the parties SDSM and DUI (together). Similarly, the Levica party often talks negatively about the Government in its posts with a harmful narrative. In 1/3 of Levica's posts on Facebook, VMRO-DPMNE emerges as an actor, negatively evaluated. Alternativa and Democratic Movement speak negatively about DUI and its members and ministers. As expected, all parties in their posts with harmful narratives do not mention other actors they speak positively or neutrally about, nor do they quote or paraphrase actors.

In doing so, certain patterns were observed in the naming of other actors/entities. Thus, for example, SDSM uses – "DPMNE" without "VMRO", taking away the abbreviation for Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization, which suggests that the party has no historical connection with the first Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization; regarding Mickoski, it uses various comparisons with a pejorative connotation, such as "Little Gruevski". VMRO-DPMNE uses – "SDS" instead of "SDSM" (without the letter "M"), implying that they are not a Macedonian party or a party from Macedonia; it uses "Authority" instead of "Government" suggesting a totalitarian system where one institution, i.e. the Government represents the power in the country, although it is well known that the power is divided into executive, legislative and judicial. The Levica uses insulting names like "SDS" for SDSM, "DPMNE" for VMRO-DPMNE, "authority" as well as "SDS and DUI Authority" instead of Government.

On the other hand, when they represent themselves or their political party in the observed harmful posts on the Internet, the political actors present themselves differently. In 55.6% of the posts, SDSM has no visible intention of self-presentation, but in 7 out of 18 posts it presents itself as an EU-oriented party and less often as a saviour and defender of the people. VMRO-DPMNE is usually not presented in a certain light, but in about 30% of the posts they are still presented as saviours and defenders of the people and justice. The Levica, and the leader Dimitar Apasiev is presented in the largest number of posts as a saviour (in 7 to 13 posts), and less often as a defender of the people, representatives of the weaker, vulnerable groups, projecting a relationship of the so-called "anti-establishment" against some imagined high social class in society, and through the focus on social issues at the local level, it tries to present itself as a party that comes from and cares for the common man, and the Alliance for Albanians in the one noted harmful post presents itself as defender of justice.

The following is a detailed presentation and qualitative analysis of the monitoring of harmful narratives in the communications of each of the political parties and actors for the month of October.

Social Democratic Union of Macedonia - SDSM

Out of the total number of recorded harmful narratives of SDSM, 18 are from the party's website, while 7 posts were recorded on their Facebook page. The main and only topic that is represented in all the identified harmful narratives on the Internet and on the Facebook pages of the SDSM and the Ministers from this party are from the field of domestic politics, and specifically refer to the process of European integration (9), government-opposition relations (7), the upcoming elections in the country (1), criticism of the work of the Mayors from VMRO-DPMNE, etc.

Thus, compared to the harmful narratives observed on the websites of all monitored parties, SDSM takes up 34.5% of the harmful communication in the field of domestic politics. Only in 2 of the 18 posts there is a secondary topic noted, which is criticism of the local government.

In the 18 posts with harmful narratives on the website of SDSM, mostly (in 15) unverified findings (or findings that can hardly be verified) were presented, which are used as a basis for accusing political opponents , in 4 post labelling, mockery and gross disrespect of other persons have been observed; claims of corruption, non-transparency/non-accountability, unprofessionalism, abuse of official position without any attempt to substantiate those claims, as well as the use of words and formulations that denigrate oneself a certain group of people in order to cause division and discord have been observed 3 times; while in 2 posts explicitly or implicitly promote one's ideologies/activities/behaviours as something that benefits the people while the characteristics of the political opponents are something that serves a small group of people, which does not reflect the will of the people.

These indicators are mostly associated with the harmful narrative - biased selection (detected 14 times), while they are less associated with the harmful narratives of undermining trust (4), demonization (4), inciting divisions (3) and populism (2). Accordingly, for example, in the short press release posted on the website of SDSM, entitled "Little Gruevski - Mickoski, he doesn't know anything else except for blocking" (6 October), even the title implies claims of unverified findings, labelling and insults, intentional failure to convey the full picture. The political opponent is discredited not only by portraying it as a party that offers "only isolation", "uncertainty", "instability" and "blockade", but also by labelling and demonizing the person as for example the phrase used to describe the president of VMRO-DPMNE, Hristian Mickoski, calling him "Little Gruevski". At the same instant, through a favourable selection of facts by emphasizing only the positive aspects of the process of the country's accession to the EU and by omitting the arguments of the opposition (the non-acceptance of the constitutional amendments), the ruling party builds a narrative about the opposition party that it incites divisions because it is "anti-EU":

"By blocking the country's European path, (Hristian Mickoski) is continuing the policy of his predecessor, who kept the country in isolation for 11 years, outside the EU and NATO. Little Gruevski, instead of a European future and European values, higher salaries and pensions, access to the European market of 500 million inhabitants and European funds, offers the citizens instability and an uncertain future. Now that we have a historic chance for EU membership by 2030, the DPMNE blockades must be defeated." (Press release on SDSM website, 6 October)

The context of this particular press release is not clear, as it is a general attack and criticism of VMRO-DPMNE and President Mickoski, which is a frequent rhetoric since half of the posts on the internet are posts on this topic. Nonetheless, on the same day, a press release from VMRO-DPMNE was noticed which criticizes the SDSM government regarding measures that increase the price of certain products, and and the public discusses the topic of the increase in the cost of living, so the press release of SDSM can be interpreted as a counter - attack on VMRO-DPMNE and attempt to change the topic in the public discourse. [4]

With a similar trend of indicators and harmful narratives, out of a total of 5 posts with a harmful narrative on the SDSM Facebook page, unverified findings are noted once, while labelling, ridicule and gross disrespect of other people and use of negative words are noted 6 times. These indicators are linked to the harmful narrative of undermining trust and biased selection. The similarity is also due to the fact that Facebook posts are repeated information from the posts on the website, i.e., a press conference is posted on both channels (Internet and Facebook).

4 See posts from the same day 06.10.2023: Media press release on the subject of price increase:https://www.slobodnaevropa.mk/a/cenite-na-hranata-zdivea-od-merkite-na-vladata/32625962.html; Press release from the website of VMRO-DPMNE, 06.10.2023 "Shark fins became flour, cheese, cans, baby food, Kovachevski made all products more expensive to fill the budget for stealing" and press conference "Stojanoski: We call on the Government to convene a meeting and correct the list of products with increased VAT, all products that are part of daily use to return to 5%.

For example, at a press conference, posted on the party's Facebook page, titled "Hristijan Mickoski cannot justify his anti-EU and anti-Western policies", SDSM spokesperson and Member of Parliament, Kaevski adds to the often-used party rhetoric that VMRO-DPMNE is an anti-European party with policies that oppose the European integration of the country, and by inciting divisions, differences and disagreements between these two parties are attributed to the difference between the positive pro-EU SDSM and the negative anti-EU VMRO-DPMNE. Consequently, in their official party communication, SDSM violates the principles of professional and ethical communication, as well as communication based on evidence, using unverified findings as an argument for attacking the political opponent, thus deepening the social divisions of pro- and anti-EU: "DPMNE has not supported any decision on the Euro-Atlantic integration of the country. On the contrary, it did everything to block the country's European future. Under the hostages of the pro-Russian Levica, it organized protests against the European proposal, **hysterically spread lies** about Bulgarianization and assimilation... For 11 years, DPMNE kept the country isolated, outside the EU and NATO, and today it is the **main obstacle** of the European integration, "(Video post on the Facebook page from the press conference of Darko Kaevski – spokesperson and MP from SDSM, 2 October)

Also, in the identified SDSM posts with harmful narratives, there are several that criticize the local government run by VMRO-DPMNE personnel and in those criticisms, unverified findings and labelling are often used, thus developing a harmful narrative to undermine trust in these institutions. For example, at a press conference, on the occasion of the end of the half term of the Mayor's cabinet in the City of Skopje, the coordinator of the advisory group of the SDSM in the City of Skopje, Ljubica Jancheva, criticizes the functioning of this institution and uses formulations such as "...a new disaster is happening to Skopje due to the incompetent local government of DPMNE" and "... Citizens suffer due to the incompetence of DPMNE and Arsovska", which, as extremely negative labels, create a harmful narrative of undermining confidence in the ability of the local government to manage the City of Skopje. (Facebook post from press conference, 7 October).

In the posts on the website of the SDSM, VMRO-DPMNE is mentioned in almost all of them, i.e. 16 out of a total of 18 posts, i.e. they talk negatively about that party, while Mickoski is mentioned in 10 posts, and the Levica party in 4. Similarly on Facebook in the SDSM's posts, the other most frequent actors mentioned, and only with a negative evaluation, are the VMRO-DPMNE party and its leader Hristijan Mickoski, and less often the Levica party. When communicating about VMRO-DPMNE and Hristijan Mickoski, only part of the party's name is often used, i.e. "DPMNE", indicative of a deliberate omission of the "VMRO" part from the party's official name with the presumed intention of degradation, while the party's leader Hristijan Mickoski is usually named only by the last name "Mickoski", while in one Facebook post, an offensive name was noted – "little Gruevski".

On the other hand, the SDSM party, on the website, mentions its name in all posts, and although in 55.6% of the posts it does not show any particular intention to present itself in a certain light to the public, when it talks about itself, it mostly presents itself as EU-oriented party (in 7 of the posts or 38.9%), and less often as saviours and defenders of the people, and in one post transparency is mentioned as a key feature.

VMRO – DPMNE

The monitoring of the political party VMRO-DPMNE and its president Hristijan Mickoski shows that in terms of fields/topics, domestic politics dominates, and the focus are the economic issues, corruption in the ruling structures and allegations of crimes committed by them. Accusations against the governing structures for corrupt behaviour and tolerance of crime dominate, specifically regarding the amendments to the Criminal Code, the conclusion of the contract with the Bechtel and Enka consortium for the construction of the highways, as well as ragerding the increase in prices and inflation, i.e., the standard of living of the citizens.

The analysis showed that the party used different tools to communicate with the public. Press releases, press conferences, speeches and reactions take precedence. During this period, VMRO-DPMNE launched the campaign "It is important! Changes depend on you" and its (high-ranking) members sent political messages to the public and the media through a series of public events and debates.

In the posts of VMRO-DPMNE, they mostly talk about their own ideologies and activities, presenting their own party as the saviour, defender of the people: "When VMRO-DPMNE is strong, Macedonia is strong - with VMRO-DPMNE, Macedonia will have an economy, good political programmes", "the only supporting national pillar, and that is VMRO-DPMNE and the Coalition led by VMRO-DPMNE", "VMRO-DPMNE was and will always be with the farmer." Critical messages are mostly aimed at the Government, SDSM, DUI and Prime Minister Dimitar Kovachevski. The Government is often called "the authority", "SDS and DUI government", and the policies are "anti-national" and "anti-people". At the same time, SDSM is often referred to as "SDS", omitting the "M" which is an abbreviation for Macedonia, implying that this party is not related to Macedonia. The Government is also called "the Authority" and "SDS and DUI government". In most posts, the person delivering the message is the only source on which the information presented is based.

The most common harmful narratives that have been observed are the undermining of trust in institutions, by presenting the so-called allegations of corruption, non-transparency/non-accountability, unprofessionalism, abuse of official position without attempting to substantiate those claims. In a statement published on 31 October by VMRO-DPMNE, the work of the Mayor of Berovo is criticized, that there is no clean drinking water in the municipality, the projects have not been implemented and "due to the incapable and criminogenic nature of the SDS local government in Berovo, the electricity has been cut off at the filter station of the Public utility enterprise", there are allegations of corruption and abuse of official position, as well as biased selection, and it cannot be determined from the statement that "the criminogenic nature of the Government" is connected to the disconnected electricity at the filter station in Berovo and no data is given on the financial management of the Municipality.

In the speech of the president of VMRO-DPMNE on the occasion of 23 October, the Day of the Macedonian Revolutionary Struggle, he criticizes the ruling structure, using unverified allegations of corrupt activities of the authorities without supporting the allegations, with labelling and character attacks. For example "the judges from the notebooks have become their servants, but they just need to know, seeing their cunning, that they will not find a new embrace in the new VMRO-DPMNE government, but they too will face justice. They may sit crookedly, but they should have judged correctly. The shame and blame for every injustice lies with this Government, Mickoski pointed out," "this Government eliminates justice with injustice."

Biased selection, which can be an effective tool for undermining trust in the institutions, can lead to public confusion and the general public not being able to determine what is true and what is false information. In a press release posted by VMRO-DPMNE on 15 October, "The numbers of the IMF show that the SDS is leading the country into economic ruin with double-digit inflation and slow growth", the IMF's forecasts for 10% inflation for Macedonia for 2023 are stated, "and the SDS sees 5% with rose-coloured glasses. All three countries from our surroundings have economic growth that is 50% higher than Macedonia. The SDS press is like provoking and knowingly mocking the citizens, especially since by the end of the year we will have over half a million people living in poverty. With SDS, the economy not only stopped, but went backwards. The only one who is progressing is Kovachevski, Grubi and people like Kaevski, who at 30 years old and political activism have millions in their accounts and huge assets." In this example, apart from using the narrative that undermines trust in the institutions (economic government departments), there is also biased selection for displaying only negative economic indicators, where certain data are extracted that benefit the political entity in order to perform in a populist manner and make a point with its voters, at the expense of criticizing the political opponent. Whereby, the data is not put in a wider context, such as the information on which the estimates are based that by the end of the year half a million people will live on the edge of poverty, or that all countries in the region have 50%

growth. Such an approach carries the risk of creating a delusion among the public that there are no positive trends in the economy at all.

Populism, undermining trust in the institutions, character attacks and labelling are used in VMRO-DPMNE narratives often in the context of talking about the presidential and parliamentary elections to be held in 2024. The narrative used expresses self-confidence in the winning results that VMRO-DPMNE will have, and criticizes the political opponent for being timid or loser. In the statements of the leader of VMRO-DPMNE, there is a narrative such as "I understand that they say that one listens to Kovachevski in the Government, why neither the Ministers, nor the Deputy Prime Ministers, nor his party respect him» (speech by H. Mickoski on the occasion of 23 October), or "he runs away from duels, from debates, from journalists, he runs away from early elections, being a coward is a character and I understand them, they should not be ashamed of it, there are timid people who are cowards and that is a character that does not change at 47/8 years old. But we have to do this if we really care about the interests of the citizens and the development of Macedonia as a country" (statement by H. Mickoski on 26 October during a visit to the municipality of Gjorche Petrov), "there is not a date for elections because there are some strange macho tactics in the government partners, and on the other hand they pray to God that those elections will never happen because they are cowards in character" (statement by H. Mickoski in response to a journalist's question on 31 October when visiting the Municipality of Lozovo).

Although the narratives criticizing a political opponent are expected in a democratic society, the use of terms such as "macho tactics", "cowards", "ficus", "notebook judges", "servants" contribute to the wider use of offensive vocabulary in the public discourse, and with their frequent use after a long period, normalization is carried out, i.e., such offensive words become part of the public discourse, which reduces the culture of speech.

Populism, regardless of its different historical forms, is also interpreted here through its basic feature, which is the apotheosis of the people (lat. populus), its glorification, while at the same time minimizing or denying the political or social elite. The goal is political mobilization with a tendency to touch the sentiment of the broadest political audience, so the most common narratives are that the party is close to the people, knows the problems and offers solutions. Populism is present in the statements of VMRO-DPMNE and its leader, mostly in a discourse that promotes the party as the saviour of the problems that society has, as someone who has always worked for the people, as well as an entity that knows the needs of the people and that it is a part of the people, with promises for "all" the people. Examples are the formulations such as "SDS and DUI have the recipe for the destruction of a country, in the areas that VMRO-DPMNE built, but SDSM only destroys and steals" (statement by H. Mickoski during a visit to Shtip as part of the «It is important!» campaign on 14 October), the people should massively send the message to them in huge numbers in these elections - there is no messing around with the people. The people is stronger than any narrow clique and elite that messes with fate and takes away the future," "for every single person in Macedonia. For justice that will protect the people from injustice, where the judiciary and prosecutor's office will function. Where there will be fear of punishment and the law will apply to everyone. If a member of VMRO-DPMNE or another party commits a crime, they will be held accountable", "When VMRO-DPMNE is strong and Macedonia is strong, we should not lose hope, we know how to do it, Macedonia will have an economy, good policies programmes with VMRO-DPMNE," "stand with the honest people, stand with us. There is a place for everyone. We need unification and we need to defeat these anti-national and anti-people policies in Macedonia once and for all." Such a narrative contributes to the polarization of people with different political convictions, and they can also influence undecided voters by creating a broader narrative that the opposition is confident and can immediately go to the elections, while the ruling parties are calculating and unsure of their victory, so they are afraid of an electoral confrontation.

Democratic Union for Integration - DUI (Bashkimi Demokratik për Integrim – BDI)[5]

The Democratic Union for Integration (DUI) primarily communicates through the social network Facebook. The party's website is relatively "quiet" and only the "news" category is updated with the official activities of its officials. All content is in Albanian language, and the options for Macedonian and English language, although they exist, do not offer translation.

DUI's Facebook page is dominated by the daily activities of the Ministers Artan Grubi, Bujar Osmani, Arber Ademi, Jeton Shakjiri, Fatmir Besimi, parliament speaker Talat Djaferi and other officials from the lower echelons of the Government. Posts about the activities of party president Ali Ahmeti have also been noticed, but less often. The harmful narratives are present in reactions of the party to someone. For example, DUI posted on 12 October that "it is following with concern the media reports about flagrant abuses in the public procurement in the Municipality of Chair" accusing the local government of concluding two procurement contracts with a company with the same owner without specifying what the subject of the contract was. It is indicative that this is the only accusation directed at the local government, while this selective critical attitude can also be interpreted as party revanchism, given the fact that the current Mayor of Chair, Izet Medziti, left the party this year and formed a new Democratic Movement party which is part of the opposition Albanian block.

On 6 October in a post on the website of DUI the Law on Games of Chance is discussed and the opposition is accused of blocking legal solutions that will regulate this business and prevent crime and corruption: "Who defends the 15-year monopoly given to a Bulgarian-Serbian-Macedonian company for organization of gambling, whose 'reported' profit is an average of 15 million euros per year? Who from the Albanian opposition lobbied for amending the Law with an amendment in favour of the casinos? The law has been approved by the Government, we expect the deputies to support it immediately. The dislocation of the casinos and betting and the demonopolization of the industry are the policy and programme of the Democratic Union for Integration, but also of the Government, approved in the Assembly. We are determined to demonopolize every industry, especially the criminal monopolies of the coexistence between politics and undercover crime." On the one hand, with the obvious accusations of criminal involvement in the business of games of chance against certain opposition politicians, and on the other hand, presenting DUI as a party determined to demonopolize and decriminalize this industry, wording is actually being used that denigrates the opposition in order to cause division and discord between us/ours which is good and you/yours which is bad, thereby inciting divisions and uncertainty is being spread about the process of solving this current problem in the country. The same party statement was also posted on the Facebook profile of Deputy Prime Minister Artan Grubi, which is further problematic because a harmful political narrative is posted on an official government channel, which violates the Code of Ethics for Civil Servants and casts doubt on the professionalism and objectivity of public communications and the operation of the Government.

LEVICA

With an average of 3-4 posts per day, the Levica party is quite active on social networks through the party's Facebook page, which has the role of an aggregator for sharing news and messages from its branches across the country and from President Dimitar Apasiev. The topics that dominate the posts of the Levica and its president are from the domain of domestic politics, with the focus being mostly on issues of social policy, education, i.e. educational values and conditions in schools, the state's attitude towards sports, the health system, ecology topics and environment. There are also the topics of responsible management of the state,

5 This post with a harmful narrative was not included in the initial overall quantitative analysis (tabulations) because it was discovered in additional site monitoring.

i.e., the court processes for the wiretapping affair and the European integrations. The Levica's posts are mostly press releases for the public, and occasionally they are reactions and speeches of its office bearers.

The main actors in the posts of the Levica are the party itself, as well as its officials at the central and local level. The party presents itself as a saviour, defender of the people and people's interests and defenders of justice and law. Other actors to whom critical messages are most often directed are the Government, often named as "the smuggling coalition SDS and DUI" (a common adjective when criticizing the passing of laws with the European flag), "unpopular and treacherous", "the government of the combo SDS and DUI", "silver lovers", then SDSM - also called "SDS", Assembly (also called "sultanate"), Talat Djaferi, EU, competent institutions, judiciary. In the messages addressed to VMRO-DPMNE, this party is almost always named "DPMNE". In the posts pointing out the DUI and its officials, Levica uses qualifications that it is a party of "national-chauvinists". In the reactions to the opening of the Albanian class in a school in Veles, Levica as an actor points out the coalition trinity "DPMNE-DUI-SDS" which is a "criminal axis" and "quislin parties".

In a press release published by the Levica on their Facebook page on 29 September commenting on the state's position towards sports through its support for FC Vardar, using a narrative that undermines trust in the institutions, unverified allegations and biased selection are used in support of the concerns of the fan group "Komiti" which also sought support from the Municipalities of Skopje and the City of Skopje, and it is commented that "after today's press, it becomes clear that in addition to the Komiti, the management and all concerned fans in Skopje Vardar were also lied to" because the Mayors took pictures and did not give support, that "the clock is ticking twelve past five for the club with the most trophies in Macedonia." The main actors that are indicated are FC Vardar and the Mayors of Skopje Municipalities, and FC Vardar is shown as a symbol of the Macedonian identity. "If the goal was VARDAR as a Macedonian symbol to be destroyed systematically by this Government due to political pressures, the question arises as to how the largest number of Municipalities that are conditionally speaking from the opposite side and are under the baton of today's opposition are different." Through the use of unverified allegations, as well as the addition of an emotional charge for the Macedonian narrative in a narrative of support for a popular football club, it contributes to fuelling the emotions of the public and creating an image of reduced support of the state towards Macedonian symbols in society.

From the domain of domestic politics, more precisely from the area of responsible management, a post on the Levica's Facebook page dated October 10 can be mentioned which contains speech by the President of the Levica Dimitar Apasiev before the Committee on Rules of Procedure and Mandate-Immunity Issues on the amendments to the Rules of Procedure of the Assembly. The speech contains allegations of non-transparent, unaccountable and unprofessional work of the majority in the Assembly, abuse of official position and democracy, and generalizations, biased selection, labelling and populist tactics are used to portray the Levica as a defender of the people and people's interests, while the rest political parties as irresponsible and opponents of democracy. The narratives include examples such as "The discretion is next, which is why I said sultanate! Instead of deconcentrating the speaker, we give him even more powers" and "This is the paralysis of parliamentarism".

Simultaneously, the speech states the commitments of the Levica for changes in the work of the Assembly, without supporting them with information that some of those commitments cannot be regulated by the Rules of Procedure of the Assembly, but for some there are already existing provisions in the Constitution or in existing legal solutions that create confusion among the public. For example, the requirements to have a repercussion for an official who is elected by the Assembly if they do not appear for a report in the Assembly "We put a position where failure to respond to an invitation from the Assembly is a basis for dismissal, so let them knock their heads afterwards whether they will not come or whether they will come" , or the request of the President of the Country or the Government to convene the session of the Assembly "Why can't the President of the Country request to convene the Assembly?" Why can't the Government ask to convene an Assembly? Why 20 MPs, or if you do not want 20, why not maybe more, but when a part of the body asks to call a session, it is not some philosophy, it is not who knows what!" (Post by Dimitar

Apasiev, Facebook page, 10 October). By using strong, emotional language, expressing concern for the interests of the citizens, and at the same time without explaining the justification of the proposals they give to advance the work of the Assembly and a functional state, as they claim, they can cause confusion among the general public and made it impossible to provide adequate information to the citizens as well as a quality debate on topics that are important in the society, such as the placement and functioning of the institutions that are responsible for managing the state.

In a post from 17 October on the Levica's Facebook page a comment is given on the Macedonian European integrations, etc. the "Berlin Process" and allegations are made of undermining trust in the EU and its officials, as well as criticism of the domestic governing structures, accusing them of non-transparency, lack of education, unprofessionalism, and through biased selection, unsubstantiated allegations and labelling causes mistrust in the process of the European integration. The allegations include examples such as "the leaders of the Union, completely ignoring the basic rights and legitimate interests of the Macedonian people, do not guarantee full membership of the country in the European Union"; "externally, the EU's requests towards Macedonia for appeasement from the crucial national interest, which undermine the Macedonian identity and deny its separateness and sovereignty, and were carried out by the domestic quislings, did not bring the country closer to the Union. The additional requests for constitutional amendments through which the Bulgarianization of Macedonia will be realized, if they happen, also do not guarantee any progress in the integration process."

The use of narratives that present unverified allegations, unsubstantiated criticisms of the goals of European officials, as well as the reasons for the slow European integration, with the simultaneous use of emotional language, is a populist approach that can easily create an image among the public that European integration is process of making the so-called easy decisions of "likes or dislikes", and not that it is a complex process that contains a spectrum of political decisions made by the European institutions, as well as decisions and obligations by the Macedonian institutions. Moreover, the use of biased selection omits one of the key information that EU membership is a strategic goal of the country with high support from the citizens and that it is a membership for which the country applied alone.

DEMOCRATIC MOVEMENT - Lëvizja Demokratike

The Democratic Movement party is a relatively new political entity in Macedonia (founded by the former DUI official), so public communication mostly takes place through the Facebook posts of its leader, Izet Medziti, and Mayor of Chair municipality. As the leader of the party, and previously one of the initiators of the so-called "the Fiery ones (Ogneni)", a group of dissatisfied officials in DUI, he appears as the main bearer of the party's communication. In addition to his Facebook profile, significant activity has also been noted on the party's Facebook page. In October, 4 posts with a harmful narrative were recorded on the party's Facebook profile, mostly in the form of posts from press conferences, all in the field of domestic politics and current events, with a focus on justice, social policy and infrastructure, which are also visible from the titles of the harmful posts: "Government officials with salaries over 2,000 euros, and pensions for retirees are not even enough for medicine", "Today you saved Mijalkov, tomorrow you will save Gruevski, why are you silent now", "Artan Grubi should give an answer for the chaos on the Skopje-Blace road!"

These posts speak negatively and criticize the DUI party and the Ministers Grubi and Osmani, and use a series of unverified findings, claims of corruption, non-transparency/non-accountability, unprofessionalism, abuse of official position, labelling and disrespecting political opponents, and without offering evidence and additional facts, spreading disinformation narratives and demonizing the mentioned senior government officials, hence an attempt is made to undermine trust in the institutions of the country.

A major topic of harmful narratives published in October is the accusation against Artan Grubi of involvement in the business of games of chance, and that harmful narrative of demonizing Grubi as the main culprit for all harmful phenomena and illegal activities related to gambling develops throughout several posts. Facebook video post from a television interview on 12 October, where Medziti says: "While Albania and Kosovo have closed their casinos, Macedonia is turning into Las Vegas. It is already known that in the evening these casinos are filled with citizens of Albania and Kosovo. So Artan Grubi does not care how far the casinos will be from the schools, because he brought the gambling and the casinos into our homes.", as well as a Facebook video post of a party press conference by Fari Hiseni on 29 October titled "DUI is turning Visbegovo into Las Vegas". Attacks and demonization of Artan Grubi also occurs in posts on other topics, for example Facebook video post from a party press conference on 15 October about the Skopje-Blace motorway where it is said: "everything Grubi said is either manipulation or a lie and that has already been confirmed several times...".

On 22 October, a Facebook post was noted on the topic of economy, with a harmful narrative where in a reported party press release with a selective presentation of information and a chart with selected economic indicators it is claimed that "all economic indicators allude that the Government is managing the country in the worst possible way." (post by Izet Medziti, Facebook- page, 22 October), thus developing insecurity in the public and undermining trust in the institutions. Additionally, harmful narratives are observed in Medjeti and in several posts about the amendments to the Criminal Code: "Mijalkov released today, Gruevski tomorrow. Thanks DUI!" (Facebook page, Izet Medziti, 10 October). Similarly, on 20 October, a photo post was noticed, i.e. a message written on a portrait photo of Medziti that reads: "The SDSM-DUI Government has the time and will to pardon Gruevski and Mijalkov, but they are against our request to abolish the "20%"! These short messages allude to the conclusion that DUI and the Government of SDSM and DUI, with the amendments to the Criminal Code, have an interest in pardoning the former high officials Gruevski and Mijalkov, while they do not accept the request of the Albanian opposition block for the constitutional amendments requiring the replacement of the wording "20%" with the Albanian language. Such selective presentation of information and unfounded accusations creates a narrative of undermining trust in the institutions, especially among the ethnic Albanian population.

Alternativa - AlternAtivA

In October, a total of 4 posts with a harmful narrative were recorded on the Alternativa's Facebook page, and all of them are on topics from the field of domestic politics, and most of them are specific attacks on corruption and unprofessional work of DUI ministers. For example, on 27 October, a Facebook content from a press conference titled "Albanian opposition leaders united against DUI", and the same content is published on the Facebook pages of the Democratic Movement and the leader Izet Medziti, and a shorter part of the content is posted on Afrim Gashi's profile. This example also indicates the tendency of the three opposition Albanian parties Democratic Movement, Besa Movement and Alternativa to communicate together as a political coalition – "European Union for Change". The press conference refers to the topic of domestic politics, i.e., in the context of elections. DUI, SDSM and the Minister of Foreign Affairs Bujar Osmani are criticized and spoken negatively about at the press conference, while their party and coalition are presented as saviours, defenders of the people and justice and EU-oriented.

This Facebook post from a press conference notes unverified findings and claims of corruption, non-transparency/non-accountability, unprofessionalism, abuse of official position, "From the information we have, Bujar Osmani tried to abuse the chairmanship of the OSCE to influence the decision on the number of observers of the electoral process. We make it clear that we know exactly what they are willing to do to try to protect their ill-gotten wealth." (Facebook post from press conference, Afrim Gashi, 27 October)

Furthermore, one can observe labelling, ridicule and gross disrespect of political opponents leading to character attacks and demonization, for example «The Government coalition on the issue of the elections behaves like a spoiled child, who thinks that if the ball is temporarily in their hands they can condition it. This attempt by DUI to manipulate the opinion that Gruevski will bring us EU values from Budapest is unprecedented hypocrisy." (Facebook post from a press conference, Afrim Gashi, 27 October). By means of this rhetoric, Alternativa also creates narratives of biased selection of information and dissemination of disinformation, which contributes to serious undermining trust in the institutions that are managed by the political opponents of this party.

Via similar harmful communication, in the Facebook post from the reactive press conference from 26 October, titled "DUI lies REALLY HAVE SHORT LEGS", which criticizes DUI officials for the not opened school in Vizbegovo and the delay of textbooks, and where the same harmful narratives of undermining trust in the institutions and demonizing the person are noted in the title ("Minister Shakjiri is powerless to do something specifically, so he finds support to "save his head" in the fraud,... when the lie is concocted by Artan Grubi and those he controls, its legs are short indeed " (Facebook post from a press conference, 26 October), thus Alternativa in its public communication violates the principles of evidence-based communication and professionalism and ethics.

Alliance for Albanians - Aleancës për Shqiptarët - AA

A post was identified by the Alliance for Albanians party with a harmful narrative on the party's website, which was also published on the party's Facebook page and on the profile of AA leader Arben Taravari.

It is about the publication of an audiovisual recording from a press conference on 26 October titled "Arsovska is degrading education, appointing inappropriate principals and breaking the law" where the topic is education, more precisely the reaction to the change of principals in secondary schools in Skopje.

Other actors who are mentioned at the press conference besides the Alliance for Albanians represented by the abbreviation AA, and the main actor who is criticized - the Mayor of the City of Skopje, Danela Arsovska, are mentioned, but in a neutral tone, and the Ministry of Education and Science and the Public Prosecutor's Office. In this press release, the party presents itself as a defender of justice.

Unverified findings are noted in the views and messages presented at the press conference, which are used as a basis for accusing political opponents, in the case of Mayor Arsovska, such as, "Arsovska's political compromises sometimes with the Levica sometimes with the right, the lack of consistency, the obvious violations cause enormous harm to our youth and society in general." Although there is no support for the views expressed that Arsovska lacks consistency and commits violations, they are still used as arguments to conclude that by doing so, she is causing enormous harm to young people and society. Moreover, unsubstantiated claims of corruption, non-transparency/non-accountability, unprofessionalism, and abuse of official duty have also been noted, such as "The silence of the competent institutions is a crime. Criminals are all those who remain silent and do not act according to the Law." (Post of a video from a press conference on the AA website, 26 October)

Thus, the press conference develops a narrative of undermining trust in the City of Skopje institution and selectively presents data on the change of principals in the secondary schools, in order to state to the public that the process was carried out in an unprofessional, illegal and biased manner. That being so, with these harmful narratives, an attempt is made to undermine trust in the City of Skopje institution and the ability and professionalism of Mayor Arsovska, while violating the principles of evidence-based, professional and ethical communication.

Liberal Democratic Party - LDP

The Liberal-Democratic Party is a smaller coalition partner in the Government and most often expresses its views on policies and current developments in the country through the joint coalition view, or additionally in support of the Government. The president Monika Zajkova has had occasional media appearances through interviews, statements in the Assembly, while there are less frequent posts of the party. In general, the LDP has a weak media activity, and also the media does not devote significant space to its activities.

In the month of October, one Facebook post with a harmful narrative was noticed by the LDP party. Namely, on 6 October, an interview of Monika Zajkova was published on the party's profile regarding the domestic online media Frontline, where she talks about the country's European integration. In the fragments of the interview, unverified findings and formulations that denigrate a certain group of people in order to cause divisions and discords between us/our and you/yours and populist formulations that promote one's own ideology are noted. For example, in the quote: "When you see that we are blocking ourselves from the inside, these kinds of things are somehow differentiated, aren't they, as you call them the European front, or a front that is against Europe" a finding is made that we are blocking ourselves from the inside, which can hardly be checked or proved, and by "differentiating such" and "front against Europe" a polarizing narrative is developed in which the division of political fronts is promoted, the division of these and those, pro- and anti-EU, i.e. good and bad. Furthermore, "I don't believe that they are also against Europe, and therefore I don't know for what reasons the whole process is being held up, because winning daily-political points at the expense of state interests is a very bad game", unverified statements are presented again and the "other side" is groundlessly accused of violating state interests for personal purposes, labelling the policy of the "others" as "bad game". (Post on Facebook profile of LDP, 6 October)

The posting of these specific quotes from Zajkova's interview is followed by a visual featuring a photo of Zajkova and a quote promoting LDP's ideology as something that benefits all citizens, thus reinforcing the populist narrative in this post.

1.1.2. Monitoring of the communication of the members of the Government of the RNM through the official Facebook pages - october 2023

The analysis of the political communication of the members of the Government of the RNM includes their communication practices through the official Government Facebook channels. The focus of the analysis is not directed to the monitoring of information about the regular official activities of the Prime Minister, his deputies and line ministers, but only in the case when the appointed officials use these institutional channels for party promotion, for spreading harmful narratives or the principles of public communication of elected or appointed officials are violated (regarding the principles and standards of professional public communication, see Methodological framework on https://respublica.edu.mk/istrazhuvanje-shtetna/shtetni-narativi-i-indikatori/standardi-i-nachela-za-politichkata-komunikacija/) Hence, it is immediately observed whether the members of the Government comply with Code of Ethics for Civil Servants according to which they should perform their work tasks in a politically neutral way, not to represent their political beliefs in the performance of work tasks, nor to carry out political activities that can affect the confidence of citizens in their ability to perform work tasks in an impartial manner way.

The politicians who are elected and appointed officials, in addition to their party communication channels, also have access to the official communication channels of the institutions they manage. Therefore, they should use government communication channels to inform about Government policies, decisions and measures, in order to ensure a clear distinction between the work of institutions and political parties, i.e., there should be no abuse of government communication channels for the promotion of party goals.

During the monitoring, the Facebook pages of the 20 members of the Government of the RNM are monitored: Dimitar Kovachevski, President of the Government of the RNM, Artan Grubi, First Deputy of the President of the Government and Minister of Political System and Inter-Community Relations, Fatmir Bitichi, Deputy of the Prime Minister in charge of economic affairs, coordination of economic sectors and investments, Bojan Marichikj, Deputy Prime Minister in charge of European affairs, Slavica Grkovska, Deputy Prime Minister in charge of Good Governance Policies, Oliver Spasovski, Minister of Internal Affairs, Kreshnik Bekteshi, Minister of Economy, Risto Penov, Minister of Local Self-Government, Bujar Osmani, Minister of Foreign Affairs, Fatmir Besimi, Minister of Finance, Blagoj Bochvarski, Minister of Transport and Communications, Ljupco Nikolovski, Minister of Agriculture, Forestry and Water Economy, Slavjanka Petrovska, Minister of Defense, Jeton Shakjiri, Minister of Education and Science, Jovanka Trenchevska, Minister of Labour and Social Policy, Bisera Kostadinovska Stojchevska, Minister of Culture, Kaja Shukova, Minister of Environment and Physical Planning, Azir Aliu, Minister of Information Society and Administration, Fatmir Medziti, Minister of Health, Krenar Loga, Minister of Justice.

The general conclusion from the analysis of government ministers' communication through official Facebook pages is that the majority of Ministers do not use harmful narratives, but the presence of posts in which the Ministers share party information is notable. October is a less "politically active month" in contrast to September, where some of the Ministers more often published content with a party background.

One case has also been noted where a line minister does not use a Facebook page at all as a line minister. Such is the case with the Minister of Local Self-Government, Risto Penov.

On the Facebook pages of the Prime Minister and the Ministries managed by SDSM members (Dimitar Kovachevski, Bojan Marichikj, Slavica Grkovska, Oliver Spasovski and Kaja Shukova) no harmful narratives have been observed. Abuse of the official institutional Facebook page for the promotion of party activities and policies has been observed among some public officials.

In October, several harmful narratives were observed in the Facebook communication of Government Ministers. In press release by the Minister of Culture, Bisera K. Stojchevska with points and photos from her presentation at the SDSM tribune with a harmful narrative, a biased selection of information is carried out, populist rhetoric is developed and divisions are incited, thereby abusing the official ministerial page for biased party communication: «#SDSM also brought order in the field of culture, today it is available to everyone equally. Gone are the days when the salaries of cultural workers are increased by telephone, arbitrarily and how and what kind profiles were promoted." (Facebook post on the profile of Minister Stojchevska, 9 October). In this case, the Code of Ethics for Civil Servants, the principle of professionalism, ethics and impartiality in the communication of government representatives is violated, with the direct promotion of the party on the Minister's official communication channel, as well as with attacks on political opponents.

A post with a harmful narrative was noted on the Facebook page of the Minister of Labour and Social Policy, Jovanka Trenchevska, which contains two photos and several points from her guest appearance on the show "24 Analysis" on Television 24 on 2 October regarding the increase in pensions according to the new methodology and the alignment that is carried out twice a year. The press release contains claims that promote the party's own ideologies and activities as something that benefits the people, while the characteristics of the political opponents are promoted as something that does not reflect the will of the people: "This Government passes systemic solutions. If the Government led by VMRO DPMNE instead of populist measures and styrofoam invested in a methodology, today we would be talking about a minimum pension of 25,000 denars", and then continues with several points that promote the social policies of the Government. (Facebook post on the profile of Minister Trenchevska, 2 October)

Accordingly, Trenchevska creates a harmful narrative of biased data selection that leads to wrong conclusions and populism. More importantly, by using the official Facebook page of the Minister of Labour and Social Policy to publish such harmful narratives, the standards of communication of public officials and civil servants are violated, as well as the principle of professionalism and impartiality in the communication of Government representatives, the principle of evidence-based communication and the principle of ethical communication.

The Facebook page of the Minister of Justice Krenar Loga is used equally for official information from the Ministry of Justice and for party communication. In a post dated 20 October, the Minister Loga reposts content from fellow party member of the Alliance for Albanians, Arben Zekiri, which has a negative connotation for the leader of the Democratic Movement, Izet Medziti, generalizing that "Izet and DUI are one and the same", or in post dated 2 October where he critically addresses the leader of the Levica Dimitar Apasiev: «Leftists , explain to Comrade Apasiev that the real fire of anti-fascists is among ordinary liberators, not in the graves of dictators." In a post on 5 October harmful narratives are contained also, [6] addressed to the president of VMRO-DPMNE, Hristijan Mickoski, for the Amnesty Law. Words/sentences are used that implicitly promote himself and the Ministry as "transparent", "cooperative" and "EU-oriented", while Mickoski is presented as an anti-EU politician who "blocks the perspective of his people and his country". Negative qualifications are used in the post uses about Mickoski, such as "he does not have an adequate vision for a political leader", "he speaks words in vain", "a leader without political hope, without international friends, a leader who has not dissociated himself from Gruevski's political legacy", thus from a position of the Minister of Justice he develops a demonizing narrative towards the leader of the opposition VMRO-DPMNE that he is not competent and uninterested in the country's European perspective. The reposted video from the speech in the Assembly of his party member Halil Snopce contains another harmful narrative, in which he criticizes the opposition regarding the Law on Games of Chance using metonymies: "The duplicity of the opposition regarding the Law on Games of Chance has been unmasked. You are two-faced and doing politics! You are only performing a show. You are blocking the law! VMRO is blocking the Law!" In addition to the fact that this press release contains biased information that may lead the public to wrong conclusions, it is problematic that such a party communication is published by a political actor who also speaks on behalf of the Minister of Justice and the Ministry of Justice, which, according to the Government's Code of Ethics, should refrain from presenting unargued and subjective criticisms towards political opponents.

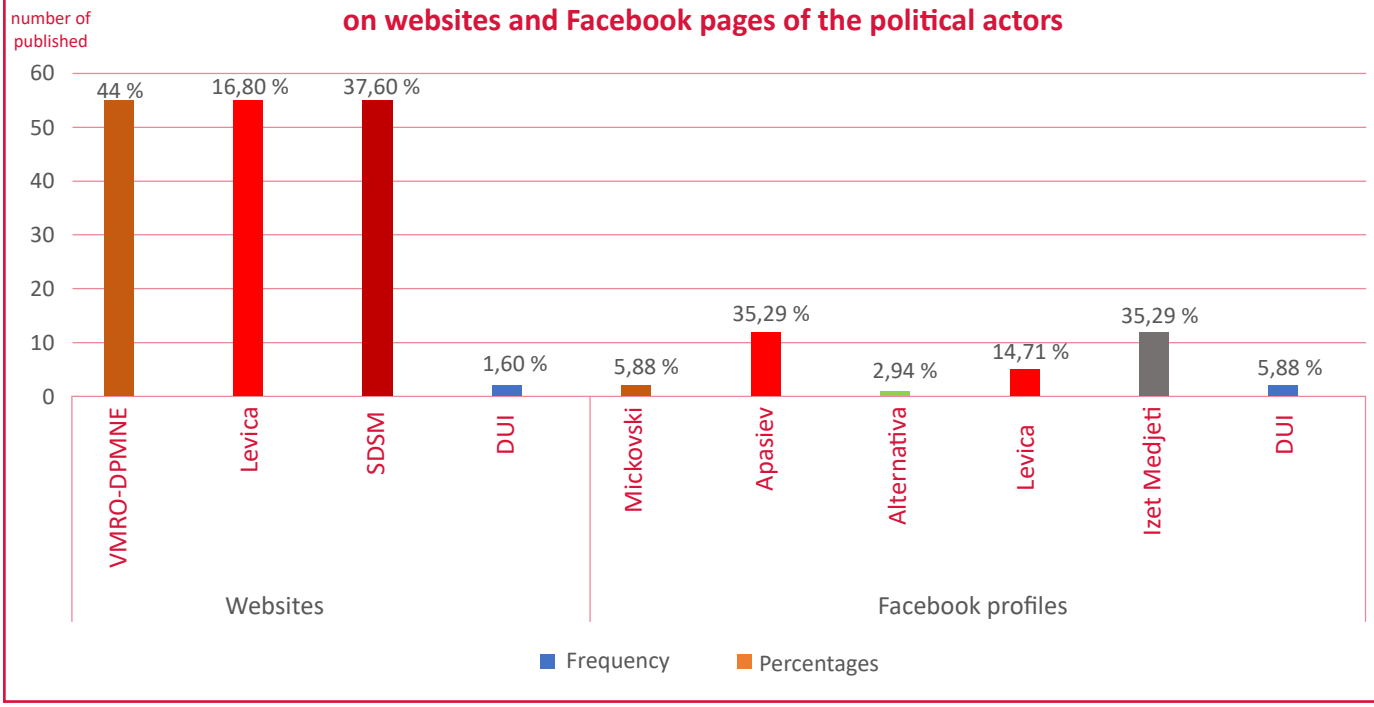
The politicians who are elected and appointed officials, apart from the party communication channels, also have access to the official communication channels of the institutions they manage. Hence, they should use Government communication channels to inform all citizens about the Government policies, decisions and measures, ensuring a clear distinction between the work of institutions and political parties, i.e., that there is no abuse of Government communication channels for the promotion of party goals.

1.2. Communication practices of the political parties and their leaders for September 2023

In September, a total of 143 posts (Internet 123 and Facebook 20) containing a harmful narrative were identified on the websites of the political parties and their Facebook pages. Almost half of the posts with harmful narratives on the websites are from VMRO-DPMNE and SDSM, and less from the Levica, while on Facebook the most posts with harmful narratives can be seen on the profiles of the leader of the Levica, Dimitar Apasiev, and the Levica party. Much less were observed on the profile of the leader of VMRO-DPMNE, Hristijan Mickoski (2), and one on the profile of the Alternativa party.

6 These posts with harmful narratives are not included in the initial overall quantitative analysis (tabular representations) because they were detected in additional site monitoring.

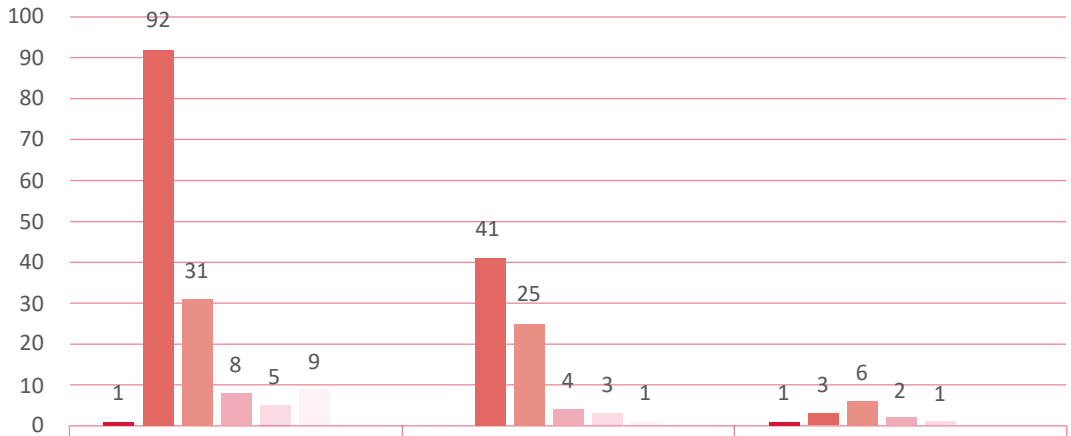
Table 4: Number of posts of parties with harmful narratives on websites and Facebook pages of the political actors



The most common topic in the posts containing harmful narratives on both platforms is domestic politics (a total of 94 of 123 posts on the Internet and 19 of 20 on Facebook). Other topics are health, economy, education, foreign policy and economy. Specifically, in the course of this month, the most common toxic narratives were when talking about the amnesty proposal, the amendments to the Criminal Code, the situation in education, corruption and the scandal of the Oncology Clinic. In the posts of VMRO-DPMNE and Levica related to the scandal of the Oncology Clinic, the direct responsibility of the Prime Minister and the Ministers for the developments is indicated, while Levica indicates the responsibility of all political parties that have been in power in Macedonia since 2012. In the posts with harmful narratives of the SDSM, they mostly talk about EU integrations, the opposition's blockade of the constitutional amendments, the relations between the opposition and the Government, but they also often posted content on the topic of crime in healthcare, i.e., about the case of the Oncology Clinic.

On the Internet, VMRO DPMNE in its total of 55 posts with harmful narratives, tried to undermine trust in the public institutions without offering evidence on 92 occasions; with 31 narratives, they tried to present data selectively about an event to confirm a position, less often they tried to spread panic, carry out attacks on a personal basis against the political opponents and incite divisions in society, and once it was also observed that disinformation was presented. Levica, on the other hand, most often tried to undermine trust in the institutions (41) and used a biased selection of information to confirm their position (25), on four occasions they used demonization of political opponents, and less often they tried to incite divisions and to spread panic in society. In a total of 47 posts with harmful narratives, SDSM mostly used biased selection of data to confirm their position, on 3 occasions they tried to undermine trust, twice they developed a harmful narrative by demonizing the political opponents, inciting social divisions and spreading disinformation was also noted once.

Table 5: Presentation of the representation of harmful narratives in the posts of the political parties on websites



	VMRO	Levica	SDSM
Disinformation	1		1
Undermining trust	92	41	3
Biased Selection	31	25	6
Demonization	8	4	2
Inciting divisions	5	3	1
Spreading panic	9	1	
Total Posts	55	21	47

On Facebook, Apasiev, in his total of 12 posts with harmful narratives, 17 times tried to undermine trust in the institutions, 16 times biasedly selected data to confirm his positions, 4 times character attacks on the political opponents are noted, and once developed a harmful narrative by spreading fear and panic, populism. A harmful narrative of blaming foreign entities for negative influence in the country has been noted in his posts. Also, in the 5 Facebook posts, the Levica mostly tried to undermine trust in the institutions (10 times) and biasedly selected data (7 times), while on 2 occasions they were used to incite divisions and once used a harmful narrative of spreading fear and panic. In the two posts with a harmful narrative on the profile of Hristijan Mickoski, as well as in one post from the Facebook profile of the Alternativa party, an attempt to undermine trust in the public institutions can be observed.

These harmful narratives with similar trends observed both on the Internet and on Facebook are mostly developed using unverified findings, claims of corruption, less often with labelling and ridicule, wording that denigrates a certain group and divides us and you, intentionally not the full picture of the event in question is conveyed, and once it is noted that foreign entities are being accused of interfering in domestic politics. On top of that, on the party websites it is noted that in 20.3% of the posts with harmful narratives, their own political ideologies are promoted, while on Facebook this indicator is observed in only one post with a harmful narrative.

Social Democratic Union of Macedonia – SDSM

In September, regarding SDSM, harmful narratives were observed only in the posts on the party's website (47 in total), and all of them are in the form of press releases [7]. The main topic in all the posts is domestic politics, with a focus on the EU integration of the country, relations with the opposition and the opposition's blockade of the constitutional amendments, the criminal case with the Oncology Clinic and several posts about the municipal work of Mayors and about the incident in the Assembly between the Deputy Prime Minister and SDSM member Bojan Marichikj and MP from VMRO-DPMNE Dafina Stojanovska.

In the posts with harmful narratives, SDSM mentions itself in all posts and most often presents itself as an EU-oriented party, which is the saviour of the citizens, which will realize the EU integration of the country. On the other hand, when speaking critically about other political actors, the party VMRO-DPMNE has primacy which is often named as "DPMNE" with the deliberate omission of the "VMRO" part from the name of the party, but also as "Gruevski's party" and the "anti-EU camp". As in October, the comparison of Mickovski as a "pale copy of Gruevski" was used in September as well (Press release, SDSM website, 23 September).

In the content of the SDSM posts from September, the most (6 times) harmful narratives of selective presentation of data about an event are noted, 3 times a harmful narrative of undermining trust in the institutions is noted when they criticize the local government led by VMRO-DPMNE Mayors, and rhetoric for demonizing the person (2) is noted, i.e., discrediting the leader of VMRO-DPMNE, Hristijan Mickoski. In one post, a narrative of inciting divisions (pro- and anti-EU blocks in society) and a narrative of spreading disinformation was noted. These harmful narratives in 97.9% of cases are developed with the help of allegations of corruption, non-transparency/non-accountability, unprofessionalism and abuse of official position, unverified or hard-to-verify findings are less common.

For example, in a 3 September press release titled "DPMNE has no arguments why it is against constitutional amendments and EU membership", a series of allegations of corruption, unprofessionalism and lack of accountability are noted: "Blockades without arguments are of direct harm to the state and the people... What Mickoski is doing to keep his seat in the White House can cost the citizens very dearly, new 11 years of isolation and lost 10 billion euros from European funds", as well as unverified findings: "Neither DPMNE nor the biggest skeptics have any comments about the content and text of the constitutional amendments" and deliberately not conveying the full picture: "DPMNE has neither one possible argument why it is against constitutional amendments and membership in the EU." This develops a narrative of disinformation that the VMRO-DPMNE party has no arguments for its political views and actions and that they are against the country's integration into the EU: "SDSM will do everything for Mickoski's blockades to be defeated and for the European path to continue", although this party has not expressed an official position publicly that it is against EU membership.

On the same day, another press release was posted, but on a different topic, i.e. on the occasion of the current event regarding the criminal case of the Oncology Clinic, where again there is a reaction and criticism towards VMRO-DPMNE and Hristijan Mickoski, titled "DPMNE shamefully abuses the sick, Mickoski fell to that level, after 20 years this is the first time such a case is being resolved". Unverified findings and claims of corruption, non-transparency/non-accountability, unprofessionalism, are noted in the press release without an attempt to substantiate those claims: "The necrophilic DPMNE, instead of welcoming the action of the competent institutions, the Ministry of Internal Affairs and the Public Prosecutor's Office, to clean up the crime of the Oncology Clinic, shamelessly tries to abuse the suffering of the sick. It mostly shows to what

7 The content with established harmful narratives was also noted on the party's Facebook page, but since it is the same content, the posts on the webpages were primarily analysed.

low level, to what rank the desperate Hristijan Mickoski fell... SDSM will not allow anyone to get rich at the expense of people's health, nor will the case be politically abused by criminal parties like DPMNE." By means this tactic of public attack with groundless accusations, a narrative of biased data selection is being developed that can lead the public to wrong conclusions. Moreover, with explicit negative labels of the party as "criminal", "necrophile" and the leader as "desperate", a narrative of demonization of VMRO-DPMNE is developed.

By developing the aforementioned harmful narratives, the SDSM party violates the principles of ethical, transparent and professional communication that is based on evidence, but it also violates its own Code of Conduct for SDSM members and officials, which encourages the principle of integrity, responsibility and honest work, while office holders must not "communicate views, information and data about official institutional policies and decisions, which are false, incomplete, untrue and which may mislead the public".

VMRO-DPMNE

On the VMRO-DPMNE Facebook page, there are 12 posts containing harmful narratives, 8 of which are about corruption, 2 about corruption in healthcare and 2 about the changes to the Criminal Code.

VMRO-DPMNE is the most frequently mentioned actor (it talks about itself in all posts), SDSM is mentioned in 4 posts, DUI in 2 posts, Kovachevski in 1 and the Government in 1 post. As in October, VMRO-DPMNE is consistent in addressing SDSM with "SDS", for the Government terms like "criminal authority" or "Government of SDS and DUI".

In the course of September 14 posts were observed on Hristijan Mickoski's Facebook profile, and the day with the most harmful narratives was 26 September (3 posts), when there was a lot of media coverage of the proposed amnesty law. Out of a total of 14 posts, 4 are regarding the work of the Mayors from VMRO-DPMNE, 2 each are about corruption and intra-party relations in VMRO-DPMNE, and 1 each is about foreign policy (Bulgaria's relationship with Macedonia), pensioner protests, constitutional amendments and regarding crime.

VMRO-DPMNE is dominated by posts criticizing the work of the Government, calling it "corrupt, irresponsible, incompetent and unprofessional", and it also attacks the Prime Minister "Desperate Kovachevski is outclassed by the people and is afraid of elections because he will experience a debacle». (Press release, VMRO DPMNE website, 1 September, 2023) which states that "Macedonia has been sinking for 7 years with SDS and DUI", as well as that "Kovachevski is only appointed to implement the business interests of DUI and SDS, stealing and devastation of the state and citizens.»

Regarding the amendments to the Criminal Code, which include acts of abuse of official position, VMRO-DPMNE claims that the ruling structures make the changes to save themselves from their own criminal responsibility, as well as that the changes are made in order to create discord in the opposition, implying that the former Prime Minister and leader of VMRO-DPMNE, Nikola Gruevski had a secret agreement with the ruling structure to provide support from deputies in exchange for exemption from criminal liability. "The amendments to the criminal code are in favour of the criminals from the Government and structures, that want to have a discord in the opposition, it will not bring them the constitutional amendments" and that the amendments are "nothing but amnesty for all crimes committed by DUIs" and SDS, in the past 7 years, to the detriment of the citizens" and that there will be no constitutional amendments. (Press release, VMRO DPMNE website, September 20, 2023).

In a press release about the amnesty law proposed by the Minister of Justice, Krenar Loga, VMRO-DPMNE states that "SDS and DUI were amnestied by the Criminal Code, and now dealers, murderers and serious criminals will also be amnestied" (Press relaese, VMRO-DPMNE internet page, 13.09.2023). According to the statements in the press release, the only reason given by the Minister of Justice is the bad conditions in the prisons, but that the ruling parties had enough time to improve them in the past six years. According to the statements in the press release, "the reality is that after SDS and DUI amnestied themselves with the amendments in the Criminal Code, now they will also amnesty those who, together with people from the Government, traded drugs and committed other serious crimes. The matrix of SDS and DUI is criminal. Before they leave power, they amnesty themselves and their perpetrators."

In both examples through targeting a topic of high public interest such as impunity, corruption and good governance, VMRO-DPMNE uses a narrative by which it makes unsubstantiated claims about corrupt behaviour, unprofessionalism, crime like, biased selection and labelling of the political opponents to show itself as a fighter against crime. Additionally, with the claim that "there will be no constitutional amendments", bearing in mind the sensitivity of this topic for ethnic Macedonians, he presents himself as a defender of national interests.

Another example of using with allegations that present the political opponent as unprofessional through unconfirmed allegations is the press release from a visit to the Municipality of Novaci. The leader of VMRO-DPMNE Hristijan Mickoski announces (Facebook post, 21.09.2023) that together with the Mayor Stevce Stevanovski, within the framework of the activity "This is Macedonia for all", they inspected construction activities on the streets. Immediately after, the post continues with "SDS-DUI are obstructing the Municipalities led by VMRO-DPMNE, but in a few months from now there will be a new, strong government that will return Macedonia to the paths of victory." The post is accompanied by photos showing Mickoski talking to the citizens, visititing church and inspecting construction works on the road. From the press release, it is not possible to see how SDSM and DUI are obstructing the Municipalities led by Mayors from VMRO-DPMNE. Also, claims are made that are not supported by evidence, i.e., only public accusations are used to attack the political opponents.

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

Similarly as in October, the monitoring indicates that unlike the website of the DUI party, which is less frequently updated, the official Facebook page of the party is quite active. The daily official activities of the Ministers Artan Grubi, Talat Djaferi, Bujar Osmani, Arber Ademi, Jeton Shakjiri and other officials from the lower echelons of the Government who are members of the party prevail.

On 29 September, in press release on the DUI website, as well as in Facebook post on the official profile of Artan Grubi (member of the party and Deputy Prime Minister in the Government), there is a post with disinformation. The press release refers to an event on the occasion of the commissioning of a photovoltaic power plant: "Together with Prime Minister Dimitar Kovachevski and Minister of Economy Kreshnik Bekteshi, today we participated in the ceremonial commissioning of the largest photovoltaic power plant in the Balkans of the Mey Energy company in Novaci, with a capacity of electricity production of 55 megawatts. Nevertheless, although seemingly positive news, this press release contains disinformation that "this is the largest photovoltaic plant in the Balkans", which develops a populist narrative of an impressive regional achievement. The same disinformation is posted and on the Facebook page of the leader of the opposition Democratic Movement party, Izet Medziti, who publicly congratulates Bilal Kasami, the Mayor of Tetovo, on this success (Post on Medziti's Facebook profile, 29 September).

On 20 September, another one was noticed on the DUI website and Facebook profile press release with a harmful narrative, criticizing the party VMRO-DPMNE: "DUI follows with attention the great concern in the ranks of VMRO-DPMNE, as well as the great divisions that appear in the battle between integration and isolation. This internal battle between the forces in VMRO that want the integration of the country in the EU and those who prefer isolation is being waged on the backs of the country and its citizens", thus presenting an unverified finding of division and discord in VMRO-DPMNE, but also an unsubstantiated accusation of favouritism towards the negative forces in society that prevent or reject the country's integration process in the EU. Using such an attempt to defame the party VMRO-DPMNE in the public criticism of DUI towards them, a harmful narrative of inciting divisions and spreading a sense of insecurity is created, as well as biased selection of information in order to lead the public to wrong conclusions.

In addition, one post with a harmful narrative was observed on the official Facebook profile of Artan Grubi dated 26 September, which is a reaction, i.e., a speech to the Albanian political parties from the opposition: "For three years you lied every day, and in those three years we worked as much as you couldn't even in 30 years and deceived the people... Illiteracy, incompetence, lawlessness, shamelessness, they don't even know how to use Photoshop." By using words and formulations that denigrate the opposition, a division is created between us and you, where we/our is good and you/yours is bad, thus encouraging divisions in the socio-political social sphere.

Levica

In September, 15 posts were identified on the Levica's website, 13 of which were about domestic politics and 2 from the field of health. More specifically, the posts are about allegations of abuses at the Oncology Clinic, amendments to the Criminal Code, political responsibility, cooperation between parties, crime, donations to parties, Rules and Procedures of the Assembly, protests, deteriorating relations among the political parties, abuses and corruption, (the law?) for the use of languages. The party usually presents itself as the defender of the people and the people's interests and defenders of justice and the law, but also as "the only parliamentary opposition." Their posts are mostly aimed at the ruling structures, while SDSM is mostly addressed as "SDS", DUI or "Ahmeti's party", "DPMNE" for VMRO-DPMNE.

There are 37 posts on the Levica's Facebook profile in September, and the day with the most, i.e. 5 posts, is 27 September, 2023. The same topics dominate Facebook as well as the national website from the field of domestic politics (26 posts), healthcare and economy, and sport, social policy, culture and education are listed as well. In Facebook posts, Levica also uses hashtags to convey a message.

In the press release about the amendments to the Criminal Code SDS and DUI will be amnestied from criminal responsibility with a European flag) the changes that are being made to the Criminal Code are stated and that they are being made using the European flag to save the politicians in power from criminal liability. Hereupon, it is added that "the anti-Macedonian and corrupt government of DUI and SDS, faced with the defeat of the upcoming parliamentary elections, is preparing the ground for the salvation of its crimes, which are revealed daily in public", that this "clearly shows that the criminal government of SDS and DUI aims to AMNESTY themselves from criminal responsibility for their corrupt governance and confirmed that Macedonia is a captive state, in which the judiciary is an extended arm of the Government"; "such scandalous changes are contrary to all the commitments by means of which SDS came to power, and therefore this hybrid REGIME, with an octroiated Prime Pinister, has no legitimacy to rule"; "the Government's tendency to save itself from prosecution due to its corrupt rule at any cost is clear!"; "the rule of this set of politicians has turned into the biggest national and economic disaster that the Republic has suffered, where the only European commitment is the smuggling of harmful laws under the European flag."

The example is also an effective use of a harmful narrative to gain public attention and support for an issue of high public interest. In the press release, Levica explains the changes to the Criminal Code and correctly states that the mechanism of the so-called European flag in the Assembly, where with changes that are harmonized with the EU legislation, an amendment was made to the Criminal Code that was not related to the EU reforms, i.e. the deletion of Article 353 (which was later supported by statements from the EU). The amendments are placed in a broader context of criticism and allegations of a corrupt and criminal ruling structure, "regime", while the Levica presents itself as a protector of the interests of citizens against its political opponent.

In a post on his Facebook profile from 19 September, the leader of the Levica, Apasiev shares a statement from the Levica party about the decision of the Language Inspectorate with the text: "Hey, what did we expect with the quislings from SDS in power!? We should fight legally, through inspectorates and agencies, to use the MACEDONIAN LANGUAGE in Macedonia! #YouAreMadmen», while in the post of Levica, which it is re-posting it, there is a text and a photo with the building of the Tetovo hospital "LANGUAGE INSPECTORATE DETERMINES ILLEGALITY IN MEDICAL REPORTS ONLY IN ALBANIAN LANGUAGE" it says: "While the Kovachevski Government remains silent in the face of such frequent denials coming from its coalition partners, #Levica will continue to oppose all negative tendencies that humiliate the Macedonian identity." This content uses unverified findings and incomplete reporting of the image of an event, thus developing a harmful narrative of undermining of trust in the institutions and placing the Levica as a defender of the Macedonian language and identity, an ally of the Macedonian people, against other parties and the Government. Additionally, Apasiev's post uses terms such as "quislings from SDS in power!?" and the hashtag «#YouAreMadmen - as negative labels that are further used to undermine trust in the institutions and discredit the political opponents.

The practice of the leader of the Levica, Apasiev, is to share comments and reactions to current events using hashtags, emoticons and other symbols. Right in them there are often elements of harmful narratives. For example, in a 20 September Facebook post, which refers to a session of the Constitutional Court on the Prespa Agreement, trust is undermined in the Constitutional Court as an institution and serves as a label "Nits Severdzhanski", and the post is from the perspective of the Levica that they are the defenders of the people. Another example in which Apasiev uses a harmful narrative to undermine trust in the institutions, populism and incite divisions is a short post on his Facebook profile from 15 September, which reads: "For months, DPMNE, by not convening a parliamentary committee, has been blocking the legal amendments proposed by the Levica for the so-called ANTI-PROVISIONAL LEGISLATION. By means of them, it is proposed that the banks cannot rob the citizens of petty cash and charge themselves fictitious commissions for anything and everything.

#DemonChristians
#UnsurerBankars
#Capitalist Servants»

By presenting an incomplete picture of the process and negative labelling, Apasiev populistically positions Levica in the role of saviour of the people and incites divisions, thereby undermining trust in the legislature.

Alternativa - AlternAtivA

In September, more precisely on 19 September, a post with a harmful narrative was noted on the Facebook profile of the Alternativa party, which consists of text (in Albanian and Macedonian) and a photo of the logos of the three Albanian opposition political parties behind the post titled "Alternativa - Besa Movement - Democratic Movement: Would Ahmeti have spoken Macedonian if the Albanian opposition had not united?" and it is a reaction to an interview for the public by the leader of DUI, Ali Ahmeti. The most obvious harmful narrative in this short post is the demonization of the person, in this case the person is the leader of DUI, Ahmeti, through the use of negative labels and words and formulations that insult, belittle, ridicule the person – "After yesterday's interview of Ali Ahmeti, where he struggled to show that he knows the Macedonian language, we want to announce the following .... What is next, the team around Ahmeti to become Komiti? The prize question is whether Ahmeti would have spoken Macedonian if the Albanian opposition had not united? This political perversion of DUI will be punished by the Albanians." The harm of such character attacks on relevant politicians in the public is that there is a risk of inciting ethnic and national divisions, hate speech and violence among individuals or groups of citizens.

In addition, in this short post, you can also see claims of corruption and abuse of official position without any attempt to substantiate those claims – "...Is the protection of illegally acquired assets dearer to DUI leading men since the start of EU negotiations?", which without argumentation and evidence develops a harmful narrative of undermining trust in the public institutions managed by DUI Ministers, but also all other elected officials in public positions from this party, who are accused of corruption and dishonest political intentions. Promoting harmful narratives to demonize the political opponents and undermine trust in the institutions violates the principles of transparent, ethical, evidence-based communication.

This post has not been noticed on the communication channels of the other two parties that are signed as being behind it.

Facebook profile of Izet Medziti, leader of the Democratic Movement

In September, 12 posts with harmful narratives were recorded and on the Facebook profile of the president of the Democratic Movement party, Izet Medziti. Medziti's Facebook profile is extremely active, with several posts almost every day, and many of them are in Albanian and Macedonian language. Most often, the posts refer to topics of current political events in the country, reporting on the party activities of Medziti, his party, the Democratic Movement, as well as the communication of the coalition with BESA and Alternativa. Information about meetings with foreign representatives is often published, showing the establishment of DD, BESA and Alternativa as a relevant political coalition in the country. The observed harmful narratives are mostly developed through claims of corruption, non-transparency/lack of accountability, unprofessionalism, abuse of official position without an attempt to substantiate those claims, unverified findings, use of negative words, riducule and gross disrespect of the political opponents, as well as the use of wording by which political opponents are defamed. The main actor most often criticized in the Facebook posts with harmful narratives of Medziti is the Deputy Prime Minister and member of DUI, Artan Grubi, as well as DUI being a "criminal authority". Communication about ethnic-based divisions (of Macedonians and Albanians) is also less often observed.

A special emphasis in the harmful posts observed with Medziti is placed on criticism on the subject of the business of games of chance, where he directly accuses Artan Grubi of corruption and involvement in that business. On 26 September, there were even 3 posts with a harmful narrative that refer to this particular topic: post of video and text from his press conference where it says: "How many marriages, how many families have to be destroyed, how many women and children have to become victims of domestic violence for this casino madness to stop?" The decision about the casinos was signed by Artan Grubi, the man

behind every casino in our country!», post with the entire text/transcript from the press conference with photos from the event, as well as post with a photo, where a message is written with a visual background of a casino and the three logos of the Albanian opposition block, and the title: "Fact!"

The same narrative continues on Facebook 28 September post, where Medziti posts a video taken from TV 21 showing young people/children playing games of chance on a computer, with the text: "When we say that casinos and games of chance have entered our homes, our schools, our places of worship, that they directly threaten our youth, we mean exactly this! These recordings are the consequence. The reason has a name and a surname, Artan Grubi, the person behind every casino in our country, and now also behind online casinos on the Internet!" By dint of this harmful narrative that talks about negative social phenomena that can arise from the abuse of games of chance, Deputy Prime Minister and member of the DUI, Artan Grubi, is blamed for them as "the man behind every casino in the country", without providing evidence of his direct involvement. By means of this type of communication, the personality of a public official is demonized; however with the accusations against Grubi of corruption and unprofessional work in his own interests, abuse of office is alluded to without providing additional facts or evidence for the claims.

Furthermore, in a 22 September post, Medziti shares a press release (in Albanian and Macedonian language) with a graphic from the Democratic Movement's Facebook page, titled: "Government officials raised their salaries to over 2,000 euros, for citizens only a 2,000 denars increase" where the "current Government" is criticized in general and specifically the Minister of Economy, Kreshnik Bekteshi, who informed about the increase of the minimum wage in the country by 10% or 2000 denars, while, on the other hand, they compare it with the latest increase in the salaries of government officials for over 2000 euros. On top of that, accusations and claims of corrupt government were also noted on 6 September 6 in a brief Facebook post on the occasion of the proposed amendments to the Criminal Code where it is stated that "... Simply what is happening is the corruption of the corrupt in order to keep a corrupt government alive." Also on 8 September, in a longer Facebook post on the same topic on the amendment of the Criminal Code, it is concluded that "The so-called European front looks much more like the Sicilian front, which is deeply involved in the casino business and quick loans that represent the legalization of usury."

1.2.1. Monitoring of the communication of the members of the Government of the RNM through the official Facebook pages – September 2023

Aside from the identified harmful narratives, abuses were noted in September on the official Facebook page for party propaganda by the Prime Minister Dimitar Kovachevski, the Deputy Prime Minister Artan Grubi, the Minister of Internal Affairs Oliver Spasovski and the Minister of Environment and Physical Planning Kaja Shukova.

On the Facebook page of the President of the Government, Dimitar Kovachevski, out of a total of 85 posts in September, 5 posts were recorded that misused the Prime Minister's official profile for party propaganda. Most often, the posts are about party activities and meetings. For example, on 2 September, a press release/meeting report is published in the first post from the "Strategic workshop" meeting, which included the secretariats of the party commissions as an integral part of creating a winning SDSM campaign for the 2024 elections – "...We are committed to transfer all viable proposals, ideas and projects into the winning electoral programme of the SDSM for the 2024-2028 mandate of a new, pro-European government...". Moreover, two posts (from 4 and 30 September) refer to a visit to the Municipalities of Centar and Dojran, which are governed by Mayors from SDSM, which are used for the promotion of both the local and central government by SDSM; for illustration – "At today's meetings with the citizens of Dojran, together with the Mayor Ango Angov, we had the opportunity to talk with them about several issues that concern them, including the rehabilitation of the collector system and a new sewage treatment plant. To my satisfaction, the Government, together with the local self-government led by #SDSM, solved this decade-long problem."

On the Facebook page of the Minister of Internal Affairs Spasovski, out of a total of 85 posts in September, 11 abuses of the official profile for party propaganda were noted. Many of the posts refer to the Minister's visit and an insight into the activities of development projects that are not within the competence of the Ministry of Internal Affairs, such as posts from 1 September about a visit to the vocational education center "Kiro Burnaz" in Kumanovo, where it is stated: I am proud that in my Kumanovo we have introduced European standards in the education system", as well as a visit to the construction works in the Secondary School of the City of Skopje "Vlado Tasevski" Skopje, (1 September), then attending the ceremonial opening of the reconstructed Chelopek-Kointse road in the Municipality of Staro Nagorichane (3 September). 5 posts with a religious content were also noted, on the occasion of religious holidays, namely 3 posts on 21 September and one on 22 September for the Orthodox holiday "Mala Bogoroditsa", as well as one post on 24 September on the occasion of the consecration of the "Holy Transfiguration" monastery in Krushevo. Furthermore, on 23 September, during working hours, the first post on the Minister's Facebook page is party propaganda with the title "SDSM is the pivot of the pro-European front", which says: "Once and for all, the progressive forces in the country must be separated vis-à-vis all those who pull the country back, those retrograde forces, those forces that do not help the country progress", and on 8 September - Independence Day, party propaganda from a festive party rally in Kisela Voda with content was observed: "Our togetherness is the driver for many successes. We are proud because we have achieved a lot and together we continue to work for the progress of the country and all our citizens. We are here with and for the citizens!"

The Minister Kaja Shukova, out of a total of 26 posts in September, noted one press release about party activities - formation of IE 5 teams and preparation for the following activities with the citizens: "Together with Bisera Kostadinovska Stojchevska as the coordinator of the winning team in IE 5 and with the members we set ourselves new tasks and field activities. SDSM remains side by side with the citizens. Together we create policies and step towards new victories. United with the citizens, we are moving towards a better, European and green future. #SDSM" (Post on the Facebook profile of Minister Kaja Shukova, 21 September).

On the Facebook page of the Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Political System and Inter-Community Relations, Artan Grubi, there are frequent posts about party propaganda, as well as the use of the profile for personal affinities, such as posts about the Albanian football team, celebrating various Albanian holidays, with photos of the family etc. The post dated 26 September is such example from the party event in Chair with photos in which the leader of the ruling DUI party, Ali Ahmeti, is present, which says: "Today's mass participation proves loyalty to the visionary policies of the Democratic Union for Integration under the leadership of the leader Ali Ahmeti, readiness to continue the common progress in the challenges before us, which are crucial for the development of our country."

The Facebook page of the Minister of Justice Krenar Loga is quite active, with several posts per day, and similar to September, it is used for both party and institutional communication. In addition to posts about some current events related to the judiciary, posts from his parent party, Alliance for Albanians, as well as party members and President Arben Taravari are very frequent. Minister Loga often comments on daily political developments, especially he comments on the opposition parties VMRO-DPMNE and Levica negatively, and less often the united Albanian opposition. It is interesting that on several occasions it can be seen how statuses in Turkish language are also published on the page about events and topics related to Turkey or Turks. Posts with party content are often noticed, such as: a post from 22 September criticizing VMRO-DPMNE for the meeting with the former Minister of Internal Affairs, Gordana Jankulovska; in a post from 25 September, party content from AA leader Arben Taravari was reposted ; in a post from 28 September where the leader of the Levica, Dimitar Apasiev, is criticized for the topic of bilingual certificates, etc.

Via these posts about party promotion and propaganda on the official Facebook profiles, the Prime Minister and the Ministers directly violate the principles of professionalism and impartiality in the communication of the Government representatives, but the Government's Code of Ethics for Civil Servants is also violated. The politicians who are elected and appointed officials, through this unprofessional practice, do not make a clear distinction between the work of the institutions they manage, and the activities in the parent political parties, i.e., there should be no abuse of government communication channels for the promotion of party goals.

SUMMARY

The monitoring and the analysis of the party's public communication show that in the public discourse represented on the websites and social media posts of the political actors in Macedonia, rhetoric is often used in which allegations of corruption, non-transparency/non-accountability, unprofessionalism, abuse of official position are presented without attempt to substantiate those claims and unverified findings (or findings that can hardly be verified) are used as a basis for blaming political opponents, for developing harmful narratives of populism, undermining trust in institutions, biased data selection leading to wrong conclusions and encouraging social-political divisions in the public.

Similar trends are observed both on the Internet and on Facebook, hence these harmful narratives are mostly developed by using unverified findings, claims of corruption, less often by labelling and ridicule, wording that denigrates a certain group and makes divisions of "we and you" deliberately not conveying the full picture of the event in question, and accusations of foreign entities for interference in the domestic politics are rarely noticed. The posts with harmful narratives on the Internet and on Facebook pages show similar trends in communication, although more harmful narratives are observed on Facebook.

The main topic in the harmful narratives for the monitored period in September and October is domestic politics, with a focus on attacks on political opponents, criticism of the Government and other institutions from the central and local government. In particular, current events and processes regarding which harmful narratives are often produced are the amendments to the Criminal Code, the case of the Oncology Clinic, Macedonian-Bulgarian relations vis-à-vis the proposed constitutional amendments and EU integrations, the Law on Games of Chance, the Law on Amnesty, but about the situation in education, the economy and inflation, corruption, especially in the judiciary and the following elections in the country are often discussed.

The trend of using official government communication channels for party propaganda, that is publishing party content on the Facebook profiles of the Prime Minister and Government ministers, is of additional concern. With these posts about party promotion and propaganda on the official Facebook profiles, the Prime Minister and the Ministers directly violate the principles of professionalism and impartiality in the communication of Government representatives, but the Government's Code of Ethics for public servants is also violated as well.

In Code of Ethics for Civil Servants adopted by the Government of the Republic of Macedonia, there is an obligation for public servants to perform their work tasks in a politically neutral manner, not to represent their political beliefs in the performance of their work tasks, nor to carry out political activities that may affect the confidence of the citizens in their ability to perform work tasks in an impartial manner.

The politicians who are elected and the appointed officials, in addition to their party communication channels, also have access to the official communication channels of the institutions they manage. Hence, they should use government communication channels to inform about Government policies, decisions and measures, in order to ensure a clear distinction between the work of the institutions and the political parties, i.e., there should be no abuse of government communication channels for the promotion of party goals.

The monitored contents indicate the existence of a low culture of expression in public discourse by the political actors in Macedonian society. Holders of public offices as well as candidates for public offices are required to maintain a high level of expression in their public appearances, to be responsible, transparent, not to spread disinformation, unverified findings as well as to refrain from populist appearances because in that manner they contribute towards the spread of harmful narratives in a society, as well as denying the right of the public to be accurately, timely and clearly informed about important topics in a society and to have an appropriate quality public debate on issues of public interest.

2. Monitoring of media coverage on political actors

The analysis of online media and television stations' coverage on political actors is the second, parallel process in the Determining Political Harmful Narratives research. It is complementary to the first monitoring, i.e. monitoring of the public communication of the political actors. While the analysis of the political parties and their leaders is focused on determining the dominant harmful narratives in the context of complying with the public communication standards, the media monitoring should provide an answer as to how this toxic and polarizing public discourse penetrates the media arena. During the monitoring, it is analysed who are the most common generators of harmful narratives in the information content, whether and how they manage to break into the prime minutes and headlines, which topics are fertile ground for their spreading, but also the most important - what is the role of the journalists in this process: whether the media adhere to the professional and the ethical standards for accurate, fair and impartial reporting, or whether they unquestioningly follow the agenda set by the political actors.

A sample of media includes the following 11 online media [8] and 9 television stations:

Online media: Lokalno; Nezavisen; Sloboden Pechat; A1on.mk; MKD.mk; Republika; Kurir; Almakos; Tetova Sot; Nova TV; Vecer.mk. The criteria for the selection of the media are: readership, editorial policy regarding different political and social standings (using the method of a purposive sample), compliance with the criteria for membership of online portals in the Council of Media Ethics in Macedonia[9] and in the registry of professional online media Promedia.mk[10], entry in the Registry of Broadcasters, Print Media and Electronic Media for paid political advertising in the 2020 parliamentary elections[11].

Televisions: national public and private TV stations with the highest viewership, nine in total: MTV 1 (public); MTV 2 (public, in Albanian language); TV Alfa (private); Kanal 5 (private); Sitel TV (private); TV 24 (private); Telma (private); Alsat M (private, in Albanian); TV21 (private, in Albanian language).

The subject of analysis is all journalistic content (news) with different genre features published in online media and news items reported in the central news, in which the following political actors appear or are mentioned:

- Political parties that have two or more MPs in the current parliamentary composition 2020 -2024;
- Leaders of political parties that have two or more MPs in the current parliamentary composition;
- The prime minister of the Government of the RNM;
- The deputies of the president of the Government of the RNM and the ministers in the Government of the RNM, in cases when they speak or are mentioned in the role of representatives of the political party.

8 Online media refers to all electronic publications that have separate web pages and that regularly publish journalistically edited current-informational content intended for the general public.

9 CMEM Membership Online Media Rules, available at https://semm.mk/chlenstvo/pravila-za-chlenstvo

10 Registry of professional online media Promedia.mk, available at: https://promedia.mk/index.php?lang=mk

11 All monitored online media and television stations registered and received compensation for paid political advertising in the last parliamentary elections in 2020, except MTV 1 and MTV 2, which are part of the public broadcaster. The list of registered media, published by the State Election Commission, is available here: https://drive.google.com/file/d/1Y8-CqI64H4-2HES2bhnpzYlHQ0yPURFP/view

Coalitions are not monitored as a separate political actor, unless the media content mentions some of the aforementioned actors. Websites of TV stations are not analysed.

The unit of analysis is a single post or a single news item.

The monitoring was conducted for a total of 16 days during October and September, spread over a four-day interval. Days for media monitoring were the following days in October: 3, 7, 11, 15, 19, 23, 27 and 31, and the following days in September: 1, 5, 9, 13, 17, 21, 25, 29.

2.1. Report on the monitoring of internet media coverage on political actors

Report for October 2023

In the eight days in October when the published contents of the online media were analysed, a total of 154 news items containing harmful narratives were identified. They are dominantly 'reported speech of a politician' at a rally or other type of gathering (68 news items) and 'reported press release'[12] i.e., the official position of a certain authority (political party, parliament, government, ministries) on a current event (33 news items), and together (101 news items) make up 65.6% of all analysed news items. The largest number of them has only one source (130 or 84.4%), i.e., one-sided reporting prevails even when the media consulted two or more (129 news items, or 86.0%). This is followed by the reason for publishing the news item, and primarily these are pseudo-events, i.e., events that are created with the purpose to attract media attention. Mostly these are party press conferences, statements by political actors, etc. (87 posts or 57.2%), and far fewer current events (28, or 18.4%) or current social topics that require more time, resources and dedicated journalistic engagement (23, or 15.1%). The indisputable dominant presence of the political actors indicates the easily accessible media space they use and which can be (mis)used to discredit the political opponents.

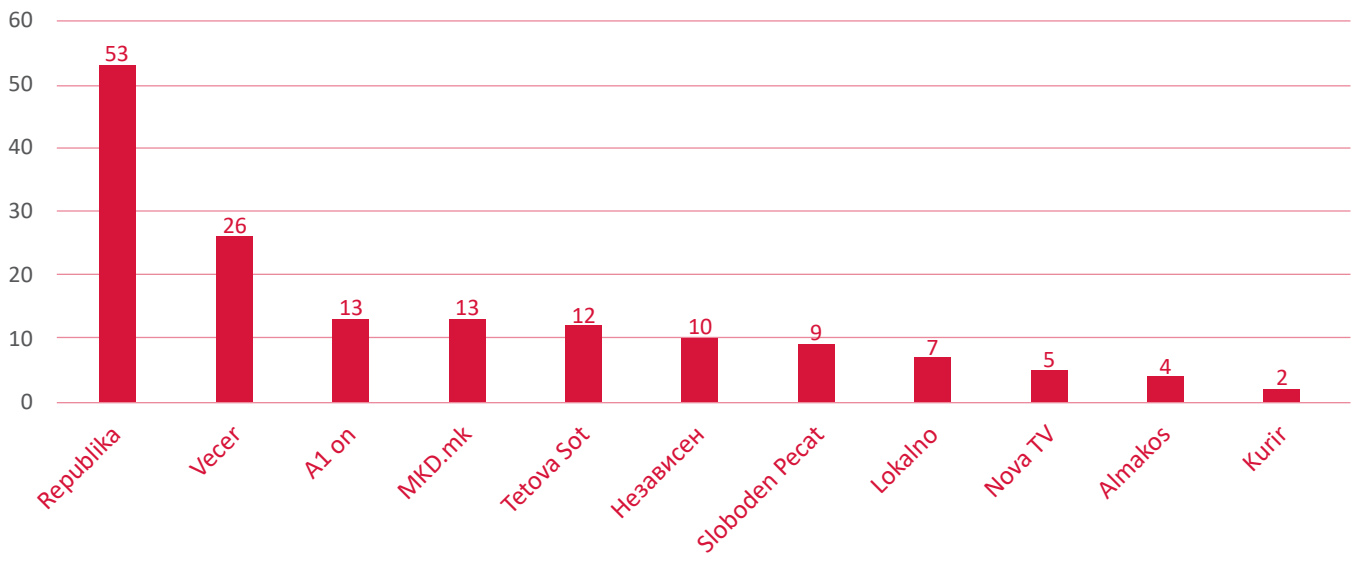
The largest number of these posts are not signed by an author, as many as 139 news items (90.3%). Thematically, the focus is on the domestic politics (93 news items, or 60.4%), followed by economy (22 news items, or 14.3%) and corruption (13 news items, or 8.4%). Small number of them, have a secondary topic in addition to the main one, which is also within the framework of domestic politics, and most of the time it refers to the European integration of the country, the constitutional amendments, the upcoming elections, accusations of corruption in the government, healthcare, the judiciary, the prosecutor's office.

12 The genre 'broadcast press release' or 'broadcast speech of a politician' usually does not belong in the traditional genre divisions according to various criteria, such as: length of journalistic text, duration of video material, topic, area, style, method of preparation, type of media etc. Considering that the online media are covered by the monitoring, and in which there is a tendency to overproduce journalistic and quasi-journalistic forms, with the methodological approach this type of posts are also recorded.

Frequency of the Harmful Narratives in Online Media

Viewed individually by online media, the most news items with harmful narratives are identified in the Republika portal, as much as 1/3 (53 news items or 34.4%) of all 154 such news items determined, and with almost the same representation in the entire monitored period. Vecer.mk is second in terms of frequency of harmful narratives, while Nova TV, Almakos and Kurir have the lowest number. [13]

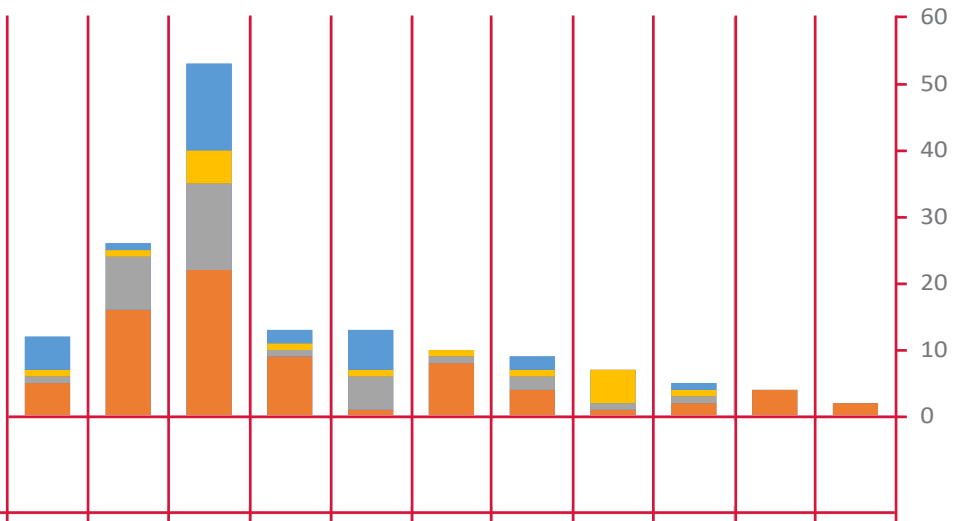
Table 6: News items containing harmful narratives in online media in October



Regarding genre, the harmful narratives appear in several forms. First of all, as a politician's speech in Republika, Vecer, Nezavisen, A1on and Sloboden Pechat, then in reported party press releases, mostly in Republika and Vecer, then in reports in Tetova Sot, Almakos and MKD.mk, less in news, in Lokalno, and sporadically in analytical/reporter news items, analyses/comments, comments and interviews in Vecer, Nova TV, Sloboden Pechat, Nezavisen.

13 The data for the online media outlet Kurir is not complete due to the unavailability of the monitored content during October 2023. The presence of harmful narratives was determined in the first phase of the monitoring and in all days of the monitoring. Such are, for example, the posts on: 03 October, 2023, a post with the title:'Mickoski: If Spasovski does not agree with the Amnesty Law, then he should leave the Government immediately', 07 October 2023 'Mickoski: Pensioners are on the street, demanding dignity and change.' After the change of Government, we will increase pensions'; 11 October 2023 VMRO-DPMNE: Because of the incompetent Kovachevski, inflation in Macedonia is 50% higher than in the Eurozone; 15 October, 2023 Mickoski: The first step VMRO-DPMNE will take is to return the money to the citizens, this Government only has political criminals; 19 October, 2023 Mickoski: Out of the lions of the Colour Revolution, not even little kittens are left, at least they could have spoken up for what is happening; 23 October, 2023 Mickoski: The price Macedonians paid for their freedom is high; 27 October, 2023 VMRO-DPMNE: Is DUI fixing a tender of 4-5 million euros for a party construction company; 31 October, 2023 Stojanovski: The position on constitutional amendments is clear - the essence of Macedonian politicians is to represent the national interests for which they are paid with public money. (October posts last accessed: 20 December, 2023)

Table 7: News items containing harmful narratives according to genre structure



Total	12	26	53	13	13	10	9	7	5	4	2
News report	5	1	13	2	6		2		1		
News	1	1	5	1	1	1	1	5	1		
Reported press release	1	8	13	1	5	1	2	1	1		
Reported speech of a politician	5	16	22	9	1	8	4	1	2	4	2

Thematically, the harmful narratives dominate in the field of domestic politics in all internet portals, and mostly in Republika, which stands out for the total number of news items containing harmful narratives. However, even among portals with a far smaller number of such news items, domestic politics has primacy, as is the case with Tetova Sot, Nova TV, Nezavisen, Sloboden Pechat, MKD.mk, and even occurs as the only one at Nezavisen and Almakos. We can also mention Republika and Vecer MK, where harmful narratives are spreading occasionally in the field of economy, corruption and justice.

In terms of journalistic writing style and techniques, the analysis showed that online media follow an almost identical pattern in creating headlines. Having in mind that news which unilaterally convey a speech of a political actor dominates, the title (or headline) consists of naming the actor (mostly the surname or the name of the party), then part of his/her/their statement, a paragraph on a specific issue. For example:

- VMRO-DPMNE: Inflation is eating up citizens' bread and at the same time the officials of DUI and SDSM are fattening themselves with steaks at cheap prices in the government buffet (Vecer.mk, 19 October, 2023)
- VMRO-DPMNE: Because of the incompetent Kovachevski, Macedonia has 50% higher inflation than the Eurozone (Republika, 15 October, 2023)
- SDSM: Macedonian struggle is for EU integration, not isolation (MKD.mk, 23 October, 2023)
- Kovachevski: 'Little' and 'Big' Gruevski have no ideological difference (Sloboden Pechat, 3 October, 2023)
- Kovachevski: The Albanian opposition block should consider whether it wants to be part of the anti-EU coalition with VMRO-DPMNE (Lokalno, 3 October, 2023)
- Mickoski: They lack money in the budget, that is why they increase the tax on basic products (A1on.mk, 7 October, 2023)
- Bilal Kasami: Osmani abuses the OSCE to influence election observers (Tetova Sot, 27 October, 2023)

The political actors in the analysed news items

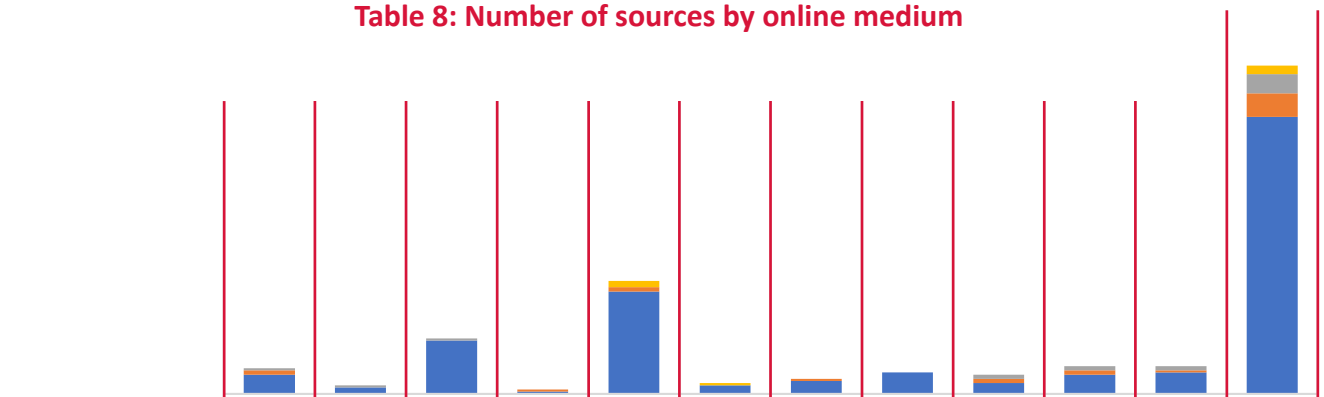
The political actors are represented differently in the news items with harmful narratives, but those with two (in 46 news items, or 29.9%), three (36, or 23.4%), and even four (23, or 14.9%) actors dominate. Of all the mentioned actors, Hristijan Mickoski and Dimitar Kovachevski have primacy, and of the political parties VMRO-DPMNE and SDSM. However, Hristijan Mickoski and his VMRO-DPMNE party are most often mentioned in the news items. He is usually named as 'the president of VMRO-DPMNE' or as 'the leader of VMRO-DPMNE', and less frequently as 'the leader of the opposition'. In contrast, Dimitar Kovachevski is usually the 'Prime Minister Kovachevski', and occasionally by name, but also with the qualifications 'Prime Minister Kovachevski/Tache' and 'the incompetent Kovachevski'. VMRO-DPMNE is usually named by its full name, and occasionally as 'false patriots from DPMNE', while SDSM by its full name, but often the media report the party's communication when the party is named 'SDS'. In addition to the two largest political parties, frequently their spokespersons, members of Parliament, vice presidents, and especially from the ranks of VMRO-DPMNE, appear as subjects.

Their presentation is different: they are quoted, paraphrased and discussed in the news items in the context of the topic. In particular, the Republika portal with the largest number of harmful narratives often quotes and talks about the actors. Vecer MK, Tetova Sot, Nova TV, Lokalno, A1on, Kurir quote and paraphrase the actors. MKD.mk and Sloboden Pechat almost equally use all three forms of representation, while Nezavisen and Almakos make use of quoting and talking about the actors in the context of the topic. Moreover, the fact that the largest number of news items (139, or 90.3% of all analysed) are not signed (i.e., they are without an author), in the small number of news items with a designated journalist, we also find (1) a positive attitude towards the actor, (2) negative (mostly in Vecer mk), (3) ambivalent (in all Almakos news items), and (4) neutral attitude towards the actor (mostly in Sloboden Pechat).

(Un)biased reporting

One-sided reporting is a feature of all Internet portals. Out of a total of 154 analysed news items, in 129 only one side dominates the reporting. Very rarely, even occasionally, two or more sides are noted. Also, they predominantly rely on one source of information, especially characteristic of Republika and Vecer. The absence of any source only appears, albeit rarely, in the Republika portal and sporadically in Nova TV.

Table 8: Number of sources by online medium



	Tetova sot	Almakos	Vecer MK	Kurir	Republika	Nova TV	Lokalno	Nezavisen	Sloboden Pechat	A1 on.mk	MKD.mk	Total
No source	0	0	0	0	3	1	0	0	0	0	0	4
Three and more	1	1	1	0	0	0	0	0	2	2	2	9
Two	2	0	0	1	2	0	1	0	2	2	1	11
One	9	3	25	1	48	4	6	10	5	9	10	130
Total	12	4	26	2	53	5	7	10	9	13	13	154

At the same time, it should be emphasized that the online portals, regardless of the number of sources in the news items with harmful narratives, usually have accurate sources of information. The precision is due to the fact that the most common sources are the political actors themselves whose views are broadcast. Republika and Vecer MK have the most, which is understandable considering the largest number of such news items. Tetova Sot, Almakos, Nova TV, Lokalno, Nezavisen, A1on and MKD.mk should also be noted, where almost all the news items analysed are with precise sources.

Media reports are usually short, quasi-news that convey the views of the political actors. Frequently, from one appearance or public communication of a political actor, several news stories are produced. This is, for example, the case when two 'news items' were published from one fully copied Facebook post of the health commission of VMRO-DPMNE. (1) 'VMRO-DPMNE HEALTH COMMISSION: SDS AND DUI made the City General Hospital '8 Septemvri' a party den?' and (2) 'VMRO-DPMNE HEALTH COMMISSION: Mira Diesel's daughter is EMPLOYED in City General Hospital '8 Septemvri', (Vecer.mk, 31 October). Statements are reported uncritically, without evidence of verification of what was reported.

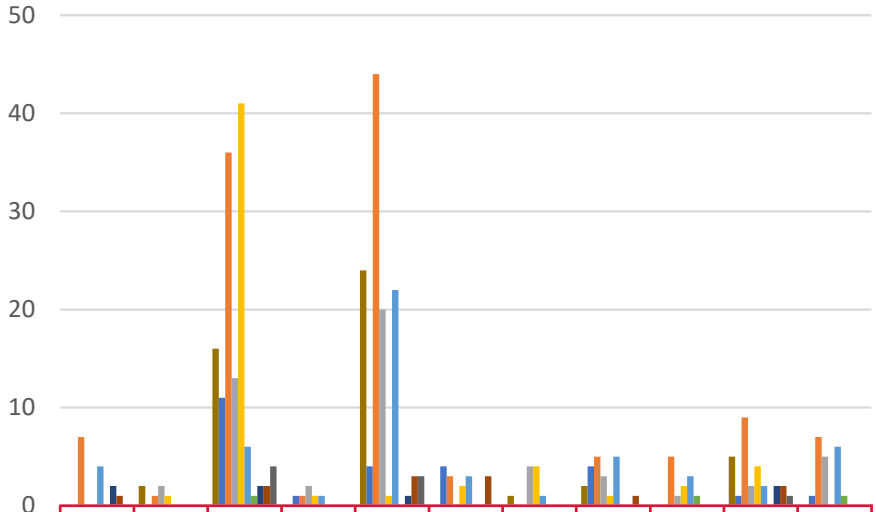
The analysed news items are visually supported, mostly with archival and current photographs, even for those with the shortest content. Most of them are in Republika and Vecer. Among other online portals, especially Tetova Sot, A1on, MKD.mk, current photos dominate, and at Sloboden Pechat and Nezavisen, archival and current photos are equally represented. The number of other types of visualization, such as video statements, graphs, etc., is very small, even negligible.

Dominant harmful political narratives

In the analysis, several indicators are singled out as the most present, indicating the presence of more harmful narratives (https://respublica.edu.mk/istrazhuvanje-shtetna/shtetni-narativi-i-indikatori/). This means that when the online media reported about political actors, their statements usually contain: (1) allegations of corruption, non-transparency/non-accountability, unprofessionalism, abuse of office without attempting to substantiate those claims (69 cases), (2) the use of words or sentences directly or indirectly promoting one's own ideologies and activities as something that is for the benefit of the people, as opposed to the activities and ideologies of the political opponents (**53 cases**), (3) unverified findings (or findings that can hardly be verified) as a basis for accusing political opponents (**50 cases**), and (4) labelling, mocking and grossly disrespecting other persons (media workers, civil activists, political opponents, public office holders...) use of negative words (**46 cases**).

They promote numerous harmful narratives. The most represented in the news items are the undermining of trust, biased selection, character attacks and demonization, populism and disinformation.

Table 6: Presence of harmful narratives in online media news items in October 2023



	Teto-va Sot	Alma-kos	Vecer MK	Kurir	Repub-lika	Nova TV	Loka-lno	Neza-visen	Slo-boden Pechat	A1 On mk	MKD. mk
Disinformation		2	16		24		1	2		5	
Inciting divisions			11	1	4	4		4		1	1
Undermining trust	7	1	36	1	44	3		5	5	9	7
Populism		2	13	2	20		4	3	1	2	5
Biased Selection		1	41	1	1	2	4	1	2	4	
Character attacks, demonization	4		6	1	22	3	1	5	3	2	6
Malinformation			1						1		1
Foreign Influence	2		2		1					2	
Spreading panic, fear	1		2		3	3		1		2	
and extreme patriotism Nationalism			4		3					1	
Total news items	12	4	26	2	53	5	7	10	9	13	13

Republika and Vecer.MK have the most news items with harmful narratives, whose indicators point to that statements that undermine trust in the institutions and populism dominate. Individually, in Republika there are character attacks and demonization, and in Vecer.MK - biased selection. With Tetova Sot, Sloboden Pechat, A1 and MKD.mk it is mostly undermining of trust, while in Lokalno, occasionally, populism and biased selection, and in Sloboden Pechat it is undermining of trust.

Portal Republika

The online media Republika is at the top of the list of monitored media that broadcast harmful narratives propagated by the political actors. Most of them emanate from VMRO-DPMNE, mostly through a reported speech of a politician (out of 22 posts, 15 are from Hristijan Mickoski, 5 are from party spokespersons, vice-presidents or MPs from VMRO-DPMNE and 3 posts are from Prime Minister Dimitar Kovachevski), broadcast press release (out of 13 press releases, 9 are from the party VMRO-DPMNE, two are from SDSM, in one post the press releases of VMRO-DPMNE and SDSM are reported, and one is from the Democratic Movement).

	Total number of news items	Reported speech of a politician	Reported press release	News item	Other
Republika	53	22	13	5	13

The Other category includes: one news item - a statement given to another media, five interviews for another media, one interview taken from another media, three news items from a reported Facebook status and three news items from a press conference of the spokesperson of VMRO-DPMNE.

The largest number of news items in Republika are dominated by allegations for corruption, non-transparency, unprofessionalism, abuse of office, which are used to undermine trust in institutions. For example, the media, without any professional distance and verification of the allegations presented, report accusations from insufficiently precise sources from VMRO-DMPNE about the abuse of the official position and sexual harassment of female officers and military personnel by senior officers in the ARM ('Is this also being suppressed? Petrovska hid the sex scandal in the ARM from Commander-in-Chief Pendarovski', October 27).

In a statement to the public of VMRO-DPMNE in which both SDSM and the Government are assessed as 'incompetent, criminal, corrupt'. In the news item under the title 'Mayors from VMRO-DPMNE have a three times higher rating than the Government and this makes SDSM nervous', it is stated that 'SDSM is desperate. They see that their rating is sinking due to the incompetence, crime and corruption of the Government in which they participate, and therefore they manipulate and blame others.' (31 October, 2023). Mickoski's speech during the VMRO-DPMNE campaign in Shtip 'It's important!' Changes depend on you,' speaking about the economic situation in the country, he qualifies the Government/its members as 'political criminals'. In the post titled 'Mickoski: The first step that VMRO-DPMNE will take is to return the money to the citizens, this Government only has political criminals', he states: '... the money is here, the problem is that it is spent and stolen. That is the biggest problem we have in the Government, political criminals who steal the money. Otherwise, the money is here, only instead of the people, it ends up in the pockets of these political criminals.' (15. 10. 2023) Here the harmful narrative is additionally reinforced by the title of the text.

There is a large number of news items in which labelling, mockery and gross disrespect of other persons, which are used for character attack. Such is the example of the post, which is actually a reported party press release with the title 'Because of the incompetent Kovachevski, Macedonia has 50% higher inflation than the Eurozone', followed by the text with identical content 'Because of the incompetent Kovachevski, Macedonia has 50% higher inflation than the Eurozone' (15.10.2023). Here the discrediting of the political opponent described as 'incompetent' is additionally reinforced by the title. The example is similar to the comparison presented by H. Mickoski for the so-called trio Kovachevski-Pendarovski-Osmani: 'I often say that if Todor Zhivkov were alive, he would be very proud of these three and would call them, I am sure, as hopeful Bulgarians,' Mickoski said (3 October).

Portal Vecer MK

At VecerVecer.MK, posts where politicians used labelling, biased selection, undermining trust and disinformation stand out. For example:

- Mickoski's speech during the VMRO-DPMNE campaign in Zelenikovo 'It is important! Changes depend on you,' where he qualifies the Government of DUI and SDSM as 'political criminals' presenting unverified findings. The title of the news item is 'Mickoski: The Government of DUI and SDSM increased the debt by almost 2.5 billion euros in 6 years, so that they have more money for fixing tenders', and the text with the same (supplemented) content 'The Government of DUI and SDSM in 6 years, increased

the debt by almost 2.5 billion euros, so that they have more money for fixing tenders, tenders that are then negotiated in four eyes, or in other words, there is a well-founded suspicion of historical political robbery by political criminals who have been running the country for six years.' (19.10.2023). With the presence of the harmful narrative both in the title and in the text, it is further reinforced. Moreover, the same news item, with the same title and content and on the same day, is also present in Republika.

As an example of labelling (negative words) and disrespecting others (political opponents), i.e., character attacks, is the following press release of VMRO-DPMNE in which Prime Minister Kovachevski is labelled as 'incompetent'. The news item under the title 'Because of Kovachevski, Macedonia is at the bottom in the region and Europe in terms of economic development', with the text 'Because of the incompetent Kovachevski, Macedonia has 50% higher inflation than the Eurozone. Macedonia is at the bottom in the region and Europe from the perspective of economic development, because of Kovachevski, Kosovo, Albania, and Montenegro also have greater economic growth.' (15.10.2023). It is the same press release from VMRO-DPME reported on the same day by the Republika portal, but with a partially modified title of the text. But even here the harmful narrative is reinforced by the title.

The other portals

The other analysed portals have a far smaller number of news items with harmful narratives. A few 'peculiar' examples are singled out:

In the **NovaTV.mk** portal, a total of 5 news items with harmful narratives were noted. Nonetheless, the analysis of the news showed that the relatively low presence of harmful narratives in this media is due to the choice of content in which government policies are favoured or uncritically reported. In the analysed days, as many as 40 such texts were noted, in which information is provided about daily activities for the Government or the ministers. The five posts with harmful narratives are dominated by inciting divisions and character attacks. Thus, in the news item 'SDSM: The State Commission for Preventing Corruption refuted the lie of DPMNE and confirmed that there is no conflict of interest for Kovachevski', which is actually a message of SDSM, the political opponent is qualified as someone who spreads 'false news, speculations and fabricated disinformation'. The text says: 'Another fabricated lie by DPMNE about the president of SDSM Dimitar Kovachevski has gone up in smoke... For days, DPMNE led a smear campaign with lies and manipulations. All fake videos, animations, statements, press conferences from the White Palace have been confirmed to be a big lie, nothing more. Nothing changes in DPMNE led by Mickoski.' (15.10.2023). For comparison, the same information, with the same content and on the same day, was published on **A1on.mk** and Lokalno. Only the titles have been changed. In A1on.mk it reads: 'Kaevski: Mickoski and DPMNE should apologize after the State Commission for Preventing Corruption buried their lies about Kovachevski', and at Lokalno 'Another fabricated lie of DPMNE about Kovachevski went up in smoke, they say from Bihachka'.

In the **MKD.mk** portal – most often the harmful narratives refer to the undermining of trust in the institutions. Such is the news item 'Mayors from VMRO-DPMNE have three times higher rating than the Government and this makes SDS nervous' that is the press release by VMRO-DPMNE in which the Government and SDSM are labelled as 'incompetent, corrupt, manipulators'. The text says: 'SDSM are desperate. They see that their rating is sinking due to the incompetence, crime and corruption of the government in which they participate, and therefore they manipulate and blame others.' (31 October, 2023). The same news item, with the same title and content, and date was published in **Republika**. Or the news item 'Mickoski: The Government of DUI and SDSM in 6 years increased the debt by almost 2.5 billion euros, so that they have more money for fixing tenders' where the Government of DUI and SDSM are qualified as 'political criminals' (19.10.2023). This news item with the same title, content and date was published in the portal **Vecer.MK** and **Republika**. The third news item 'Mickoski: The situation is alarming, the elections between the two religious holidays next spring', is the panel discussion on the occasion of 23 October, the day of the Macedonian Revolutionary Struggle (VMRO) with messages from Hristijan Mickoski, i.e. promotion of the party in favour of the people, against the opponents, a small elite group

of people that does not reflect the will of the people. For example, his messages '...massively support the only force capable and ready for change VMRO-DPMNE and the coalition that will be led by VMRO-DPMNE... 'The people are stronger than any small clique and elite playing with fate and taking away the future.' (23.10.2023).

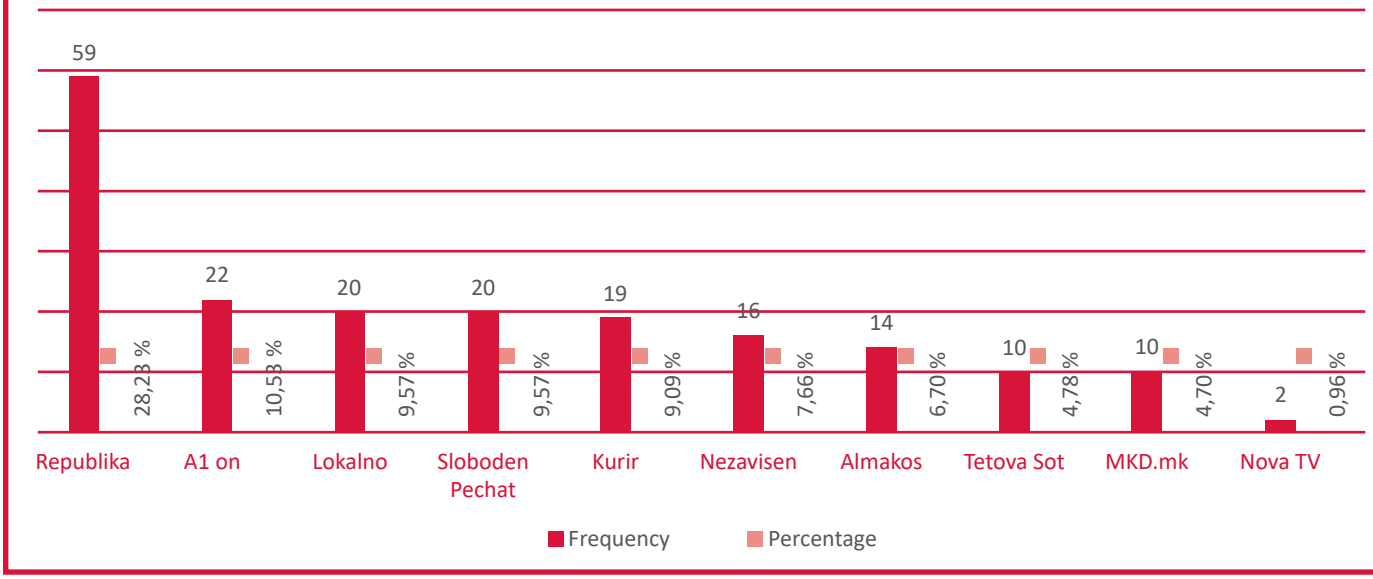
In the portal **Nezavisen**, a harmful narrative with 'allegorical' labelling and character attacks of the political opponent is noted in the statement by Prime Minister Kovachevski in the news item 'Kovachevski: 'Little and 'Big' Gruevski have no ideological differences'. His words are quoted 'Mickoski and Gruevski do not have different political views regarding the isolation of the state, the lack of decision-making, in relation to non-integration into the EU... Look at the position of the current president of VMRO-DPMNE, he is against the integration of the state in the EU and all the time he finds excuses, he has no standing, he shows no determination and it is likely that the debate about who is the Little and who is the Big Gruevski in VMRO-DPMNE is opened to them, regardless of the height of the current president a few tens of centimetres taller, but I think that in ideology the great Gruevski is the one who is shorter in stature.' (3.10.2023). At the same time, the same text, on the same and the next day, with the same or similar title, is found in other portals and televisions, and from those analysed in **Sloboden Pechat** (under the title Kovachevski: 'Little' and 'Big' Gruevski have no ideological differences), **Lokalno** (Kovachevski: In DPMNE there is one Little Gruevski and one Big Gruevski), **MKD.mk** (titled, Television interview, Kovachevski does not negotiate with Gruevski, does not hold a chair for Zaev, and receives advice from Shekerinska) and essentially is about an interview with Prime Minister Kovachevski on TV Sitel. Whether due to the title, whether due to of the content, whether due to the main actor, the news item with a harmful narrative practically multiplies in the media space.

Report September 2023

During September (eight days), a high number of news items with harmful narratives were detected. A total of 209 news items containing harmful narratives were identified in the online media. In terms of genre, they are mostly news items from 'reported speech of a politician' (75) and 'reported press release' (70). Thematically, the most represented is domestic politics (117 news items), and far less, for example, health (36 news items) and the economy (18 news items).

Their frequency varies according to individual online media, and news items with harmful narratives dominate the Republika portal (59 news items or 28.23%). Then they follow A1On.mk with 22 news items, Lokalno and Sloboden Pechat with 20 news items each, Kurir with 19 news items, Vecer MK with 17 news items. Specifically, the image is as follows:

Table 10: News items containing harmful narratives



In terms of genre, the most common forms are 'reported speech of a politician' and 'reported press release', short news items with elements of news, but specific content. They dominate in Republika (19/29 out of a total of 59 news items), but also in A1on (7/12 out of a total of 22 news items), Vecer (7/7 out of a total of 17 news items), Kurir (6/11 out of a total of 19 news items), Nezavisen (10/1 from a total of 16 news items). The most news/news with statements are present in Lokalno (in 17 out of a total of 20 analysed news items), a smaller number of reports, in Almakos, Sloboden Pechat, and incidental comments, analyses/comments and reports.

According to the topic that is addressed in the analysed news items, all online portals mostly reported on issues/problems related to domestic politics. The most of them in Republika, 30 news items (out of a total of 59 analysed), followed by Lokalno in 16 news items (out of a total of 20). In other online media, health is almost equally in focus, apart from domestic politics. Such is the example of Kurir, where out of a total of 19 news items with harmful narratives, 9 refer to domestic politics, and 7 to healthcare. Or, A1On where, in addition to 16 news items from domestic politics, there are also 6 from healthcare. The approach in reporting on the topic, i.e., the announcement of the topic, is almost without exception mirrored from media to media. That is, in the titles of the news items, the main actor is first, individual (for example Mickoski, Osmani, Kovachevski...) or collective (for example VMRO-DPMNE, DUI, SDSM, Levica...) and then part of his/her statement, attitude. A few examples:

- **Mickoski: I am disgusted by the immoral act of Marichikj, their mouth is full of Europe, and there was not even an apology** (Republika, 29.9.2023)
- **Kovachevski: We see the constitutional amendments as a vote for the continuation of European integration** (Republika, 15.9.2023)
- **Central Committee of VMRO-DPMNE: Strong cohesion of our MPs for not accepting constitutional amendments under Bulgarian dictate** (Nezavisen, 21.9.2023)
- **VMRO-DPMNE: The reduction of penalties is a confirmation that the Government is criminal and afraid of responsibility and prison** (Republika, 9.9.2023)
- **Ahmeti: Nazi campaign against DUI and the companies of my relatives** (MKD.mk, 17.9.2023)
- **Mickoski: There should be both criminal and political responsibility for the Oncology scandal because no action was taken for at least 6 months and human lives were allowed to be lost** (A1on, 1.9.2023)
- **Gashi: The authorities agreed in Budapest amnesty for Gruevski in exchange for votes for the constitutional amendments** (MKd.mk, 13.9.2023)
- **Mickoski: I trust Washington and Brussels, but not Sofia, which is pro-Russian!** (Almakos, 29.9.2023)
- **BESA, AA and DD: Ali Ahmeti and Artan Grubi privatized the construction of Corridors 8 and 10** (Tetova Sot, 13.9.2023)

The analysis of the news items identifies a prevalence of (1) allegations of corruption, non-transparency/non-accountability, unprofessionalism, abuse of office without attempting to substantiate those claims (104 cases/posts) and (2) unverified findings (or findings that are difficult to verify) as a basis for accusing political opponents (106 cases/posts). This is followed by news items in which politicians used a populist narrative to directly or indirectly promote their own ideologies and activities as something that benefits the people (47 cases/posts), as well as labelling, mocking and grossly disrespecting other persons (media workers, civil society activists, political opponents, public office holders...), or used negative words (38 cases/posts). They produce, first of all, undermining trust in institutions and biased selection, but also character attacks, demonization, as well as populism, extreme patriotism/nationalism.

The Republika portal has the largest number of news items with harmful narratives, and they most often refer to claims of corruption, unprofessionalism, abuse of office (36 news items) and unverified findings as a basis for accusations of political opponents (30 news items). A few examples:

- News item under the title: 'VMRO-DPMNE: The reduction of the penalties is a confirmation that the Government is criminal and afraid of responsibility and prison', and refers to the adoption of the Criminal Law. VMRO-DPMNE accuses SDSM and DUI of being 'criminals who distribute shady tenders'. The text in the news item begins with the same sentence as the title and is supplemented with several more accusations: **'...SDS and DUI have been committing crimes for 6 years, hundreds of millions were spent on shady tenders, hundreds of millions were shared for contracts in four eyes to companies close to the Government, and now that they are aware that they are failing and that they will have to answer, they are changing the law and reducing the penalties.'** (9.9.2023)

- News item under the title: 'Mickoski: Neither now nor in the future will there be any constitutional amendments under Bulgarian dictate' in which the Government is qualified as 'untrustworthy, criminal', and the text: 'If these are the conditions that will remain, the future Government of VMRO-DPMNE does not intend to enter into the process of constitutional amendments under these conditions, until the conditions change. And what conditions should be changed. They signed the contract with politicians who cannot deliver, have no credibility and are deeply involved in crime. We are aware of that, as a state-building party, on many occasions we have offered solutions. They promoted the Croatian model, we accepted it, then they rejected it, we offered them early elections, guarantees... they refused' (13.09.2023).

In other online media, the number of news items with harmful narratives is far less. NovaTV.mk has a total of two posts with harmful narratives. One refers to inciting divisions with 'we vs. you' narratives, which is in fact a fully reported party press release by SDSM, which states that this party cares about the strategic goals of the state and that the opposition is against the EU: '...DPMNE manipulates citizens with lies about alleged Bulgarianization, assimilation, loss of identity and language, alleged Bulgarian dictate, with unsubstantiated opposition to constitutional amendments, blocking the European path of the country and the European future of the people.' (17 September, 2023). Nevertheless, similar to October, the media's editorial policy regularly and uncritically publishes content about the usual activities of the Government and its ministers (total of 55 publications) which are often news reported by the Media Information Agency (MIA).

Other online media are dominated by labelling, ridiculing political opponents as well as reporting unverified findings as a basis for accusing the political opponent. Thus, in A1on, in almost 1/3 of the analysed news items, labelling, disrespecting other persons is present, in Vecer.mk presenting unverified findings as a basis for accusing the political opponent (in 13 out of 17 analysed news items), in Kurir, there is also presentation of unverified findings (in 13 out of 19 news items), as well as in the Lokalno portal (in 17 out of 19 news items). A few examples:

News item in **MKD.mk** under the title: 'Ahmeti: Nazi campaign against DUI and the companies of my relatives' which is actually only a small part of the interview with the president of DUI, Ali Ahmeti, for TV 21. It was also published in the portals **Lokalno, Republika, Sloboden Pechat**, but also other portals and televisions on 17.9.2023. The text quotes the words of the leader of DUI, Ali Ahmeti, that 'it is a well thought out campaign against me personally and against the Democratic Union for Integration. I can even say that it is a Nazi campaign because they think that the DUI and the Albanians will take their country and economy.' By means of such uncritical reporting of strong and negative adjectives such as 'Nazi campaign' by a political actor, there is room for spreading panic, fear of the presence of Albanophobia and xenophobia, especially since the political entities behind this accusation have not been specified. At the same time, the news item, like many others, has no author, who tailored the short text, why only the indicated parts of the interview are quoted, etc.

News item in **A1on** titled 'Kovachevski: VMRO-DPMNE is like a parrot, elections after elections, ask them what time it is and they will tell you: elections', with the text 'VMRO-DPMNE is like a parrot that repeats the same thing every day. Whatever you ask them, they say elections. What time is it? Elections. What will you do next? Elections. Do you have a plan? Elections. 11 years of elections and only elections. There is only one politician from the European Union who defends the positions of VMRO-DPMNE, and that is Nikola Gruevski from Budapest.' It is news item with reported statements of the Prime Minister Kovachevski from the guest appearance on Kanal 5 television. He uses comparison, correlation, similarity (common features) of the political opponent with a 'parrot' who repeats the same thing every day. (1.9.2023). The news item was also published in **Nezavisen** and **Almakos**, as well as other portals and televisions. In **Almakos** the title is 'Kovachevski with an irony: VMRO-DPMNE like a parrot, whatever you ask them, they say ELECTIONS', 01.09.2023), while in **Nezavisen** titled 'Kovachevski non-humorous, VMRO-DPMNE 'parrot', in addition to Kovachevski's statement about VMRO-DPMNE being like a parrot, the response of VMRO was also given, which 'disputes' the intelligence of Kovachevski and labels the authorities as 'installed'. (01.09.2023).

A news item in **Vecer mk** titled 'Kovachevski with outrageous manipulation in a campaign for EU benefits', with expressed views of the Socialist Party of Macedonia, without an indication of whether, for example, it is a press release by the political party. In the text, numerous epithets are given to Prime Minister Kovachevski as 'self-righteous', 'manipulator', who leads a 'suicidal policy', the Government as 'unpopular', 'illegitimate', 'authoritarian', and SDSM as a 'stateless party' or in 'translation', foreigners, stateless persons. The text says: 'The Socialist Party of Macedonia directs the Prime Minister Kovachevski to the following, the opposition does not support the Government and him because he so requests, but the opposition does not support his national suicidal policy of concessions and the fulfilment of all demands delivered by the Bulgarian side, and they are to the detriment of the Macedonian national interest... The Socialist Party of Macedonia shares the attitude of the vast majority of the citizens on the pernicious policy of SDS and DUI on the enormous damage that their unpopular and authoritarian Government has done to the Macedonian state.' (1.9. 2023)

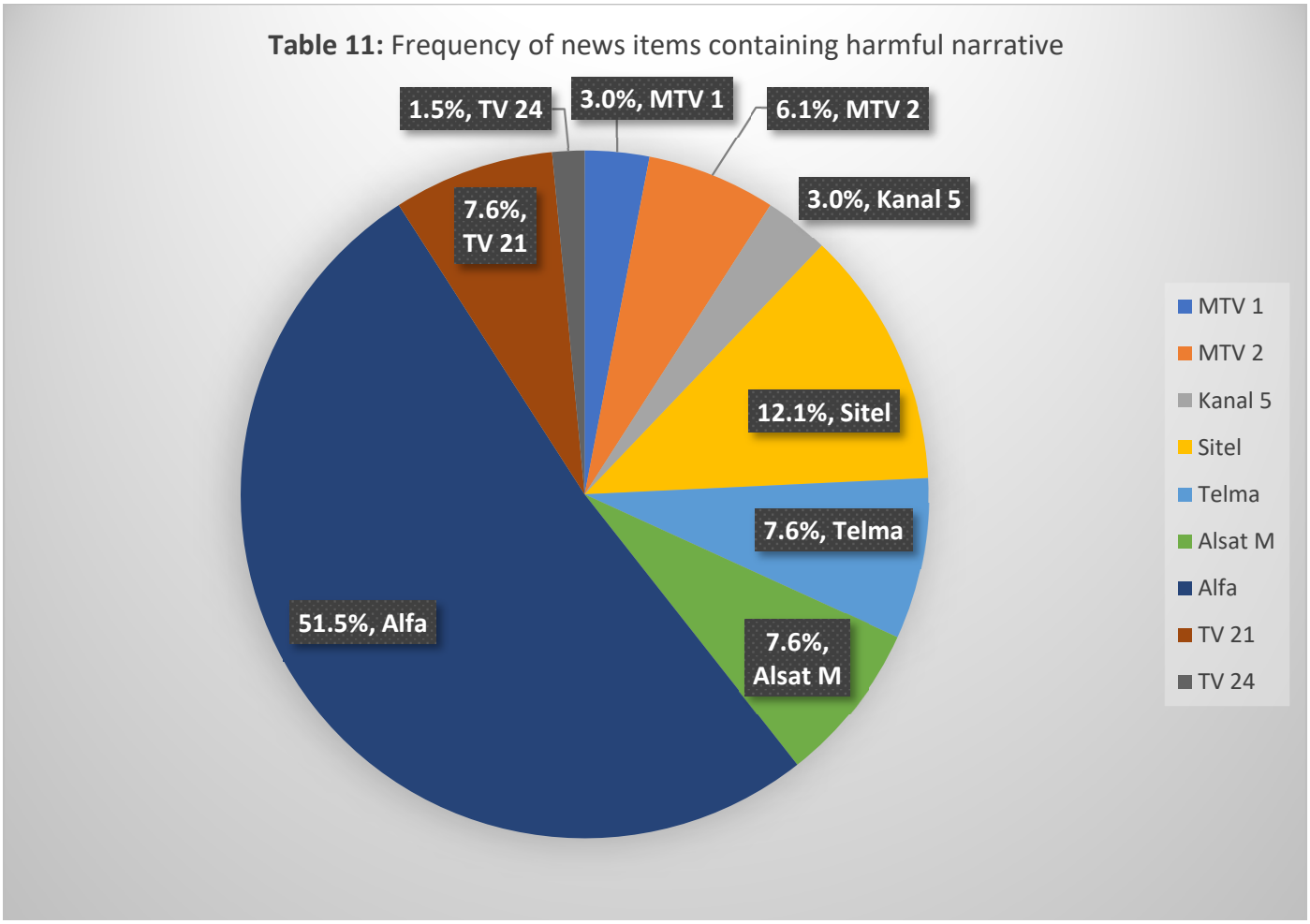
2.2. Report on the monitoring of TV stations' coverage of political actors

In the period of October, the central news of 9 national TV stations was analysed and with the highest viewership, such as: 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), TV21 (private, in Albanian language). A total of 8 days in October were monitored, i.e., the analysis was made from the central news of the above-mentioned TV stations in October on 3, 7, 11, 15, 19, 23, 27 and 31. In September, the central news editions were monitored for a total of eight days, on 1, 5, 9, 13, 17, 21, 25, 29.

October 2023

In the analysed period, a total of 66 news items containing harmful narratives were identified. More than half were registered on the private TV station TV Alfa (34 news items or 51.5%), on TV Sitel 8 such news items were recorded (12.1%), 5 news items with a harmful narrative (7.6%) were registered on TV Telma, TV Alsat M and TV 21, at MTV 2 there were 4 (6.1%), 2 each (3%) at MTV 1 and Kanal 5 and only 1 at TV 24 (1.5%).

Table 11: Frequency of news items containing harmful narrative



The highest frequency of news items with a harmful narrative 12 (18.2%) were recorded on the Day of Commemoration of the Macedonian Revolutionary Struggle, 23 October, mostly in the statements of the politicians who used the date to accuse each other. 10 news items each (15.2%) with a harmful narrative were recorded on 27, 31 and 11 October, when again a national holiday was used for statements through which the political opponents criticised each other. 'I will once again call the cowards from SDSM to face the public,' is part of the statement of the president of VMRO-DPMNE, Hristijan Mickoski, given during the 11 October holiday. (Alfa TV, 11 October, 2023)

Among the news items with a harmful narrative, the most prevalent is the analytical-reportage genre (30 news items or 45.5%), followed by the reports (19 news items or 28.8%). The number of news items in which the speech of a politician is reported is equal to the genre of news or news followed by a statement (7 news items each or 10.6% for each of the two genres).

Through such type of news items, in which only the speech of a certain politician is reported, the journalists and the media give the political actors a platform that they can abuse for their own purposes and calculations, while their statements are not critically analysed by the media.

The largest number of news items, i.e. a total of 50 out of 66 registered with harmful narratives, were broadcast in the first half of the news, i.e., between the first and the fifth report.

Topics, Actors, and Sources of News Items with Harmful Narrative

Domestic politics dominates the TV content where a harmful narrative is confirmed, which should not be surprising, if we consider that domestic political actors are the subject of the analysis. More than half of the news items (56.1 %) are on this topic, followed by the topics of judiciary (10.6 %) and justice (10.6 %). Almost all TV stations fit into this ratio, with the exception of TV Sitel, where we see a more even distribution of topics among the content with a harmful narrative, and two news items each on the topic of domestic politics, economy, healthcare and justice.

The news items with a harmful narrative mostly addressed the constitutional amendments and the upcoming elections, which were often used for mutual accusations and insults.

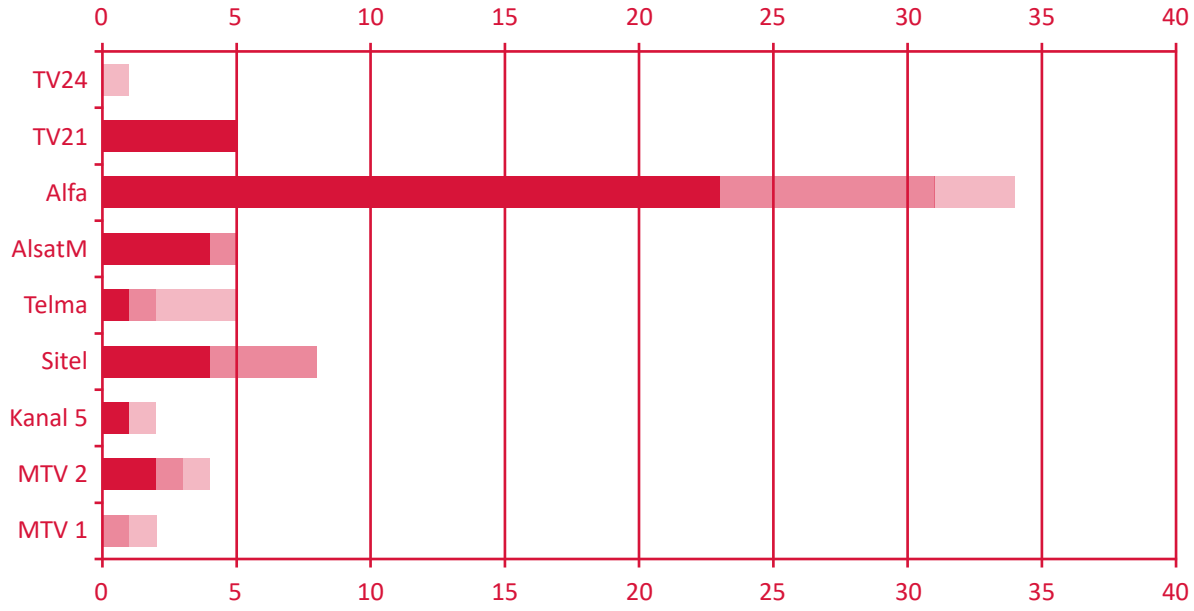
The most common actors who appear in the news items with a harmful narrative are the leaders of the two largest political parties, Dimitar Kovachevski and Hristijan Mickoski. Kovachevski is most often named as 'prime minister' or 'president of SDSM', and Mickoski as 'leader of VMRO-DPMNE' or 'leader of the opposition', which is usually the case with TV Alfa news items (in six out of seven news items he is named as leader of the opposition). In addition to the others, the political parties SDSM, VMRO-DPMNE, DUI and Levica appear as actors in this period, as well as the Government as a special actor. Specifically, for the Government, in one place the qualifications 'small group of people', 'corrupt politicians' or 'cowards' are used (TV 21, 31 October, 2023), while for the parties VMRO-DPMNE and Levica, the political opponents used the expression 'anti-Western party.' It should be taken into account that these lables come from the political actors and not from the journalists, who only report them without critical distance.

The relationship of the journalist to the actors differs among the analysed media. It is mostly neutral at TV Telma, TV 24 and MTV 1, while at MTV 2 and TV 21 an ambivalent attitude of the journalist towards the actors was noted in the largest number of cases. The journalists of TV Alfa usually take a very specific attitude towards the actor, mostly negative, in twelve out of thirteen cases. Thus, Kovachevski, who is an actor in seven of the news items analysed, was referred negatively six times by both the journalist and the political opponents who spoke about him. Such a biased approach of the journalist, who in their news items is emphatically against or on the side of a political actor, is in contradiction with professional journalistic standards. According to the Code of Ethics for Journalists, 'reporting on political processes, especially elections, should be impartial and balanced.' The journalist must ensure a professional distance from political entities[14]'.

The analysis also aimed to determine how much the media reported in a balanced and impartial manner and whether they gave all parties the opportunity to present their arguments and opinions. Analysing this, it was determined that the majority of the reports that contain harmful narratives are one-sided reporting, i.e., out of a total of 66 analysed reports, the journalists in 40 (60.6%) consulted only one side. Here, TV Alfa stands out, where out of a total of 34 news items included in the analysis, 23 contain only one side, 8 have two sides, while only 3 have three or more sides. This is not the case with TV Telma, for example, where out of a total of 5 news items, 1 contains only one side, while 3 contain three or more sides. TV Alsat M, in the 5 news items in which harmful narratives were recorded, showed only one side in even 4, while with TV 21, in all 5 news items, the reporting is one-sided, i.e., there is only one side of the story. In the eight analysed news items of TV Sitel, in 4 one-sided reporting is noted, and in the same number (4) two sides are shown.

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

Table 12: How much media report in a balanced and impartial manner and whether they have provided the opportunity to all sides to present their arguments and opinions



	MTV 1	MTV 2	Kanal 5	Sitel	Telma	AlsatM	Alfa	TV21	TV24
Total	2	4	2	8	5	5	34	5	1
Only one side	0	2	1	4	1	4	23	5	0
Two sides	1	1	0	4	1	1	8	0	0
Several sides	1	1	1	0	3	0	3	0	1

The fact that more than 60% (40 news items, 60.6%) of the news items include only one side, even though they are news items that contain a harmful narrative in themselves, is alarming considering that impartiality and objectivity must be among the most important journalistic standards. Even more, if it is noted that in the largest number of news items in which only one side appears, political actors dominate as the only source of information, which implies the role of the media only as a silent observer of the political events. Especially in cases where the harmful narrative is produced by one of the political actors, the journalist is obliged to consult the other side, i.e., to offer all points of view on the problem or situation.

The visual elements of harmful narratives

Television is a visual medium, i.e., images and video representation play an important role in highlighting messages, ideas and values in society, including highlighting and amplifying the harmful narratives. In exactly half (33 news items) of the 66 news items, in which harmful narratives are noted, archival recordings and photographs are used.

Such is the case with the news item in which a political party claims that the accused in one of the cases is a close associate of the brother of the former prime minister, and in doing so, their separate photos are placed side by side (not their joint photo) to support the party's claim. (TV Telma, 31 October, 2021)

Sometimes, the recordings do not have a clear connection with the topic of the news item, but they aim to strengthen the beliefs and attitudes of the public about alleged dishonest political games or coalitions, criminal agreements or the like.

Often, the news ticker, i.e., the journalist's description of the feature being reported can also reinforce the harmful narrative. 'Prilep under siege: Fearing the people, the Government ordered the police to exert strict control' is a news ticker, which was used on the occasion of the celebration of the 11 October holiday (Alfa TV, 31 October, 2023)

In cases where events from election campaigns or political debates are reported, photography and video footage play an important role in reaffirming the narrative. For the objective approach of the media, it can also be problematic when the footage was not made by the TV station itself, but was taken from YouTube or by the political party, as is the case with the footage from the VMRO-DPMNE pre-election debate, on which the pre-election party slogan is clearly visible (Alfa TV, 15 October, 2023). In such cases, when video material from a third party is used, the source from where it was taken should be indicated.

Occasions for news items with harmful narratives

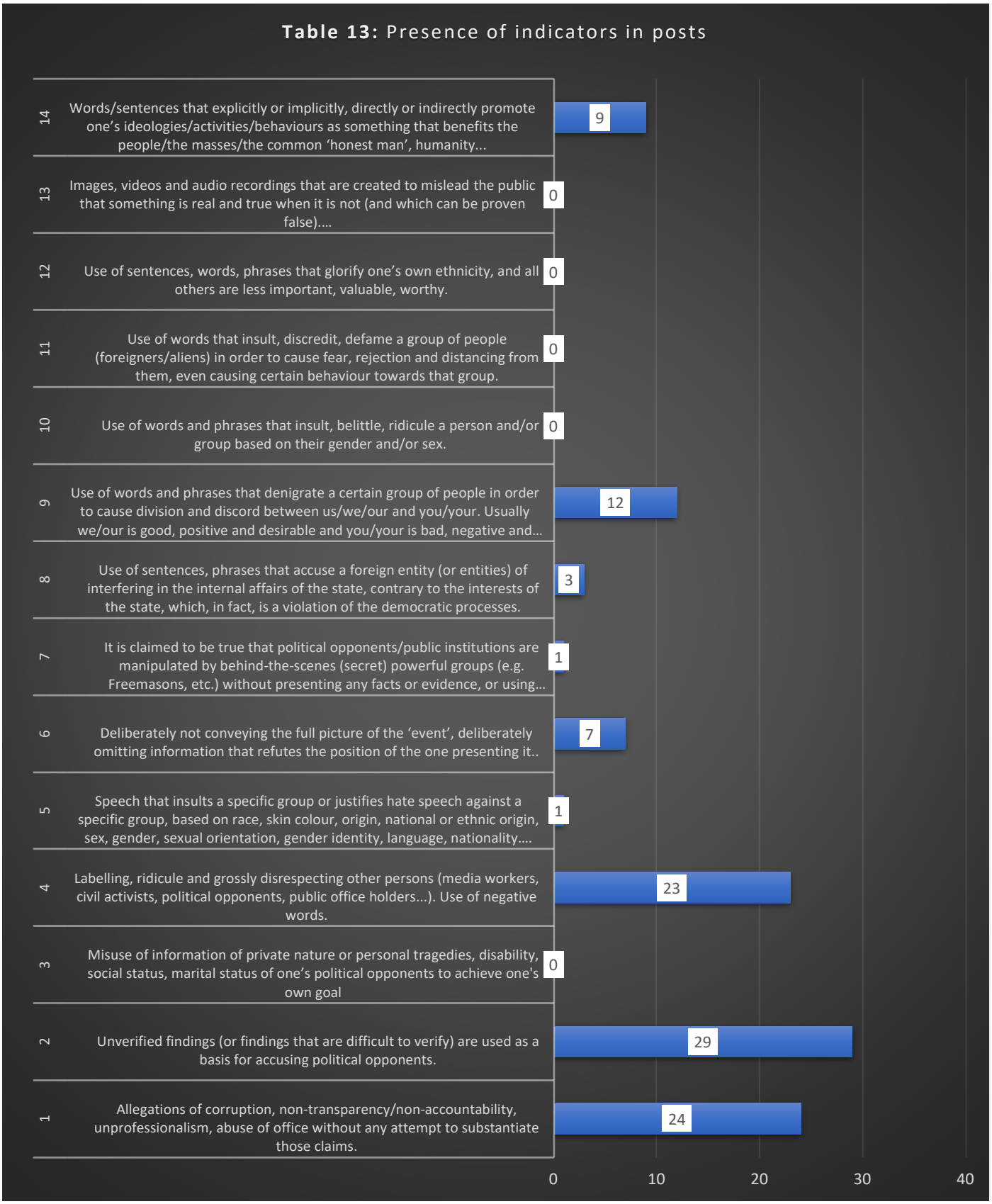
The most common occasion for the TV news items or in 23 of the total 66 news items in which harmful narratives were recorded is some social event or some public topic. Immediately after this, there are news items that have as an occasion a pseudo-event, i.e., an event that was created for no other reason than to generate media attention and publicity. What is interesting is that 16 of these 18 news items were reported on TV Alfa. Pseudo-events, as Daniel Boorstin says, are not spontaneous, they do not come by chance, but someone planned them, instigated them and inserted them in order to get a media space that they would use to promote their own ideas and views.[15] Monitoring shows that these are events that are mostly organised by political parties/actors and attract media attention.

The most common harmful narratives

In October, the most common were news items related to unverified findings (or findings that are difficult to verify) used as a basis for accusing political opponents (total of 29 cases) and the news items related to allegations of corruption, non-accountability, unprofessionalism, abuse of office without attempting to substantiate those allegations (24 cases). Also very frequent (23 cases) are the cases of labelling, ridicule and gross disrespect of other persons and the use of negative words. This is followed by news items in which words and formulations are used that denigrate a certain group of people in order to cause divisions and discord between we/us/our and you/yours (12 cases) and news items in which by using words or sentences they directly or indirectly promote their own ideologies and activities as something that benefits the people, in contrast to the activities and ideologies of the political opponents (9 cases).

15 Daniel J. Boorstin, The Image: A Guide to Pseudo-events in America (New York: Vintage Books, 1992).

Table 13: Presence of indicators in posts



These types of news items promote various types of harmful narratives, starting with Undermining trust (noted in 56 of the news items); Character attacks and demonization (23 examples); Biased selection (20 examples), Disinformation (15 examples); Inciting divisions (12 examples); Populism (9 examples) etc.

A great heterogeneity is noted in the role of the journalist in the creation of the harmful narrative. While in the majority of the media that are the subject of this analysis, the journalist only reports the statements of the political actors without intervention or without taking any position, in some of the reports on TV Alfa and TV Sitel, we see more situations where the journalist directly participates in the creation of the harmful narrative. Out of a total of 34 reports on TV Alfa, where there are a total of 54 indicators of harmful narratives, the journalist produces the harmful narrative alone in 10 of them, while in 20 they produce it together with the political actor. Out of 8 reports with a harmful narrative and 14 indicators that produce such narratives in TV Sitel, 6 times the journalist is responsible for the harmful narrative, while in 4 times they produce it together with the political actor.

An example of lack of professional distance and favouritism of a certain political subject, and attack on the political opponents is the TV Alfa report broadcast on 19 October. 'Another lie by SDSM against the leader of VMRO-DPMNE Mickoski has gone up in smoke. The Prosecutor's Office concluded that there is no evidence for the case known as 'Delchevo fields', with which the Government, through its media, claimed that money from the fields in Delchevo reached VMRO-DPMNE. After the findings and the order to end the investigative procedure for the specific case, it becomes clear that the goal was to deliberately defame the largest opposition party and their leader.' (TV Alfa, 19 October, 2023).

The news item broadcasted on 31 October on TV Sitel is similar, in which the journalist presented the allegations of criminal acts at the oncology clinic in Skopje as facts, fitting them into a rather biased narrative. By the manner in which the report is structured, the choice of statements and their order, the journalist affirms and 'feeds' the opinion that the director of the clinic, crying and justifying herself in front of the committee members, admits guilt and takes responsibility. (TV Sitel, 31 October, 2023)

TV Alfa

In TV Alfa's news, the most noted news items are related to unverified findings (or findings that can hardly be verified) that are used as a basis for accusing political opponents (18) or labelling, mocking and grossly disrespecting other persons (18). Most often, this is reflected in the creation of narratives that undermine the trust of the political opponent (25 cases), character attacks and their demonization (18), biased selection (14), etc.

Out of a total of 34 news items, and 54 identified indicators through which the harmful narrative is produced, in 10 the journalist is the one who creates the harmful narrative, while in 20 they participate in the creation of the harmful narrative together with the political actor. However, although the journalist does not always have a direct role in producing the harmful narrative, in 17 cases they convey it with approval, and only once they convey it with condemnation or criticism. In 13 news items, the journalist supported the indicator of the political actors, which is connected with a certain harmful narrative.

In a news item in which the journalist analyses the survey about the situation in the country, they say: 'There is not even a 'D' from democracy in Macedonia and the country is going in a totally wrong direction. The reason for this is that there are people in the top positions who, instead of thinking and working for the common good, think and work only for themselves and their loved ones. This is the comment of most of the citizens we talked to after several surveys of public opinion came out with worrisome results.' (Alfa TV, 27 October, 2023). Regardless of the fact that, in the survey, the respondents talk about the work of the Government from different aspects, none of them says what the journalist concludes in their comment. Such a comment is an example of insufficient distancing from the political entities and reporting that is biased and not balanced.

TV Sitel

Out of a total of 8 news items, 14 different indicators were registered that led to the emergence of a certain harmful narrative. Regarding TV Sitel, the most numerous are the news items in which the complete picture of the 'event' is not conveyed and information that refutes the position of the one presenting it is omitted (6 cases), three times unverified findings (or findings that can hardly be checked) which are used as a basis for accusing political opponents and claims of corruption, unaccountability, unprofessionalism, abuse of office without attempting to substantiate those claims.

In a news item broadcast on 3 October regarding the amendments to the Criminal Code, the statement of Hristijan Mickoski was reported, saying: 'The second option is to stop playing theatre and remain silent and accept that those who are covered by this law are notorious criminals, people who traded in illegal substances or known as drug dealers, laundered money, extorted money, committed violence and so on.' Although the Law will not cover prisoners who 'laundered money', neither Mickoski nor the journalist explained the details of the law, which supports the claim that the Government will amnesty 'notorious criminals'. (TV Sitel, 3 October).

The most common harmful narratives resulting from this type of news items are biased selection (10), undermining trust (10) and disinformation (6).

In six out of fourteen cases, the journalist produces the harmful narrative alone, while in four they do it together with the political actor. Also, the journalist never once condemned the harmful narrative in the news items, and four times they reported it with approval.

TV Telma

What is characteristic of Telma is that the journalist in neither of the cases produces the harmful narrative, but only conveys the statement of the political actor. In 7 cases, the journalist conveyed the statement of the political actor without any intervention, and in 3 cases they highlight the part where there is an indicator of a harmful narrative, but do not take any position. Such is the example when the journalist conveys the accusation of Hristijan Mickoski, the president of the party VMRO-DPMNE, for corruption in the judiciary, while using discredit and generalization about all judges that they are 'judges from notebooks': 'It is disgusting and nauseating to see the picture with which destroy justice, namely those who jumped on the Lada vehicle and talked about justice while they were in opposition. Judges from notebooks became their servants. Nonetheless, they should know that they will not find a new embrace in the new VMRO-DPMNE government and they will face justice.' (Telma, 23 October, 2023). It is necessary to note that in the TV Telma news item, apart from Mickoski's statement, the views of all stakeholders were conveyed, which is the case for all 5 news items in which harmful narratives were noted.

TV 21

In 5 news items in which harmful narrative was noted with TV 21 in October, most of them were related to unverified findings that were used as a basis for accusing political opponents without attempting to substantiate those claims (3) and with claims of corruption, unaccountability, unprofessionalism, abuse of office without attempting to substantiate those claims (2), while one news item is related to labelling, mocking and grossly disrespecting other persons.

The news item from 27 October and the statement by the president of the Democratic Movement, Izet Medziti, who claims that DUI is pushing for the return of Gruevski is an example of unverified findings being used as accusations, without offering any evidence for it: 'Our sources say that 'DUI has been giving up the constitutional changes for a long time and the only reason why they are so much in favour of Gruevski's return is to bargain with the management of VMRO-DPMNE'. (TV 21, 27 October, 2023).

Undermining trust (5) and disinformation (4) are the most common harmful narratives observed in these news items. Similar to TV Telma, the journalist never produces the harmful narrative and in all cases, only reports about it without any intervention.

TV Alsat M

Similar to the two previous examples with TV Telma and TV 21, and with TV Alsat M, the most numerous are the news items that contain indicators related to unverified findings that are used as a basis for accusing political opponents without attempting to substantiate those claims. One of the news items also contains an indicator of labelling, mocking and gross disrespect of other persons, where in a statement of a representative of VMRO-DPMNE, judges are called 'servants of the Government' (TV Alsat M, 31 October, 2023).

The most common harmful narratives that emerge from these indicators are the undermining of trust (4).

MTV 2

During the monitoring in October, a total of 4 news items were noted that contain indicators of the production of harmful narratives on the second channel of the public broadcaster - MTV 2. Most of them are related to claims of corruption, unaccountability, unprofessionalism, abuse of office without attempting to substantiate those claims (2). An example of such a report is the report broadcast on 27 October, where the statement of the president of the Besa political party, Bilal Kasami, is reported, who, without offering any evidence, accuses the Minister of Foreign Affairs, Bujar Osmani, of manipulating the OSCE chairpersonship:

'Bujar Osmani tried to abuse the chairpersonship of the OSCE to influence the decision on the number of observers from the OSCE for the election process.' (MTV 2, 27 October 2023).

TV Kanal 5, MTV 1 and TV 24

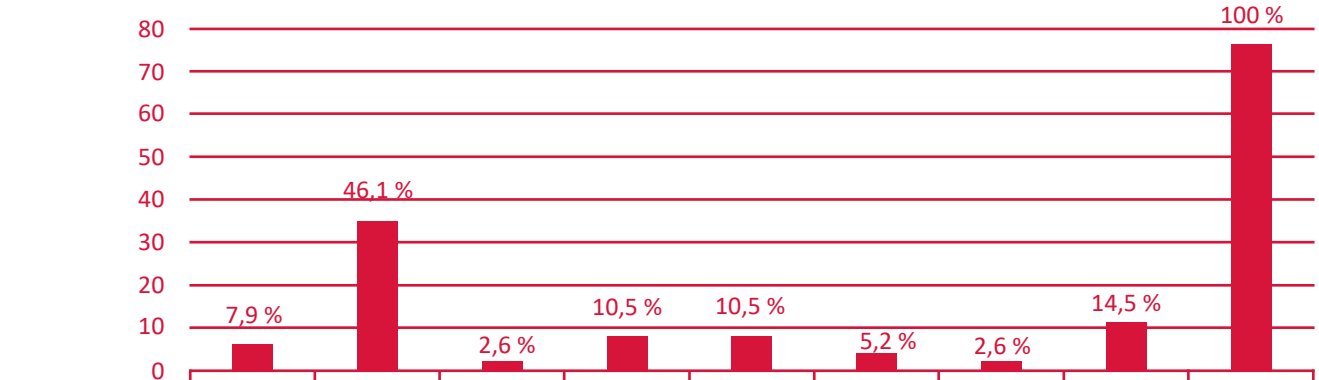
A total of 5 news items were observed on these televisions during the monitoring, 2 each on Kanal 5 and MTV 1 and one on TV 24. Therefore, and due to the lack of sufficiently characteristic examples that could be processed, a more detailed analysis of these media was not conducted in October.

September 2023

In the analysed period, a total of 76 news items with harmful narratives were registered. Most of them were identified on 29 September (15), then on 13 September (13) and on 1 September (12). According to the genre, most often such narratives appear in analytical-reportage news items (26) and reports (17), while there are 11 harmful narratives registered as news or news with a statement.

More than half of the news items (52.6% or 40 news items) belong to the section of domestic politics, while other topics are much less represented, health (10), economy (6), etc. The most common are the news items that cover the debate on the constitutional amendments and the amendments to the Criminal Code.

Table 14: News items containing harmful narratives on TV stations in September 2023



	Alsat M	Alfa TV	Kanal 5	MTV 1	Sitel TV	TV 21	TV 24	Telma TB	Total
Frequencies	6	35	2	8	8	4	2	11	76

The largest number of news items which contain harmful narratives was recorded in TV Alfa (35 or 46.1%), while in other media, the number of such news items is smaller - TV Telma (11), MTV 1 (8), TV Sitel (8), Alsat M (6), TV 21 (4) and TV 24 and Kanal 5 (2 each). One important detail should be taken into account here, which is who and how the harmful narrative is created and what is the role of the media and the journalist in this process, i.e. do they just report the statement of a certain politician without taking any position or do they also actively participate in creating or reinforcing a harmful narrative. Thus, in news items on TV Alfa, in 4 cases the journalist is the one who produces the harmful narrative, while in 11 they do it together with the political actor, while regarding TV Sitel and MTV, there are 3 cases each where the journalist and the political subject together produce the registered harmful narrative. On the other hand, in the reports that were registered with other television stations, the journalist mostly just conveyed the statement of the political actor, which contained false accusations, insults, populism, etc. without taking a stand or intervening in any way.

The most common harmful narratives

In this initial monitoring, the most notable are the news items related to unverified findings (or findings that are difficult to verify) used as a basis for accusing political opponents (total of 38 cases) and the news items related to allegations of corruption, non-accountability, unprofessionalism, abuse of office without attempting to substantiate those allegations (26 cases).

Then the news items follow in which we notice labelling, ridicule and gross disrespect of other people and the use of negative words (15 cases), as well as the news items in which one's own ideologies and activities are promoted as something that benefits the people, in contrast to the activities and the ideologies of the political opponents (14 cases). Such news items mostly refer to the undermining of trust, biased selection, as well as attacks on the person, i.e., demonization.

The following are some examples that may serve as an illustration of such (ndings:

TV 24 reports an accusation from VMRO-DPMNE about the import of 20 tons of carcinogenic long-life milk from Serbia that ended up on the shelves of the country's markets: 'Instead of full control during food imports, Food and Veterinary Agency under the leadership of Babovski knowingly puts into use products with carcinogenic substances' (September 29). In the case, the journalist mechanically combines the press release/accusation of the VMRO DPMNE party and the rebuttal from the Food and Veterinary Agency, while it remains unclear whether the party submitted proof/document about imported milk with aflatoxin, because the journalist says 'in the document provided by the opposition, they say that...', indicating that the journalist has not seen the document. Information related to the health of citizens and their lives, apart from being of the highest public interest, always causes strong emotions and panic. Therefore, accusations of the existence of products that can endanger health, even more 'knowingly putting into use carcinogenic substances' should not be broadcast without an attempt to verify the data.

MTV 2 uncritically and promptly in the announcement reported the statements by Prime Minister Dimitar Kovachevski and the Minister of Economy Kreshnik Bekteshi that in Novaci 'the largest photovoltaic plant in the Balkans has been put into operation' and that 'the solar insolation in our country is the best compared to all countries in the world.' (MTV 2, 29 September). The facts presented by the government representatives are disinformation because FEC Novaci is not the largest solar power plant in the Balkans, there are much larger ones in Greece and Bulgaria. Nor is the solar insolation in Macedonia the best compared to all countries in the world (source: www.balkangreenenergynews.com, www.reuters.com).

In a news item on Telma TV, on 13 September, the statement by SDSM was reported, accusing the Parliamentary Commission investigating the work of the Oncology Clinic of only obstructing the investigation: 'DPMNE has sunk so low that it abuses the sick and instead of welcoming the investigation, hinders it, with attempts to politicize it and confuse it with a non-existent competence. This only confirms that Mickoski is afraid of what the investigation will show, about everything that was done at Oncology years ago.' (TV Telma, 13 September, 2023).

TV Kanal 5 broadcasts a part of the speech by president of DUI, Ali Ahmeti, who claims that a Nazi campaign is being waged against the Albanians: 'I can even say that it is a Nazi campaign because they think that DUI and the Albanians will take their country and economy.' (TV Kanal 5, 17 September, 2023).

In the report on 21 September, broadcast on TV Sitel, the journalist quotes part of the Facebook status of Nikola Gruevski, in which qualifications are presented for VMRO-DPMNE MP, Antonio Miloshoski: 'When a new leader steps in, he spits on the previous one, so it will be when Mickoski leaves the top position' (TV Sitel, 21 September, 2023).

Although not very often in this period, there are still reports in the media in which political actors, and sometimes journalists, use sentences and formulations that accuse a foreign entity of interfering in the domestic affairs of the state.

Such is the example of the news item broadcast on 21 September, on TV Telma, in which a Facebook status from the leader of DUI Ali Ahmeti is reported, who accuses a neighbouring country of provocations and as he says 'igniting an evil fire': 'This serious provocation is intended and with a predetermined agenda, so it should be managed with coolness and wisdom, because the consequences may be regional, i.e., they may affect peace and stability in the region. Urgent action is needed to extinguish the murderous and evil fire that aims to spread throughout the country and the region.' (Telma TV, 21 September).

TV Alfa has the most news items in which harmful narratives appear, and they mostly refer to unverified findings as a basis for accusations of the political opponents (23 news items) and claims of corruption, unprofessionalism, abuse of office (14 news items).

Here are some examples:

- In the news item reported on 21 September, the statement by the president of VMRO DPMNE, Hristijan Mickoski, is broadcast: 'VMRO-DPMNE and Macedonia have an option at this moment. Either choose the axis between the Democratic Union for Integration, SDSM, former, small structures from VMRO DPMNE, their secret meetings and continue to sink into crime, corruption and national defeats, or choose reforms and a real perspective.' (TV Alfa, 21 September, 2023)
- TV Alfa reports the Facebook post of the former Prime Minister Nikola Gruevski, who accuses the current leadership of the party: 'He told the party members and activists not to fall for what he says are disastrous strategies.' To think with their own head, to look for solid evidence when they are forced to condemn someone out of nowhere, so that they do not end up in a situation where they apologize and justify that they were lied to, that they blindly trusted someone, that now it is their fault, they did not know them you are doing well or similar.' (TV ALFA, 21 September, 2023).
- In the news item dated 21 September, Hristijan Mickoski says: 'You hear from international media, credible sources, who are the ones who divided Macedonia, but at the same time destroyed justice and the sense of justice in Macedonia.' (Alfa TV, 21 September, 2023)

In 5 news items reported on TV Alfa, labelling and insults towards certain participants in political life can be noted.

- - Such is the example of the report broadcast on 29 September, and the statement by director Jani Bojadzi: 'I am sorry, but it's the methods you use. You have long mastered the works of your grandfathers and your communist fathers, and you have turned into bloodsuckers of the Macedonian future.' (Alfa TV, 29 September, 2023)

Among **other TV stations**, the number of news items in which harmful narratives appear is significantly lower. Similar to the example of TV Alfa, where most often appear unverified findings as a basis for accusations of political opponents, as well as claims of corruption, unprofessionalism and abuse of office, while the news items in which insults and labelling were registered are in smaller numbers.

- In a news item reported on TV Telma, Prime Minister Dimitar Kovachevski labelled the judiciary from the previous system as evil, comparing it to the film character from 'Star Wars' - Darth Vader, who is the personification of evil in this science fiction series: 'What we had before was a law in which the punishments were from some communist period, because they were made by I call someone the 'Darth Vader' of the Macedonian judiciary and prosecution, and that does not mean that they should not be changed.' (TV Telma, 13 September, 2023).
- In an interview with TV 21, the president of the Democratic Movement, Izet Medziti, claims that the Minister of Justice did not sign the amendments to the Criminal Code because he is either against European reforms or because he thinks that these amendments are against European values: 'It means that either the Minister of Justice is against European reforms or knows that this has nothing to do with reforms, this is a devaluation of European values, and that is why he did not sign it.' (TV 21, 25 September).
- On 17 September, TV Sitel broadcasted a news item containing part of the press conference of VMRO-DPMNE, where, among other things, the President of the country is insulted and called a liar: 'Unfortunately, the President of the country is a puppet of the Government and a president-liar.' (TV Sitel, 17 September, 2023)

SUMMARY

The analysis from the monitoring of the media contents of the televisions shows that as the election date approaches, the rhetoric of the political actors and the number of statements containing harmful narratives intensify.

Media coverage of **the online media October** is replete with a large amount of content with harmful narratives. In October, 154 news items with harmful narratives were identified, and in them the frequency (number) of these narratives is 386 times, i.e., more harmful narratives appear in a large number of news items. This image is predominantly influenced by two online media (out of a total of 11 analysed), Vecer.MK and Republika, in which the negative narratives are by far the most numerous (a total of 253 posts).

In the 11 online media, one-sided information dominates: in 130 posts or 84.4% of the analysed content, the media reported the position of one side, and even when they consulted two or more (129 news items, or 86.0%). This is followed by the occasion for the releasing of the news item, where the primacy is held by the so-called pseudo-events, i.e., events that are created to attract media attention. Mostly these are party press conferences, statements of political actors, etc. (87 posts or 57.2%), and far fewer current events (28, or 18.4%) or current social topics that require more time, resources and dedicated journalistic engagement (23, or 15.1%). The indisputable dominant presence of the political actors indicates the easily accessible media space they enjoy and which can be (mis)used to discredit political opponents. The largest number of these posts is not signed by an author, as many as 139 news items (90.3%).

Regarding the presence of the harmful narratives, the most common are claims of corruption, unprofessionalism, abuse of office; unverified findings as a basis for accusing political opponents; labelling, mocking, disrespecting other people; promoting one's own activities/behaviour in favour of the people against the activities/behaviour of opponents who serve a small elite. At the same time, the fact that the largest number of posts in these two media have no author, and in terms of genre they are usually defined as a reported speech of a politician and a reported press release, points to the knowledge that their 'creators' are the political entities, while the portals/journalists appear in the role of 'bare' transmitters of their messages, press releases, speeches. Hence it is to be expected that these news items are dominated by only one, albeit precise, source of information. Consequently, two to three key actors, both individual and collective (political parties and their presidents, spokespersons, MPs, the Government), are usually noted in the news items, with the most negative assessments of them by other actors. This is followed by the thematic structure of these news items, with a focus on domestic politics, i.e., the European integration of the country, constitutional amendments, upcoming elections, but also corruption in the Government, healthcare, judiciary, prosecutor's office.

During the month of **September**, the number is also high; the figure of 209 news items with harmful narratives in the analysed online media for a period of eight days of monitoring is even worrying. Thus, the frequency, i.e., the multiple repetitions of harmful narratives in one news item, is additionally reinforced by their presence in the titles of the news items. These narratives are mostly recognised in the reported speeches of the politicians and the press releases of the political parties.

The most numerous are those with claims of corruption, unprofessionalism, inaccuracy (without their support) as well as unverified findings as a basis for accusing political opponents. Of all analysed online media, Republika stands out with the largest number of news items with harmful narratives (59 in total), and Nova TV with the smallest, negligible number (only 2) of harmful narratives. Nonetheless, it is Republika that predominantly influences the production, the creation of the 'image' for the presence of the harmful narratives in this type of media.

Regarding the news coverage by the **TV stations in October**, in the analysed period (eight days), a total of 66 news items containing harmful narratives were identified. More than half of them were registered with the private TV station TV Alfa (34 news items or 51.5%) and 8 such news items (12.1%) were noted in TV Sitel. Other television stations have less content in which harmful narratives have been detected.

The political actors who dominate such reports usually come from the largest political parties SDSM and VMRO-DPMNE, which can mean two things – that they are the most frequent creators of such narratives or that smaller parties do not receive equal space in the main news on TV stations.

With the exception of TV Alfa, in which there are cases where journalists participate in the creation of the harmful narratives with their reporting and framing of the news items, in the rest of the cases the journalist is mostly just a silent reporter of the political statements, without setting a filter for such a narrative. The lack of a professional barrier and verification of statements that promote accusations without evidence, populism, intolerance, spreading disinformation and even hatred towards certain groups only encourages the political actors who see the media as a free platform to promote their harmful narratives.

One-sided reporting by some media, i.e., the presentation of only one side in the report, is a serious problem that points to unprofessional reporting and an imbalanced and biased attitude.

The most frequent actors who appear in the news items with a harmful narrative are the leaders of the two largest political parties, Dimitar Kovachevski and Hristijan Mickoski. Kovachevski is most often named as 'Prime Minister' or 'President of SDSM', and Mickoski as 'leader of VMRO-DPMNE' or 'leader of the opposition' (which is usually the case with TV Alfa's news items). In addition to the others, the political parties SDSM, VMRO-DPMNE, DUI and Levica appear as actors in this period, as well as the Government as a distinctive actor. Specifically, for the Government, in one place the qualifications 'small group of people', 'corrupt politicians' or 'cowards' are used (TV 21, 31 October, 2023), while for the parties VMRO-DPMNE and Levica, the political opponents used the expression 'anti-Western party'. It should be taken into account that these designations come from the political actors and not from the journalists, who only convey negative labelling without critical distance.

In the total of eight days that were the subject of the monitoring in **September**, a total of 76 news items were registered in which one or more harmful narratives were recorded. They are mostly accusations of unprofessionalism and corruption without offering evidence, but news items insulting and labelling political opponents are not rare.

References

1. Graef, J., da Silva, R., & Lemay-Hebert, N. (2018). Narrative, Political Violence, and Social Change. Studies in Conflict & Terrorism, 1-13. doi:10.1080/1057610X.2018.1452701. ISSN 1057-610X
2. Polletta, F., & Callahan, J. (2017). Deep stories, nostalgia narratives, and fake news: Storytelling in the Trump era. American Journal of Cultural Sociology, 5(3): 392-408. doi:10.1057/s41290-017-0037-7. ISSN 2049-7113
3. Shenhav, S. R. (2006). Political Narratives and Political Reality. International Political Science Review, 27(3): 245-262. doi:10.1177/0192512106064474. ISSN 0192-5121

Institute of Communication Studies

www.iks.edu.mk
info@iks.edu.mk

НЕ ВЕРУВАЈ ПРОВЕРУВАЈ! #користифакти

British Embassy Skopje

UKaid from the British people

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.



Institute of Communication Studies

ШТЕТ-НА

НЕ ВЕРУВАЈ ПРОВЕРУВАЈ! #користифакти