



**SUMMARY**

**THE  
NARRATIVE  
TRAP:**

**EXPOSING HARMFUL NARRATIVES  
USED BY POLITICIANS AND MEDIA**

**Title of the Monograph:**

The Narrative Trap: Exposing Harmful Narratives used by Politicians and Media

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# INTRODUCTION

Since the dawn of time to the present day, in the world of politics, the publicly uttered word has had the weight of a 'mountain'. In ancient times, political rhetoric was considered a science, and today it is apostrophised as a skill. For the politicians, it is a 'privilege' to (in) directly address the public, but also, it is a 'responsibility' on the manner they will act, what and in what manner they will say to their citizens who elected them to lead and govern the state. The political actors create and use narratives to shape the public opinion, thereby influencing the political behaviour and the decision-making. Hereupon, they also use the media to promote their narratives. The goal of the media is to inform, educate the public, and ensure pluralism of opinions, positions and reliable facts regarding all social processes. The misuse of the public communication space with potentially harmful content and narratives with disinformation, false, inaccurate, malinformation, hate speech not only contaminates the political 'arena', but poses a serious challenge and threat to democracy. Communication science, political science, and psychological science constantly warn, numerous theories have been developed, and a series of laws, declarations, and codes have been passed to 'defend the truth.' With the rise of the information and communication technologies, the challenge has become even greater. The circle is increasingly widening, including all forms and methods of public political communication, all entities, from ordinary citizens to the highest political structures in the country, and along with it, the potentially harmful content and information.

The Macedonian political scene is 'living' the same upheavals, especially emphasized in the 20s of the 21st century. A period burdened with serious issues crucial to the development of the country: change of the name of the country, entry of the R.N. Macedonia into NATO, start/stagnation of negotiations for EU membership, change of the Constitution, growth of Euroscepticism, relations with Bulgaria and Greece, change of government (presidential and parliamentary elections 2024), judicial reforms, corruption scandals in numerous social spheres. This socio-political context is 'susceptible' to the creation of harmful stories of the political opponents, divided into 'patriots' and 'traitors', 'honest' and 'criminals'. There is deep political polarization, the media and the information literacy are poorly developed, the online space is insufficiently regulated, and the public communication sphere is increasingly polluted with disinformation, inaccurate and malinformation, propaganda, and hate speech. Attacks, belittling, labelling and insults towards the 'other' are a routine, without arguments and facts, and the different opinions are not heard or perceived. All forms of political communication have been activated through the traditional media, the social networks, the alternative platforms, private chat groups, echo chambers as 'companions' in order the political messages to reach the citizens.

In the absence of in-depth research that reveals the scope, the sources, and patterns of the harmful content that 'contaminate' the public communication space, it is necessary to answer several key questions: who are the creators and the conveyers of harmful political narratives, what the nature, frequency, and context of harmful political narratives is, what the rhetorical strategies and techniques in their communication with the public are, as well as what the violations of public communication standards are. The answers to all these questions are

provided by the Determining Political Harmful Narratives (HARM-TIVE) research conducted between September 2023 and May 2024, empirically observing harmful political narratives - the main research problem - operationalized through a series of indicators. You can see the entire monograph [here](#).

# CONCEPTUAL AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

## NARRATIVES IN POLITICS

Political narratives are structured representation (personal and collective) of political events that provide frameworks through which individuals and groups understand the world, interpret their roles in the political life, and assign meaning to the political and the social events. Political narratives help individuals and groups understand the political reality. Political actors use them to portray events in a certain way, to legitimize their actions, and to promote the collective identity. They influence the perception of the political issues, linking them to a broader story that may include elements of history, ideology, or cultural values. In fact, through the repeated storytelling, groups and individuals establish a shared sense of belonging and continuity, goals, and values that help maintain the political cohesion (Patterson and Monroe, 1998; Shenhav, 2006).

Political narratives not only shape and reflect, but sometimes distort the political reality, as well. Their role in politics is to serve as essential tools for constructing meaning and organizing complex political realities (Patterson and Monroe, 1998; Shenhav, 2006). By framing events and issues through storytelling, the political actors help the public interpret the political events in ways aligned with their agendas and commitments. They are dynamic and adaptable, and as political contexts change, so do the narratives, allowing the political actors to respond effectively to the changing realities. This allows them to remain relevant and prevailing, adapting to new information or changes in the political landscape. Their power lies not only in describing but also in constructing the political reality, thereby influencing the public perception and behaviour. They differ in content and objectives. They are used for positive purposes, promoting civic engagement and impartial public information, but also in negative manner for manipulative purposes, distorting facts, reinforcing divisive stereotypes, inciting prejudice and hostility towards certain groups, creating and supporting negative perceptions for political purposes. The latter are defined as harmful political narratives and can increase polarization, divisions, and undermine trust in the institutions, which in turn leads to social and political conflict. (Wodak, 2015; Sokol & Sarajlić, 2023). They spread particularly quickly in the era of the social media, the 'information bubbles', and the echo chambers' and can be a powerful weapon in the hands of various actors aiming to destabilise democracy and abolish humanity. The most discussed, analysed and researched aspects of the political narratives are: framing (appropriate choice of words, images, metaphors), message (aligned with the political agenda and constantly repeated), emotion and identity, simplicity and bias (easily 'digestible' for easier acceptance), consistency, media and communication channels (speeches, debates, social media, advertisements for 'covering' the news), narrative evolution (adaptability to time and circumstances) and effects (influence on public opinion and public perception, mobilization of the electorate).

## THE ROLE OF EMOTIONS IN NARRATIVES

Emotions play a key role in storytelling as they increase the involvement and the engagement of the listeners, help retain the narrative content in the memory and influence the positions and the behaviours of the audience. Emotionally 'charged' stories capture attention and foster a connection between the storyteller and the audience. Evoking emotions such as joy, sadness, or fear creates a unique experience that leads to deeper involvement of the individual. This emotional resonance is essential for effective communication and persuasion (Bruner, J. 1991). Well-crafted narratives typically follow a structure that builds tension and resolution, evoking emotions and leading to a cathartic experience for the audience (Scully & Seger, 2003). Emotion in storytelling can shape the positions and behaviours of the audience by creating empathy for the characters or the situations. When the audience emotionally identifies with the story, they are more likely to change their beliefs or take action based on the presented narrative (Green & Brock, 2000).

Especially significant is the role of emotionally charged words as conveyors of meaning, expressions of feelings, and catalysts of change. A single word can incite a storm of emotions, changing the direction of a conversation, interpersonal relationships, and even life. These are expressions, phrases burdened with underlying meaning and an additional package of emotions that go beyond their semantics. They add intensity to the conversation or written text, and not only are they heard and read, but they also influence thoughts and emotions. They are more impactful than neutral words because they provoke emotional reactions to manipulate public opinion and serve a specific agenda. Politicians often pay particular attention to these powerful words when preparing their speeches and messages, aiming to tap into the emotions of the public (D'Ambrosio, 2022). Their effectiveness lies in language, which is more than just a means of communication, a tool for influence, persuasion, and inspiration. In human interaction, the words serve as threads that connect us (Tausczik & Pennebaker, 2010). As any other tool, they can be used for both constructive and destructive purposes. Just as they can offer comfort and foster connection, they can also serve as tools of manipulation, harm, or division. It is, therefore, no surprise that the leaders, marketing professionals and communication specialists pay close attention to the emotional resonance of their language, using it to evoke specific reactions from their audience, subtly manipulating feelings and thoughts. On the other hand, the excessive use of these words in politics can sometimes blur the line between truth and perception.

## POLITICAL ACTORS AND HARMFUL NARRATIVES

Political actors, as creators, constructors and producers of the political narratives, shape and frame the stories or the narratives that define issues, events, policies and political identities. Hence, they are indeed a powerful, yet legitimate tool for the political actors to engage, inform and mobilise the public. However, precisely because they can shape beliefs, attitudes, and behaviours, they also carry significant ethical responsibilities. In political communication, there is a consensus on the need for a political culture of correctness and respect for all participants in the communication process, reflected in numerous documents (declarations, recommendations, and codes) that define the standards and principles of political communication. These documents serve as the foundation for defining, understanding, and recognizing harmful narratives in

political discourse. Political entities, politicians, officials, government and public servants, and parties have an obligation to apply ethics in communication. This implies honest, conscientious, and responsible fulfillment of work duties; preservation of freedom of speech; refraining from engaging in or supporting hate speech; maintaining a high level of transparency before the public and the media on matters of public interest; remaining impartial, retaining objectivity, and prioritizing official duties over personal interests; and using and sharing only verified information, avoiding the spread of disinformation. Therefrom the principles of ethical communication arise, preserving freedom of speech, not spreading hate speech and discriminatory speech, transparency and accessibility to the media, professionalism and impartiality in communication, and evidence-based communication.

## **MEDIA AND HARMFUL NARRATIVES**

The media play a central role in conveying, amplifying and sometimes even creating political narratives. They serve as a bridge between the political actors and the public, offering specific frameworks for the stories they share, which undeniably influence how people understand and respond to the political events, policies and ideologies. As primary sources of information with a broad audience, the media's approach to political narratives can profoundly influence public opinion and shape political culture. Therefore, respecting professional journalistic standards is imperative.

When reporting on harmful political narratives, the professional journalists are expected to adhere to the values upheld by these standards. Although debates continue today regarding the fundamental values on which the journalism profession rests, there is a consensus on the key postulates—*independence, impartiality, accuracy, autonomy, transparency, and constructiveness*—values that are translated into journalistic standards that inspire trust, or in other words, *credible journalism*. The main standards regarding sources are: *verification (respect for the facts, their verification, multiple sources, the public's right to know), comprehensiveness (first-hand information, own observation, reliable indirect sources), confidentiality of sources (reliable sources), more than one source (not just a single source, questioning all those covered), citing sources and their protection (transparency and their protection, avoiding vulnerable sources – children, victims of crime, accidents, disasters), payment/acceptance of money (avoiding payment for information and money from/to sources)*. Main standards in relation to news are: *avoiding dramatization and reconstruction (accurate and precise quotes in a given context), distinction between facts and opinions (difference between factual information and normative statements), context (facts in perspective, relevant context), fairness (reality is not black and white, stating which groups and interests are involved in a particular event), avoiding polarization (telling the whole story, not just extremes), privacy (respect for the integrity of individuals, their privacy)*.

## **NEOLOGISMS IN THE POLITICAL NARRATIVES**

One way political actors seek to shape political reality is by using neologisms in political discourse. These newly coined expressions, phrases, or redefined words can become powerful tools for presenting certain issues, creating new associations, simplifying and emotionally

'charging' political issues in ways that align with particular political agendas. They can bring clarity, identity and unity, but they can also lead to manipulation, oversimplification, and polarisation. When used responsibly, they can enrich public discourse and help societies tackle new challenges, but when used irresponsibly, they can distort reality and lead to a range of harmful consequences.

In politics, they are used to enrich the political lexicon, but also for a certain degree of control and framing of the narrative. Thus, they influence the public to adopt and use these new words, most often associated with discrediting political opponents and negating and/or ridiculing different political ideologies. Political language shapes the emotional identity of the public by offering something to belong to, something to care about, or by prompting a decision about which group to belong to, and from which to fear and attack (Luu, 2016). Politicians are considered masters of creating new words, especially during election campaigns, skilfully influencing voters, most often with new terms that target the character of a political opponent and belittle some of their traits. They simultaneously flatter and, in a way, command citizens, as language users, to adopt the replacements for some existing words with new ones. Over time, these innovations attempt to generalize, change the meaning of words, and make them suitable for further dissemination in society (Booij, 2005; Saeed, 2009). Once, almost all political terms were political neologisms and have their own history of creation. Their acceptance in a language depends on the significance of the concept that a particular neologism represents. Some have a short lifespan, while others become an integral part of the language. This is especially problematic when it comes to harmful narratives, because in this way, they enter everyday use and become 'normalised'.

## POLITICAL NARRATIVES THROUGH THE PRISM OF THEORIES

**Framing Theory** (Goffman, 1974) is one of the most commonly applied approaches and relates to the manner the information is presented to the public, shaping their perception and understanding of political issues. It is widely used in political communication and media studies to explain the manner the public discourse can be influenced by the way the issues are presented. Political actors use 'frames' to highlight certain aspects of an issue while minimizing others. This selective approach affects perceptions, thinking, decision-making, and people's behaviour. The basic concepts of the theory include the idea of *frame*, a mental structure that helps in the interpretation and organization of information with a focus on specific elements of a story, and *framing*, the process through which communicators (media or political actors) construct a certain way of understanding an issue. In political communication, framing is a powerful tool for shaping public opinion and influencing the political debates. The politicians, the media, and the interest groups use framing to promote their agendas by emphasizing certain issues and perspectives, which include narratives that align with specific values, ideologies, or emotions. The frame determines what will be included or excluded in the conversation. The theory aims to explain the political narratives and their impact through several concepts—defining the problem (what the problem is and who is responsible for it), moral evaluation (judgments of right and wrong), causal interpretation (attributing causes), and proposing solutions. Finally, framing often relies on metaphors or symbolic language to create vivid and emotionally resonant narratives.

**The Theory of Strategic Narrative** focuses on how actors—the states, the political leaders, or the institutions—construct and communicate stories to shape perceptions, define reality, and influence

the behaviour of both domestic and international audiences. These narratives are deliberately designed to achieve political, social, or cultural objectives, such as securing public support, legitimising certain actions, or guiding policy. The theory includes the concepts of narrative (a coherent story that connects events, actors, and actions, shaping how people understand a situation), strategic action (the deliberate use of narratives for specific purposes—impacting the public opinion, gaining political legitimacy, or obtaining international support), narrative alignment (the process of aligning one's own narratives with the dominant or desired understanding of an issue), and power and influence (soft power through shaping beliefs, behaviour, and values of the audience). The strategic narratives are employed in both domestic politics and international relations to achieve the political objectives by shaping the perceptions. The politicians and the states use narratives to communicate their values, justify decisions, and legitimise their actions. In a political context, these narratives help present complex issues in alignment with target audiences, encouraging identification with certain policies or worldviews (Miskimmon, A. et al., 2013).

**Discourse theory** focuses on language and analyses the manner the language is used to construct power, ideology, and identity. The political narratives are analysed within the broader discourse, emphasising how they reinforce or challenge the existing power structures. For example, the political speeches are analysed to understand how the politicians construct the national identity or portray their opponents (Fairclough, 2001). The Theory is a frame used to understand how the language, the symbols, and the communication practices shape reality, identity, and power relations in the society. At the core of this theory is the *discourse*—a system of meaning or a particular way of speaking and understanding of the world. It is more than just language - it includes practices, ideas, and representations that shape the knowledge and the social reality. Discourse (Foucault, 1969) is closely linked to *power*, meaning that those who control the discourse can shape what is considered 'truth' or 'common sense' in the society. Also *the articulation* or construction of connections between different ideas is important, symbols, or social practices to create a coherent narrative or worldview. In the concept of *hegemony* (Gramsci, Laclau, Mouffe, 1985), certain discourses become dominant and naturalized, while others are marginalized. The political struggle is often a battle for establishing hegemony by making a particular discourse appear as 'common sense.' The political narratives are discursive strategies that create meaning, legitimize power, and shape the public policy by defining problems, assigning blame, and proposing solutions.

**The theory of symbolic interactionism** emphasizes the role of symbols and meanings in shaping interpersonal interactions (Blumer, 1969; Mead, 1934). It focuses on the ways individuals create, interpret, and respond to symbols in their everyday interactions. People act based on the meanings things have for them—meanings that arise from and are shaped through the social interactions. At the core of the theory is the understanding that reality is socially constructed through communication, and meaning is constantly negotiated and revised in interpersonal relationships. The theory is often used to explain how individual identity, social roles, and group dynamics are shaped by symbolic meanings that emerge in the communication. Its key concepts include *symbols*—objects, words, gestures, or actions with specific meanings in a given culture or context created through social interaction; *meaning*, which is determined through interaction and changes based on context or perspective, so people behave towards things based on the meaning they hold for them; and *self-concept*, where individuals develop self-identity through interactions with others, i.e., taking on the role of the other. Political narratives can be explained through this theory with a focus on the ways political actors (politicians, media, and voters) create and negotiate meanings through symbols, language, and interactions. Political symbols—such as flags, slogans, or iconic figures—carry powerful meanings constructed by individuals/groups within the society.

Various scientific disciplines - the political science, the communication studies, sociology, social psychology, and linguistics, have focused their research on the impact of the narratives on public opinion, political behaviour, identity formation, and policymaking.

***The Influence of the Political Narratives on Public Opinion.*** Numerous studies indicate that framing narratives, emphasizing certain aspects of an issue over others, influences public opinion and political decision-making, and how people interpret and evaluate information (Chong & Druckman, 2007). The effectiveness of the framing depends on the credibility of the source, the frequency and the repetition of the narratives, the frames (through which things should be interpreted), and the susceptibility to manipulation of the audience. When competing frames exist (different politicians presenting opposing views), individuals' interpretations are influenced by their prior beliefs, political knowledge, and values, which mitigate the impact of framing effects. Narratives with predictions about future outcomes influence the public attitudes towards the political issues. Appeals to certainty for a particular policy increase support for it, while those focused on uncertainty and negative predictions about another political option reduce public support for it (Jerit, 2009).

***The Role of the Narratives in Policymaking.*** Studies that seek to systematically examine the role of narratives in policymaking, i.e., how narratives about political problems and solutions shape the political debates and outcomes. Research findings support the idea that narratives are essential in shaping the public opinion and the policy preferences because they simplify complex issues, making them more accessible and persuasive (Shanahan & McBeth, 2018). Successful policy narratives often contain clear elements such as heroes, villains, victims, and moral lessons, which help audience connect emotionally and cognitively with the messages of the policy. They can either drive policy change or reinforce the status quo, depending on how they present and frame the issues, mobilize the supporters, and shape the perceptions of legitimacy and urgency.

***The Connection between the Media and the Political Narratives.*** Studies exploring the role of the media in creating, spreading, and amplifying the political narratives highlight that the media influence the public perception of political issues, the shaping of democratic discourse, and civic engagement, often through framing, selective coverage, and agenda-setting. Therefore, the public perception of the political issues depends on whether and what kind of political narratives the media convey, as well as how selectively or comprehensively they present them. The proliferation of media channels and digital platforms has fragmented audiences, potentially fostering echo chambers and ideological polarization, which in turn amplifies political narratives. Hereto, media coverage of the political narratives can either strengthen or undermine political accountability (Bennett & Entman, 2001). Although the media have the potential to hold political leaders accountable for their statements and actions, they often consciously prioritize sensationalism over substantive reporting, affecting the public's understanding of important issues. However, equally problematic are 'episodic' narratives, which focus on individual cases rather than thematic ones, leading the audience to attribute responsibility for social problems to individuals rather than systemic factors. These narratives undermine accountability by obscuring the role of the government, the institutions, or the social factors in addressing complex issues, resulting in less informed and more individualized views of the political responsibility (Iyengar, 1991).

***The Importance of Emotion in Political Narratives.*** Scientific interest focuses on the influence of emotions on the political culture, the citizen mobilization, and the formation/construction of

identities. Research confirms that political narratives that evoke strong emotions, particularly enthusiasm and fear, significantly impact voter engagement and decision-making. Appeals to enthusiasm increase voter interest and encourage political participation, while appeals to fear make people more open to new information, re-evaluating, or changing their attitudes (Brader, 2005). The concept of 'dual emotional systems' is also highlighted: disposition and surveillance, where disposition is associated with habitual actions and reinforces loyalty to certain policies, while surveillance is activated when people sense a threat, prompting a more careful evaluation of political information. Additionally, 'deep stories' containing emotionally charged narratives that reflect people's life experiences and values, play a significant role in the construction of the political identities and perspectives. These narratives often transcend the facts and are more closely tied to the personal and collective experiences. Narratives rooted in nostalgia are particularly effective in mobilizing support for political movements, evoking a sense of longing for an idealized past while offering a sense of belonging and identity. (Polletta, Callahan, 2017). According to all studies, the political campaigns can strategically employ emotional appeals to trigger specific voter responses, making emotions a powerful tool for influencing election outcomes (Brader, 2005). Emotions play a central role in informed political reasoning, shaping how individuals interpret, engage with, and respond to political events (Marcus & MacKuen, 2000).

**Populist Narratives and their Impact on the Public.** Populism, as an ideology, views society as being divided into two antagonistic groups: 'the pure people' versus 'the corrupt elite' (Mudde, 2004). The dualistic frame lies in the foundation of much of the populist rhetoric and strategy. Its appeal lies in its simplicity, making it particularly attractive to the citizens who feel excluded or alienated from traditional political elites. This adaptability allows populism to thrive across various political contexts and ideologies, ranging from right-wing nationalism to left-wing movements opposing the social order. This type of narratives can mobilise the disengaged voters and challenge the entrenched elites, yet they also risk undermining the democratic norms by fostering division, reducing tolerance for pluralism, and eroding institutional checks and balances. Populist narratives associated with right-wing movements use rhetoric of fear, both within and outside groups, to construct feeling/connection/identity. They often present their views as 'common sense,' appealing to 'the ordinary people' against 'the elites.' This approach helps legitimise the exclusionary policies so that they do not reflect the authentic, natural will of the people (Wodak, 2015).

**Political Narratives and Conflicts.** Narratives embedded with conflicts (cultural, historical, social) that influence how the public perceives itself and its own identity. The emotions these narratives provoke play a crucial role in maintaining conflicts. Fear, anger, and distrust are typically embedded into these narratives, reinforcing the negative perceptions of the opposing group and hindering the possibilities for reconciliation or dialogue. Both the leaders and the institutions significantly influence the dynamics of the intractable conflicts and can perpetuate narratives that justify ongoing hostilities or, conversely, promote dialogue and peace-building efforts (Bar-Tal, 2007). They also play a crucial role in shaping individual and collective identities. While they can deepen and perpetuate divisions, they also hold the potential to foster empathy and dialogue. By understanding and engaging narratives 'with one another, together,' bridges can be built, and identities can be transformed (Hammack, 2011).

**Hate Speech in the Political Narratives.** Research shows how political leaders and movements use hate speech to target specific groups, inciting violence and discrimination, and how they create an 'enemy' or scapegoat and reinforces dehumanization. The concept of a 'dangerous speech' narrative has a high potential to incite mass violence, and identifying specific speech

patterns and contexts that increase the risk of violence is crucial for prevention (Benesch, 2014). It has also been found that the use of counter-narratives—positive responses to hate speech—can prevent mass violence or reduce the impact of the harmful narratives. This includes raising awareness among the communities and the individuals to produce alternative messages that promote inclusion (Gagliardone, Alves & Martinez, 2015). Effective counter-speech strategies include public condemnation of inflammatory rhetoric, promoting positive messages, and amplifying peace messages. One method to prevent violent rhetoric and potential mass violence is community monitoring and alerting, which includes media and public message tracking.

***Polarisation and 'Us vs Them' Narratives.*** Research has identified rising political polarization as a challenge for democracies worldwide, dividing societies along ideological, ethnic, or religious lines. Key factors contributing to polarization include identity politics and the strategic manipulation by the political elites, economic inequality, and the influence of social media. Leaders often exacerbate the divisions to mobilise support, framing the opponents as existential threats to the values or the survival of their group (McCoy, Rahman & Somer, 2018). A significant number of polarizing narratives contribute to the decline of democracy by delegitimizing political opponents and weakening democratic norms, such as mutual tolerance and institutional checks and balances. This intensifies the power struggles and weakens the trust in the democratic institutions. 'Identity-based polarization' is also observed, with the strengthening of group loyalty and out-group hostility. It erodes democratic norms, fosters an environment where compromise and cooperation become increasingly rare, while individuals justify undemocratic practices in order to 'defend' their group's values and power (Mason, 2018).

***Discrediting campaigns as harmful narratives.*** Discrediting campaigns significantly influence the political landscape, undermining the candidates and the parties through targeted disinformation and character attacks. They foster an environment of distrust and hostility among the electorate. Narratives that rely heavily on gender stereotypes in the political discourse that marginalise female candidates and reinforce traditional gender roles, not only affect the candidates individually, but also they perpetuate the social inequalities. Addressing the challenges posed by the harmful narratives requires a collective effort from the political actors, the civil society, and the media organisations to promote accountability and encourage a 'healthier' political discourse (Sokol & Sarajlić, 2023).

***Disinformation as harmful narratives.*** Disinformation is understood as deliberately false information created and distributed to manipulate public opinion or obscure the truth, serving specific political purposes such as delegitimizing opponents, influencing public perception, and election outcomes, as well as strategically advancing certain agendas or narratives (Freelon, Wells, 2020). Its spread is facilitated through social media platforms, whose design prioritizes engagement over accuracy, exacerbating the problem by amplifying sensational and false content. They generate more interest and shares compared to the traditional news sources (Allcott, Gentzkow, 2017; Guess, Nagler, Tucker, 2019). Disinformation has also been shown to influence citizen behaviour, disrupting civic engagement by creating an environment where citizens are more likely to disengage from the political processes or become confused as regards the political issues. This fragmentation further weakens the democratic institutions and processes. In summary, disinformation, as a type of harmful narrative, poses significant challenges to the democratic processes by undermining the trust in the institutions, polarising the public opinion, and creating confusion regarding the factual information.

***Social Media as Boosters of Harmful Political Narratives.*** A key research challenge is understanding how social media platforms amplify harmful political narratives, facilitating the rapid spread of disinformation, hate speech, and extremist content. Initially, they facilitated the

democratic movements by providing a platform for mobilization and expression, but later they significantly contributed to political upheaval, polarization, and the spread of disinformation. Thus, while the social media enable more direct interaction between the citizens and the political figures, mobilizing and encouraging political engagement, they can also lead to the erosion of the role of traditional media as a gatekeeper, raising concerns regarding the quality of information and the potential for manipulation, as well as exacerbating divisions, reinforcing extremist views and fuelling conflict (Tucker et al, 2017).

# RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

## SUBJECT, OBJECTIVES, RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The subject of this research is the harmful political narratives in the political communication. The research problem is the way in which narratives are constructed by political actors and the way in which the media reports on them. The objectives of the research are: analysis of the narratives of political actors, identification of dominant harmful narratives, rhetorical strategies and techniques in communication with the public, analysis of the way these narratives are conveyed to the public by the media.

The main research question is: **Do and how harmful political narratives get created and spread in Macedonia?** This is further specified in the following direction:

- How do the main political actors (parliamentary composition from 2020 to 2024 and government composition from 2023 to 2024) construct/create harmful narratives on their official websites and Facebook profiles (the vocabulary used)?
- What harmful narratives are constructed and sent to the public by major political entities, including the prevalence of the types of harmful narratives?
- What topics are harmful narratives most commonly constructed around?
- What are the main violations in the political communication of the political actors?
- How do the media broadcast the political narratives created/shared by the political actors?
- Are there and what are the main violations of the professional journalistic standards for fair, equitable and impartial reporting on political actors and conveying their narratives?

## VARIABLES, INDICATORS FOR HARMFUL NARRATIVES

A *harmful narrative* is a key variable, a narrative of the political actors that does not have a benevolent goal or content, does not serve to promote civic activism, instead of promoting civic activism or merely informing the public, it seeks to manipulate, undermining democratic and humane values. Such narratives can have damaging consequences across nearly all aspects of social and political life. The list of harmful narratives created for the purposes of the research is adapted to the desk analysis, consultation of reference literature, and in accordance with the socio-political context of Macedonia. A total of 14 indicators have been defined that refer to one or more types of harmful narratives. Their common denominator is that the recognized claims are not supported by facts and evidence. The purpose of these indicators, as operationalised harmful narratives, is to recognise and conduct a detailed analysis of the harmful narratives.

A list of all indicators, as well as the harmful narratives they may refer to:

	Indicators	Related harmful narratives
1	Claims of corruption, non-transparency, unaccountability, unprofessionalism, abuse of official position without attempting to substantiate those allegations.	Disinformation.  Undermining trust in institutions - if unsubstantiated claims are about the public office holders or institutions.  Biased selection.
2	Unverified findings (or findings that are difficult to verify) are used as a basis for accusing political opponents.	Disinformation.  Undermining trust in institutions.  Biased selection.
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.	Malinformation.  Character attacks, demonization.  Hate speech.
4	Labelling, ridicule and grossly disrespecting other persons (media workers, civil activists, political opponents, public office holders...) Use of negative words.	Character attacks, demonization.
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, healthcare status, personal capacity and social status or any other grounds.	Hate speech.
6	Deliberately not conveying the full picture of the 'event', deliberately omitting information that refutes the position of the one presenting it.	Disinformation.  Undermining trust in institutions.  Biased selection.  Manipulative audio-visual media content.

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.	Disinformation. Conspiracy theories. Spreading panic, fear and uncertainty. Foreign influence.
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.	Foreign influence. Spreading panic, fear and uncertainty.
9	Use of words and phrases that denigrate a certain group of people in order to cause division and discord between <i>us/we/our</i> and <i>you/your</i> . Usually <i>we/our</i> is good, positive and desirable and <i>you/your</i> is bad, negative and undesirable.	Fomenting divisions. Spreading panic, fear and uncertainty.
10	Use of words and phrases that insult, belittle, ridicule a person and/or group based on their gender and/or sex.	Sexism. Character attacks, demonization. Hate speech.
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.	Xenophobia if they are foreigners. Ethnocentrism. Spreading panic, fear and uncertainty.
12	Use of sentences, words, phrases that glorify one's own ethnicity and all others are less important, valuable, or worthy.	Ethnocentrism. Extreme patriotism and/or nationalism
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).	Disinformation. Manipulative audio-visual media content. Spreading panic, fear and uncertainty. Biased selection. Character attacks, demonization. Hate speech.

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.	Populism. Foreign influence. Extreme patriotism and/or nationalism Conspiracy theories.
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## METHODOLOGICAL TECHNIQUES, TOOLS, SAMPLE, RESEARCH DYNAMICS

The research is exploratory, with qualitative analysis supported by basic quantification. In addition to the general scientific methods of interpretation and classification, the following methodological techniques for analysis were applied:

- **Content Analysis** – Conceptual and relational analysis of the content of posts on official websites and Facebook pages/profiles of key political actors: political parties, party leaders, ministers, as well as news reports from central TV stations and posts on informative online media regarding socio-political and economic topics.
- **Critical Discourse Analysis** – Analysis of the language (linguistic means), rhetoric, and framing strategies used by political actors and the media.
- **Component Analysis** (Lexical Units) – Analysis of the word-forming components from a lexicosemantic, syntactic, and stylistic perspective.

The empirical research is conducted over the period from 1 September, 2023, to 31 May, 2024, in two time intervals: a six-month pre-election period and a three-month period during the election campaign and the presidential and parliamentary elections. The implementation took place on two levels: first – monitoring with the application of three templates for tracking and analysing official websites and Facebook profiles of political actors; analysis of the main news from selected TV stations and the informational content of selected online media; and second – communicative analysis of neologisms.

More details on the methodology and samples are available. [here](#)

# POLITICAL HARMFUL NARRATIVES IN NUMBERS

## HARMFUL NARRATIVES CREATED BY POLITICAL ACTORS

The analysis answers the following questions: *What is the dynamics with which political actors use harmful narratives? What are the most commonly used harmful narratives? What form are harmful narratives conveyed in? How do the political actors present themselves in the harmful narratives?* The monitoring includes the following political actors:

POLITICAL PARTIES – OFFICIAL WEBSITES AND FACEBOOK PROFILES	
Macedonian bloc	Albanian bloc
1. VMRO-DPMNE	4. Alliance for Albanians
2. SDSM	5. Alternativa
3. Levica	6. DUI
	7. Democratic Movement
LEADERS OF THE POLITICAL PARTIES – OFFICIAL FACEBOOK PROFILES	
Macedonian bloc	Albanian bloc
1. Hristijan Mickoski	4. Arben Taravari
2. Dimitar Apasiev	5. Afrim Gashi
3. Dimitar Kovachevski (in this position since February 2024)	6. Ali Ahmeti
	7. Izet Medjiti
GOVERNMENT OFFICIALS – OFFICIAL FACEBOOK PROFILES	
Macedonian bloc	Albanian bloc
1. Bisera K. Stojchevska	6. Artan Grubi
2. Ljupcho Nikolovski	7. Kreshnik Bekteshi
3. Dimitar Kovachevski (September 2023 – January 2024)	8. Krenar Loga
4. Bojan Marichikj	9. Jeton Shaqiri
5. Jovanka Trenchevska	

**Findings from the Analysis of Political Actors:** The monitoring was conducted over 137 days, with a total of 1,342 posts containing harmful narratives, averaging more than 100 posts per month. In these posts, three times more harmful narratives were produced—**3,967 harmful narratives**, or an average of three harmful narratives per post. The key producers of harmful narratives are the political parties (a total of 3,365), while the harmful rhetoric of party leaders and government representatives is concentrated during the election period. The production/communication of

harmful narratives in political communication by all political actors to the public shows two trends in dynamics: An increasing trend, peaking in December 2023 (the departure of the Government and the formation of a Caretaker Government) and in April 2024 (presidential and parliamentary campaign, conducting of the first round of presidential elections), and a **decreasing** trend from January 2024, reaching its lowest point in May 2024, after the elections. The presence of harmful narratives was not linear—one post did not necessarily contain just one harmful narrative, but in most cases, multiple harmful narratives were present in a single post. For some political actors, two, three, and in some cases, four, five, or even six harmful narratives were observed in a single post, which indicates an intensified negative/harmful rhetoric aimed at positioning themselves as the top political choice for citizens in the elections. The most frequently used harmful narrative (37 %) was ‘undermining trust’ in institutions, ranging from the state institutions and local governments to the political parties as institution and the media. Immediately after, almost as often, is the biased selection of data and information in two directions – smearing political opponents or ‘beautifying’ one’s own image, by omitting important data, which in turn can lead citizens to wrong conclusions. Far less frequently are character attacks, by labelling, belittling and/or smearing political opponents, then inciting divisions, by deliberately distinguishing between ‘us – the good, the prosperous, the progressive’ and ‘them – the bad, the backward, the destructive’ and populism by using words and sentences to promote one’s own ideologies or activities for the benefit of the people.

One-fifth of the political actors presented themselves as saviours and defenders of the people against the political opponents allegedly working to destroy the country. The government officials mostly (one-quarter of them) present themselves as being EU-oriented. Among the political parties in the Macedonian bloc, the then ruling party portrayed itself as the only option for a European future, while the largest opposition party pledged to defend national interests, restore national dignity, and return the state to the hands of the citizens by decisively combating corruption. A smaller opposition party from the Macedonian bloc positioned itself as the only uncorrupted political option committed to protecting national interests. Among the political parties in the Albanian bloc, the ruling party presented itself as pro-European, against the harmful Russian influence, and as a champion of true values and the defender of the people (primarily the Albanian population). The opposition, united in a three-party coalition, portrayed itself as a better alternative to the ruling party, advocating for the Albanians, fighting against corruption, and defending the interests of the ordinary people.

Reasoned and sharp criticism of the political opponents during the pre-election period is expected and present in every democratic society. However, the creation and the distribution of harmful narratives in the public space can contribute to the polarisation of the public debate, normalisation of the poor communication practices, and violation of the ethical and professional communication standards. A discourse containing unfounded accusations, attacks, insults, and offensive language on the public scene and in the public communication can lead to fomenting even greater divisions based on ethnicity and politics, ultimately reducing the trust in the electoral process and the institutions. When the offensive vocabulary is not condemned, its use is not restricted, after a long period it can be accepted as part of the general lexicon of the language, and thus enable the spread of harmful narratives and a low culture of the public speaking. The responsibility of the political actors in fostering a culture of public communication is crucial. Hence, the principles of political communication based on evidence, professionalism and impartiality, ethics, and the rejection of hate speech and discriminatory language.

## MEDIA REPORTING ON HARMFUL POLITICAL NARRATIVES

The analysis addresses the following questions: *What is the dynamic of media reporting on harmful narratives, and what are the most commonly used harmful narratives? Who created the harmful narrative – the political actor or the journalist? How many sides are represented, and how many sources are consulted in reports containing harmful narratives?* The monitoring was conducted on two types of media, differing in the channels through which they communicate with the public, their target audience, and the way they are regulated. The list includes public and private national TV stations, as well as online news media outlets.

TELEVISION STATIONS	
MTV 1 (public)	TV 24 (private)
MTV 2 (public, in Albanian language)	Telma (private)
Alfa TV (private)	Alsat M (private, in Albanian language)
Kanal 5 (private)	TV 21 (private, in Albanian language)
Sitel TV (private)	

Sample of informative online media outlets

INFORMATIVE ONLINE MEDIA OUTLETS	
Vecer.mk	MKD.mk
Lokalno	Republika
Nezavisen	Kurir
Sloboden Pechat	Almakos
A1on.mk	Nova TV
Tetova Sot	

**Findings from the Media Analysis:** Media reporting on harmful political narratives is intensely present both on national television broadcasters and in online news media. The TV station monitoring was conducted over a total of 69 days, identifying **669 news item containing harmful narratives**, with a monthly average of 74 news items. In contrast, the online media recorded a total of 1,908 posted news items containing harmful narratives, (or averaging 212 per month) approximately 600 more than those created by the political actors themselves. This is primarily because the same content was posted by multiple online media outlets, or multiple news items were posted about the same event. Thus, they have amplified the impact of the harmful narratives by providing a platform for the political actors to reach broad audiences, not only those who follow the communication channels of the parties and the Facebook profiles of the politicians.

The harmful rhetoric dictated by the largest and most powerful political actors is almost entirely mirrored in prime-time TV news and the headlines of online news platforms. The highest peaks of toxic narratives and interparty accusations occur in January, before the official start of the election campaign and in April, at the height of the campaign. The numbers confirm that the political elite has exceptionally easy access to the media agenda, enjoying the comfort of

imposing topics important to them, shaping public opinion, and dominating the public sphere. Online news media have broadcast the highest number of informational news items containing harmful narratives, even three times more than the TV stations, which actually have the lowest involvement in spreading harmful narratives (compared to political actors, who are the primary creators of these narratives). When adding the number of broadcast harmful narratives, the lack of seriousness and (ir)responsibility of the analysed actors regarding their professional duties toward the public becomes evident. Once again, the online news media lead the way, broadcasting three times more harmful narratives than the TV stations. However, the political actors hold the primary role in spreading these narratives. Although regulations exist to ensure professionalism and correctness in the public communication for each of these actors, almost none have adhered to them.

Theoretically, if a citizen regularly follows the communication channels of the political actors, television stations, and online media, they would be exposed to an average of 435 news items containing harmful narratives in a single month. This theoretical 'exaggeration' is hypothetical and serves as an illustration of the excessive exposure of the citizens to harmful narratives. The potential consequences of such high exposure are multiple and far-reaching, negatively impacting democracy, societal well-being, and, above all, the citizens themselves. Therefore, adherence to positive regulations and standards of fair public communication (both political and media-related) is a responsibility that political actors and media professionals should be reminded of more frequently. The trust that the citizens place in both politicians and media professionals obliges them to uphold transparency, impartiality, civility, and communication based on evidence and facts.

The most frequently broadcast harmful narratives in television and online media almost entirely mirror those most commonly shared by the political parties. The top three most common types of harmful narratives are the same across all three groups—political actors, television stations, and online media: undermining trust in the institutions, biased selection of information, character attacks. The key difference between the political actors and the media is that, in media reporting, the harmful narrative of spreading disinformation ranks among the top five. Furthermore, when analysing the manner the media report on harmful narratives, the role of journalists often emerges as that of a passive reporter, without critical analysis of the harmful claims, accusations and statements of the political actors, without providing multiple perspectives on the narrative, by consulting only one source in most cases, it becomes even clearer how much the public has been exposed to narratives that arouse feelings that can inhibit or encourage unproductive behaviours, even aggression.

When presenting harmful narratives, online media almost identically inform the public by: unilaterally reporting the speech of political actors or a political statement from a specific political party, often with a short text or a few paragraphs, sometimes with just a few sentences from their statements or positions on a particular issue. A reader who does not follow the events daily must make an effort to understand the information, what was said, why, when, and where. A specific practice of some online media is the tendency to create multiple posts from a single event or pseudo-event (such as a press conference or debate show) focusing on different issues or topics. Television reporting also largely follows a one-sided approach, consulting only a single source in reports or analytical features containing harmful narratives. This is alarming, given that impartiality and objectivity should be among the most important journalistic standards. This concern becomes even more pronounced when it is observed that in the majority of reports featuring only one side, political actors dominate as the sole source of information, implying that the media acts as a passive observer of the political events. Especially in cases where the harmful narrative is produced by a political actor, journalists are obligated to consult the opposing side and provide all perspectives on the issue or situation.

# KEY FINDINGS FROM THE ANALYSIS OF THE POLITICAL ACTORS AND THE MEDIA

## POLITICIANS CREATE, MEDIA SUPPORT THE SPREAD OF HARMFUL NARRATIVES

Politicians demonstrate enormous 'creative' potential in the creation of harmful narratives, both in terms of the volume and frequency of their production, as well as the content and diversity of these harmful narratives. On average, they create over 400 harmful narratives per month. Political actors use numerous communication channels to spread these narratives, including their own websites and Facebook pages, online news media, television, press conferences, and public statements that they send to both TV stations and online media outlets. In media reporting, the most common forms of communication are press conferences and public statements. Thus, the political actors effectively cover the entire informational space.

For every harmful narrative created by political actors, the media have supported and reported these narratives to the public, allowing them to penetrate the media landscape and reach a wide audience. In the case of online news outlets, they often report more harmful narratives than the creators themselves. On average, TV stations broadcast over 100 harmful narratives per month, while online media broadcast over 400. This is a concerning finding, both with regard to political actors' roles in the media and the role of journalists. From politicians who earn the trust of citizens, the public expects transparent, dignified communication based on evidence, not the creation of narratives that undermine the sense of security and trust. Media outlets must serve as 'guardians' of the truth and impartial reporting. Media reporting should provide the public with complete, accurate, and evidence-supported information, explaining different viewpoints, so that the public can make informed decisions.

## HARMFUL NARRATIVES - A PRIMARY COMMUNICATION TOOL IN ELECTION CAMPAIGNS.

The discourse, primarily based on unsubstantiated claims, without evidence or facts, used to undermine trust in institutions and opponents (a total of 3049 recorded attempts to undermine trust in institutions within the discourse of the political actors and in the media reporting), in which information is selectively chosen in favour of one's political option (a total of 2039 recorded attempts of biased selection of information by the political actors and the media) or uses offensive language against the political opponents (a total of 953 recorded character attacks by the political parties and in the media reporting), was the dominant tool in the pre-election race.

This type of discourse does not contribute to providing citizens with a well-informed foundation to draw conclusions and make informed decisions during elections. The frequent use of such discourse may lead to the acceptance of the offensive language as part of the general lexis, thereby enabling dissemination of harmful narratives and a poor culture of public discourse.

## THE MEDIA VIOLATE THE BASIC PROFESSIONAL STANDARDS OF MEDIA REPORTING

Impartiality and balance, along with truthfulness, are the basic elements of the journalistic profession. Consulting only one source (in 45 % of the TV news items and 86 % of the informative items on the online media outlets and over 1 % of the online media posts where no source is provided) and presenting only one side in the news item (in 55 % of the TV news items) or the posted online content (in 90 % of posts), especially when that side is responsible for creating certain harmful narratives, is far from professional journalism.

If we take into account that many of the published pieces of content were merely broadcast speeches of the politicians or press releases from the political parties, we can conclude that journalists, instead of approaching the social events and developments in a serious and thorough manner, leave it for the political actors to speak on their behalf, naturally through the prism of the daily politics. Thus, serious topics such as vetting in the judiciary, corruption and crime, foreign influences in domestic politics, constitutional amendments, relations with neighbours, are opened without the intention of seriously analysing them, but only as part of political attacks and accusations. Therefore, the reports are one-sided, unprofessional and in no way contribute to enriching the public debate on these important topics.

The reporting of the TV stations on the political actors is regulated by the Law on Audio and Audiovisual Media Services and the Electoral Code, which prescribe in details the conditions and methods by which the broadcasters, particularly the Public Broadcasting Service MRT, must cover the elections. In accordance with the aforesaid, the Agency for Audio and Audiovisual Media Services (AAVMU) monitors the media reporting of the presidential and the parliamentary elections as prescribed in the Electoral Code. The clearly regulated legal obligations and the focus of both the domestic and international organisations on informing the public during the elections have caused/encouraged the TV stations to be very careful in how they report and broadcast the election campaigns. This has also resulted in a significant reduction in harmful narratives in the news items during the election period, including those created by the journalists and those created by the political actors and broadcast by the media. However, there is a lack of clear legal regulation for the informative online media outlets (similar to that for the broadcasters) regarding the manner in which they should report during elections, thus allowing for more 'freedom' in their operations. The self-regulation mechanism in the online media outlets does not yield the expected results, nor does it lead to full adherence to ethical standards.

## THE HARMFUL IMPACT OF THE NARRATIVES ON THE CITIZENS.

The large number of harmful narratives created and disseminated in the public probably has a significant impact on the citizens and their decisions. The goal of the harmful narratives is to manipulate the public opinion, shape perceptions and attitudes, and provoke emotions that can lead to discrimination, hate, or violence.

Emotions, both positive and negative, have always been a fundamental element of political action and, consequently, of political communication. Election campaigns are the context in which the dramatization of the political narratives reaches its culmination. This is also contributed to by the increasingly personalized, popularized and populist rhetoric and communication styles of leaders and other political actors. The subject of this research was not the potential influence of the harmful narratives on the public, or how they affect their decisions, opinions, and feelings. Therefore, conclusions cannot be made regarding the harmful impact within this publication.

# THE ROLE OF WORDS IN THE CONSTRUCTION OF THE HARMFUL NARRATIVES

One of the key research questions is how the political entities and the media construct the most potentially harmful narratives. The analysis delves into the basic construction of each narrative, analysing the most frequently used words, their meaning and the potential for inciting emotions through which the harmfulness of the narrative is amplified. The subject of analysis are three most frequently used harmful narratives: undermining trust in the institutions, character attacks and/or demonization, inciting divisions that offer a vocabulary that is emotionally charged and content-wise 'richer' with toxicity in an attempt to 'gain' the trust of citizens.

## VOCABULARY OF THE HARMFUL POLITICAL NARRATIVES FROM THE POLITICAL ACTORS

The most frequently used words in texts containing harmful narratives are the names of the three largest political parties (*VMRO-DPMNE, SDSM, and DUI*), followed by *Hristijan Mickoski, Levica, President Stevo Pendarovski, and Dimitar Kovachevski*. In addition to political actors, the most commonly mentioned terms are *Macedonia* and *citizens*, with Macedonia often being referred to without the addition of North or Republic. The *Authority/Government* is frequently discussed in the context of undermining trust in institutions, as well as in character attacks that include references to *euros, money, millions, corruption, and crime*. Divisions are fomented in relation to the *EU* and *European future*.

Whenever trust in institutions is undermined, politicians clearly invoke the good of the *citizens/people/public*. VMRO-DPMNE most frequently undermines trust in institutions by pointing to SDSM, DUI, and the government. Character attacks predominantly target DUI (and its members) and SDSM, as well as key state figures such as President Stevo Pendarovski and Prime Minister Dimitar Kovachevski. These attacks are most commonly made by Levica and VMRO-DPMNE. The main actors fomenting divisions are VMRO-DPMNE and SDSM. SDSM directs its attacks at VMRO-DPMNE, while VMRO-DPMNE targets both SDSM and DUI, with Levica attacking VMRO-DPMNE, SDSM, and DUI. It has become a common practice to specifically name certain political entities, particularly when the goal is to attack an opponent personally or demonize them. For instance, VMRO-DPMNE is often referred to simply as DPMNE, and SDSM as SDS. The vocabulary used by political actors toward one another is rich and diverse, including terms such as: *incompetent, fools, bastards, mafiosos, lackeys, schizophrenics, criminal gangs, neo-fascists, neo-monarchists, scoundrels, kleptomaniacs, bullies, thugs, puppets, bandits, battery-powered patriots, secessionists, cancer-mafia, political illiterates, cowards, ballists, quislings, nationalists, irredentists, bloodsuckers....* In other words, these words create the 'frame' through which narratives should be read and understood.

## VOCABULARY OF POLITICALLY HARMFUL NARRATIVES IN TV STATIONS

The most frequently used terms in TV reports that reflect the erosion of trust in institutions, character attacks, and the fuelling of divisions include the three largest parties—VMRO-DPMNE, SDSM, and DUI, as well as the Prime Minister *Dimitar Kovachevski*. In addition to the ‘big three’ one of the main protagonists in undermining trust is *Hristian Mickoski*; character attacks target *Stevo Pendarovski* and *Hristian Mickoski*, while the main actors that foment divisions, alongside VMRO-DPMNE, SDSM, DUI, and *Dimitar Kovachevski*, are *Levica* and the European Front. Usually VMRO-DPMNE as the opposition undermines trust in the Government (SDSM and DUI) by making claims that it is criminalized, under serious suspicions of money laundering, with scandalous tenders and must be held accountable for that. SDSM is most often associated with corruption and crime. VMRO-DPMNE is also targeted much less frequently and is accused of spreading fake news, attempts to silence and intimidate journalists, and of being a regime party. Emotionally charged words such as *criminalized*, *scandalous tenders*, *chaos*, *disseminating fake news*, *silencing and intimidation*, *regime party* are certainly intended to cause fear, suspicion, contempt, rage, and anger.

The character attacks/demonization of the political opponent refer to the Government, the government partners SDSM and DUI, and mainly come from the opposition VMRO-DPMNE. The narrative of the character attacks of the political opponent is most often placed in context and between the words *Macedonia/state* and emphasizes that it is against: *the citizens*, *the nation*, *the public*, and *the people*. This is an attempt to provoke resistance, discomfort, rage, anger towards DUI, SDSM; the Government/authority because they are *the criminals*, *the mafia*, *the hypocrites*, *the servile ones*, in order to protect the state and the people. The divisions of *us/we/our* and *you/your* are sharp and polarizing: *We are the pro-European front, while they are anti-European. We are oriented towards the West, while they are oriented towards the East. We will save Macedonia, while they are the ones with whom we will have no country. We are the car that takes you to Brussels, while they are a car made of styrofoam that no one would want to buy...* In terms of the emotional ‘weight’ that the words of division carry, without exception they refer to patriotic feelings, and then to the hope for a European future, the sense of belonging and connection, on the one hand, but also fear, anger, contempt on the other. So the basic choice left to the citizens is the choice between ‘*the patriotism and the honest governance*’ and ‘*the hope for prosperity and a European future.*’

## THE VOCABULARY OF HARMFUL POLITICAL NARRATIVES IN ONLINE MEDIA

Online media, as ‘loyal’ transmitters of the political actors’ messages, authentically convey all their harmful political narratives. Words and phrases with a ‘toxic’ charge appear not only in texts but also in headlines, amplifying their meaning and impact. The three largest political parties (VMRO-DPMNE, SDSM, DUI) and political leaders *Mickoski* and *Kovachevski* dominate, constructing harmful political narratives, fomenting divisions, and attacking the political opponents. Distrust in the institutions is most pronounced toward the Government, specifically SDSM and DUI, with accusations of multimillion-dollar crimes committed by a corrupt government and partisan institutions, where the people and the state are *deceived*, *manipulated*, and *harmed*.

When a political actor is in the spotlight, whether a political party, its leader, or an official, character attacks have an exceptionally negative emotional charge. SDSM and DUI are *sycophants*, *criminals*,

*destroyers of the state, spineless; SDSM is a servant, lackey, appendage of DUI, quislings, kleptomaniacs, while VMRO-DPMNE are incompetent, drug addicts, trapped in a conservative mind-set. Dimitar Kovachevski is the most incompetent Prime Minister, an installed leader of SDSM; Hristijan Mickoski is a liar, a wishy-washy person, lacking stance and political capacity; while President Stevo Pendarovski is a manipulator, shameless, and a representative of the artanoid regime. Their categorization by meaning highlights words related to: (a) unprofessionalism, incompetence, and lack of capability of political actors, which may provoke contempt and encourage belittlement; (2) illegal behaviour of the political actors, which incites anger, disdain, and aggressive behaviour; (3) irresponsible and unpatriotic behaviour, which evokes emotions of guilt and contempt; (4) certain moral characteristics, which provoke feelings of repulsion, disdain, belittlement, and neglect; (5) specific mental illnesses/disorders, which cause fear, shock, and encourage condemnation and avoidance; (6) submissive, dependent behaviour, which fosters contempt and shame and may lead to offensive behaviour and ridicule.*

## KEY MESSAGES FROM THE ANALYSIS OF THE EMOTIONALLY CHARGED WORDS USED

The analysis of the most common harmful narratives constructed by the political entities and broadcast by the TV stations and the online media revealed the same tendencies and characteristics. Essentially, the same emotionally charged words used by the political actors are mirrored in the online media posts and television news reports, without additional information, explanation, or scrutiny of the statements. The media 'managed' to support the political actors in their attempt to incite distrust in institutions, to insult their political opponents and to incite divisions for their own purposes, fully conveying the emotionally charged words created by the political actors, and even amplifying them, conveying them without any intervention and additional facts and explanations.

All three harmful narratives analysed in this section abound with an emotional vocabulary that is extremely negative, thereby clouding rational assessment of facts and quality decision-making, and may even encourage destructive behaviours. The words used in undermining trust in institutions such as - *misery, poverty, misery, scandals, ruined, incompetent, criminal, corruption, panic, chaos, profiteers, false promises* - can incite negative feelings such as anger, fear, insecurity and are precisely manipulated in an attempt to incite and/or strengthen distrust in state institutions, local government, and the political party. Words with an emotional charge used in the construction of the harmful narrative character attacks/demonization such as *schizo, retard, cuckoo, schizophrenic, and kleptomaniacs* indicate a certain mental state in people and can cause feelings of fear, insecurity, perhaps even pity, feelings that result in distrust of a certain person. Meanwhile, words like *coward, wishy-washy person* and *deserter* indicate a person's morality and willpower and they can evoke feelings of contempt and anger in people and may lead to low respect for the person, aggression, belittlement, and similar reactions. Feelings of fear are the underlying subtext of words like *bully, tyrant, terrorist, bloodsuckers*, etc. Words used for divisions—*Macedonia, state, people, and citizens*—evoke patriotic feelings and a sense of belonging, easily manipulating citizens' emotions. In the context of a harmful narrative that fuels divisions, this manipulation is aimed at creating a divide between us the patriots and them the traitors, or we for the people and citizens and they acting against the people and citizens. The words *isolation, backwards, hopelessness* arouse feelings of loneliness, of inadequacy, as opposed to the words *future, prosperity, hope* whose emotional potential encourages hope and action. Some *care for* and *respect* the people, while others *insult* and belittle them. By choosing

emotionally charged words that provoke contradictory feelings (positive for some, negative for others), divisions are encouraged not only among the political parties but also among the citizens who support different political options.

What are the possible effects of these words on citizens? A single word can incite a storm of emotions, changing the direction of a conversation, interpersonal relationships, and even life. Words like *schizo, liar, wretchedness, poverty and misery, nepotism, scandals, crime, corruption, party minions, Bulgarian dictate, naked propaganda, destroyed the state, bandit, incompetent, irresponsible, criminal gang, profiteers, false promises, creating chaos, spreading panic, retard, fugitive, schizophrenic, kleptomaniac, coward, repentant pilgrim, deserter, violent, tyrant, terrorist, bloodsuckers, isolation, backwards, hopelessness* incite fear, anger, frustration, rage and are used as weapons for manipulation, insult or division. This causes deep distrust and uncertainty among citizens who have to make important decisions that affect their lives and the lives of the entire society. The emotions that are triggered by words, and the possible behaviours that would emerge as a result of negative feelings, can have far-reaching consequences for democratic processes, but also for the mental health and mental state of people. Moreover, neither the political actors who create the harmful narrative, nor the online media that amplify the harmful narrative with their repeating it word for word, bear any responsibility for disrupting the well-being of citizens.

# NEOLOGISMS AS PART OF HARMFUL POLITICAL NARRATIVES

The subject of this research is the neologisms created, used, and disseminated by political actors in communication on their official websites and Facebook profiles. These neologisms are part of harmful political narratives, particularly aimed at belittling and discrediting political opponents. The analysis answers the following questions: What is the meaning of harmful political neologisms? What is the broader context of these neologisms? What other elements of harmful narratives do these neologisms contain? Who uses them and whom are these neologisms directed to? What components do these neologisms consist of? The analysis covers: political communication, political discourse, political actors, and the broader political context related to the harmful neologisms, the formulations, as well as the lexical-semantic, word-formation, morphological, and syntactic elements of the neologisms used by the political actors. From the monitoring and analysis, the political actors who use neologisms are: VMRO-DPMNE; Democratic Movement (and Izet Medjiti); Levica (and Dimitar Apasiev); SDSM.

## KEY MESSAGES FROM THE COMMUNICATIVE-LINGUISTIC ANALYSIS

Political actors in North Macedonia use a significant number of harmful neologisms, including entirely new coinages and well-known expressions that acquire new meanings and are harmfully contextualized. This practice of creating coinages represents a form of political newspeak. Macedonian political parties use more harmful neologisms, partly due to the larger number of Macedonian political actors. However, the function and the purpose of harmful neologisms are the same in both languages, i.e. among Macedonian and Albanian political actors. These harmful neologisms are most often used with the aim of criticizing, belittling, and discrediting the political opponents through character attacks and biased selection, with the goal of undermining trust in certain institutions, fostering divisions, spreading panic, fear, and insecurity, as well as spreading fear of foreign influence and promoting populism. Concomitantly, they present themselves as the 'saviours of the people,' i.e., 'with the people and for their interests,' while their opponents are 'against the people and their interests.' They most commonly use their official websites and Facebook profiles, as channels for spreading these harmful neologisms. They are often found in the titles of their posts, which further amplifies their harm, making them more visible and impactful, and easier to share and spread. This is especially true because a large part of the public often reads only the headlines for quick information, and the media have a practice of adopting certain headlines from the posts of political actors, which further spreads these harmful neologisms and embeds them into everyday language.

The harmful neologisms in the vocabulary of political actors represent strategic linguistic manipulations aimed at the public, particularly future voters. Those who prove to be more skilled or creative in creating and spreading them could win over the public more successfully, but also harm their political opponents more, thus creating a kind of 'pollution' of the socio-political space

and the communication ecology, leading to an unfavourable climate for everyone. This is further amplified when harmful neologisms are reported by the media. The analysis showed that the media report harmful neologisms from political actors, especially from the so-called major parties, from which reporting is more frequent, most often as a reported press release. Through the media, they become more accessible and more likely to enter the everyday use of citizens, thus spreading further and becoming a practice.

The most commonly used harmful neologisms refer to: a person, or political actor, both individual and collective (such as: *Zhmicko*, *tachevizm*, *artanoid*, *casino-man*, *DUI-lottery*) and power/governance and socio-political developments (for example: *bon-bon business*, *cancer mafia*, *casino-party*, *pasokification*, *smuggling*). Some of these harmful neologisms have already entered wider usage by the Macedonian public and have somewhat been 'normalized' (such as: *sorospii*, *severdjiani*, *MVRO-VMRO/VMRO-MVRO*, *Gruevist*, *Tache*). More concerning, most of the harmful neologisms are associated with terms that signify shady businesses, criminal activities, and despotic rule, both in terms of the fact that these are the socio-political events, processes, and developments in the country, and in terms of the fact that harmful neologisms are created based on them, which further deepen these processes. These neologisms then enter discourse as commonplace, but in reality, they are harmful for multiple reasons.

# CONCLUSION

## THE HARMFUL RHETORIC OF POLITICAL ENTITIES

Political narratives are a legitimate, but also powerful tool of political actors in their efforts to inform and mobilize the public, to shape its perceptions, attitudes and behaviours. Hence the enormous responsibility of political actors. If used carelessly or with the aim of manipulating the public, then narratives become harmful with the potential to divide people, to deepen distrust in the institutions of the system, to insult, discredit or demonize.

What is common to the major political actors is that they all equally and most often use the same four harmful narratives - undermining trust in institutions, biased selection, character attacks and inciting divisions. Thus, they communicated messages that undermined citizens' trust in the system, expressing positions without presenting all the facts and the whole picture, while at the same time smearing the opponents, distinguishing between good and bad. In their communication with the public, words with strong emotional charge dominate, exclusively used in a negative connotation. This promotes a culture of personal discrimination, but unequivocally triggers intense negative emotions and states: fear, anger, rage, frustration, hatred, aggression, depression, hopelessness. Additionally, they most often create a discourse of saviours and defenders of the people, justice, and identity, directly addressing the emotional side of the individual, sending the underlying message that helpless citizens need someone to defend and save them. By using a vocabulary of words with a negative emotional charge, instead of clear and unambiguous words that would accurately inform the public, political actors manipulate citizens more, without offering evidence or facts to support their claims.

Political parties, their leaders, and government officials have violated all principles of non-discriminatory and transparent communication by using harmful rhetoric. Through harmful rhetoric that undermines trust in institutions, with accusations of corruption, unprofessionalism, and without offering facts and evidence for harmful claims, the political entities have directly violated the principle of ethical communication and preserving freedom of speech. Ethical communication in politics builds the foundation for trust between the politicians and the citizens. It is aimed at educating and informing the public, not at exploiting emotions. By using biased selection, they flagrantly violate the principles of transparency and professionalism, impartiality and objectivity. The deliberate transmission of a segment of the picture or phenomenon, while omitting part of the information, directly contradicts the principle of transparency. A key characteristic of this is for politicians or officials to tell the public the truth, even when it is not in their favour. Professional political communication avoids misleading statements, manipulation and dishonesty, and the discourse is constructive and respectful of others. Simultaneously, with the rhetoric of the politicians aimed at belittling opponents and fostering divisions, they violate the principle of not spreading hate speech and discriminatory speech, which is essential for creating an inclusive and fair political environment where everyone is respected. This rhetoric does not contribute to stopping the spread of discriminatory speech, but rather, it contributes to the emergence of violence, hatred, or discrimination among the public. By adhering to this principle, political entities can help maintain social harmony, protect vulnerable groups and contribute to a more just and democratic society.

In a democracy, the citizens need access to accurate and timely information so that they can make informed decisions, especially when voting or participating in public debates. The media provide important news, analysis and ongoing monitoring of government activities, policies and global events, helping people stay educated on the issues that affect their lives. A healthy democracy relies on open public debate and dialogue, with the media providing space for diverse groups and viewpoints. They can help strengthen democratic principles such as equality, justice, and human rights by promoting fair and balanced coverage, opposing discrimination, corruption, and injustice, and advocating for policies that support democratic values.

Media coverage of harmful political narratives is intense and present daily. This is equally true for the presence of harmful narratives on the airwaves of the national television broadcasters and in the internet space of the online news media. Toxic reporting by online news media is particularly intense, even more intense than by the creators of harmful narratives themselves – the political actors. Hereby, the media multiplied the effect of harmful narratives by providing a platform for political actors through which they reached the general public, not just those who follow politicians' communication channels. Both television and online media have almost mirrored the harmful narratives as created by political actors, relying on content from speeches by politicians or press releases from political parties. Thus, instead of approaching social events and occurrences in a serious and thorough manner, they allow political actors to speak through their own lens and daily political agenda. Serious topics such as vetting in the judiciary, the corruption and crime, foreign influences in the domestic politics, the constitutional amendments, the attitude towards neighbours, were addressed without the intention of quality analysis, but only as part of the political attacks and accusations.

The most common harmful narratives—undermining trust, biased selection, character attacks, and fomenting divisions—are equally present among both political actors and the media. Hereupon, when we look at the way in which the media reported on harmful narratives and the role of the journalist as a 'mute' reporter (without intervening or taking a stand), without critical analysis of the serious, yet harmful claims, accusations and statements of political actors, without providing multiple perspectives on the narrative being conveyed, by consulting only one source in most cases, it becomes even clearer how intensely the public was exposed to narratives that arouse feelings that can inhibit or encourage unproductive behaviours and even aggression.

Impartiality and balance, along with truthfulness, are the basic elements of the journalistic profession. Consulting only one source and presenting only one side in the report or posted content, especially when that side is responsible for creating certain harmful narratives, is far from professional journalism. In cases where a journalist has already given space to unsubstantiated attacks, labelling, disinformation or insults of a political actor, the least they should do is consult the other side, confront them with the accusations and offer them the opportunity to present their side of the story. A key conclusion related to adhering to professional journalistic standards becomes evident when it comes to reporting on harmful narratives during an election campaign. Namely, a significant decline in the presence of harmful narratives was observed only in television media during the election months, a period when televisions are subject to specific regulations. This is not the case with online media, where the highest number of harmful narratives was recorded in the election month of April. This leads to the conclusion that there is a significant difference between a regulated sphere and self-regulation in online media.

## THE CONSEQUENCES OF HARMFUL NARRATIVES

In general, the production and distribution of harmful narratives in the public communication space can contribute to the polarization of public debate, the normalization of bad communication practices, and the violation of standards and principles of ethical and professional communication. The communication containing harmful narratives openly and directly violates the principles of ethical and professional communication, and public office holders and candidates for public office are expected to communicate transparently, responsibly, and accurately, in accordance with their commitment to working for the good of citizens. Although each of the analysed actors has regulations regulating professionalism and correctness in communication with the public, almost none of them complied with them.

The possible consequences of high exposure to harmful narratives are multiple and far-reaching at the expense of democracy and social well-being, but above all for the citizens themselves. Therefore, respecting the existing positive regulations for nurturing and respecting correct public communication (political and in the media), such as the Code of Ethics for Civil Servants (adopted in 2011), the Code ethics of Journalists of Macedonia (adopted and signed by journalists themselves in 2001), the codes of individual political parties, is an obligation that political actors and media workers should be reminded of and revisit more often. The trust that citizens and politicians and media workers have, obliges them to correct communication, which implies transparency, impartiality, courtesy and based on evidence and facts, but is also their primary responsibility.

The unfounded undermining of trust in institutions, the incitement of divisions, character attacks and demonization, as well as biased selection, leads to general distrust of the citizens in the system, hopelessness, isolation, avoidance of following the news, civic inactivity, conflict, polarization of public discourse, which in turn usually results in an uninformed and passive public that does not believe that reaching an agreement on even the most significant aspects of socio-political life is possible and that has neither the strength nor the motivation to be corrective to those it has elected, who do not work for its good.

The use of harmful narratives by the political actors in public discourse encourages the normalization of the use of offensive language on the public stage and in public communication. When the offensive vocabulary is not condemned, after a long period it can be accepted as part of the general lexicon of the language, and thus enable the spread of harmful narratives and a low culture of the public speaking. Harmful narratives in which political entities offer themselves as 'saviours' and 'defenders' besides sending the message that the citizens are powerless, do not actually encourage or leave room for critical, independent thinking and decision-making based on data, facts and different aspects of looking at issues and problems. The same effect on the rational process of fact assessment and decision-making is caused by the emotional vocabulary used by the politicians, which is highly negative, provoking feelings of fear, anger, contempt, rage, frustration, hatred, and may incite destructive behaviours.

## THEORETICAL AND SCIENTIFIC IMPLICATIONS

All political entities sought to offer their own frameworks through the information they conveyed to the public, highlighting certain aspects of an issue while minimizing others. Some emphasized crimes and corruption scandals, others focused on ethnotribalism as a characteristic of the political opponent, and yet others presented the elections as a choice between Macedonianism

and anti-Macedonianism or a bright future versus a dark past. These frameworks, through which citizens were supposed to perceive and understand political entities and the political reality, in general, confirm the concept of framing theory. In political communication, framing is a powerful tool for shaping public opinion and influencing political debates. The politicians and the media (as shown in the research) always use framing to promote their agendas through narratives that align with specific values, ideologies, or emotions. The frames determine what will be included in the conversation and what will be excluded; whether it will emphasize honesty or patriotism, care for citizens or European future, crime or nationalism.

Evidence of the functioning of the strategic narrative theory is that none of the harmful narratives was designed by chance; on the contrary, they were well-thought-out strategies with which political entities sought to influence the public. The large number of harmful narratives shows how political entities construct and communicate stories in order to shape perceptions and influence audience behaviour. During the election period, all political entities created and conveyed their own slogans, which were constantly heard, such as: *Macedonia Yours Again, Bravely for Macedonia, Dignified Macedonia, People First, Change in Your Hands, Programme for a European Future*. Through these, the political entities aimed to evoke symbolic meanings related to national identity, self-identification, and self-acceptance, as well as highlighting honesty, loyalty, and courage as important human characteristics. This serves as proof that the political narratives often rely on symbols, metaphors, and cultural references, emphasizing their role in shaping interpersonal interactions, as advocated by the theory of symbolic interactionism.

A vast amount of research data suggests that the media influence public perception of important political issues, the formation of democratic discourse, and civic engagement, often through framing, selective coverage, and agenda setting. Therefore, the public perception of the political issues depends on whether and what kind of political narratives the media convey, as well as how selectively or comprehensively they present them. If we acknowledge that one of the most common harmful narratives used by the political entities and amplified by the media was biased selection, deliberately omitting important facts that could undermine the position of the one presenting their views, we can only assume its harmful impact.

Research has identified increased political polarization, a shared challenge for democracies worldwide, and further dividing societies along ideological, ethnic, or religious lines. Polarizing narratives intensify power struggles, lead to a decrease in compromise in politics, and weaken citizens' trust in democratic institutions. This type of harmful narrative (very common in the public communication in Macedonia) leads to the erosion of democratic norms and fosters a climate where compromise and cooperation become increasingly rare. Concurrently, character attacks and smear campaigns significantly affect political discourse, encouraging an environment of distrust and hostility among the electorate. Furthermore, hate-driven narratives, strategically used to mobilize certain voter groups while alienating others, contribute to a polarized political atmosphere, making efforts to promote inclusive democratic engagement even more challenging. Character attacks and/or the demonization of political opponents were one of the three most common types of harmful narratives identified in the research.

Previous studies suggest that narratives are more effective when they provide a clear prediction of the consequences related to a particular policy. In this context:

narratives that offer a sense of security about a specific policy tend to increase public support for it. On the other hand, narratives that evoke uncertainty, specifically, negative predictions about an opposing political option tend to reduce public support for that option. In a large number of harmful narratives in the study, especially those that fuelled divisions, the rhetoric followed a pattern of predicting future outcomes: If one political option is chosen, citizens face a return to a

dark past; if the other is chosen, a bright European future awaits. Alternatively, if one political option is selected, the country will return to the right path, but if the other is chosen, agony, crime, and corruption will continue, along with the failure to protect national interests. Many of these harmful narratives contained clear elements such as *heroes, saviours of the people, defenders of national interests*, but also villains in the form of *criminals, usurpers, oppressors, and bloodsuckers*, as well as victims portrayed as the suffering *Macedonian people, deceived citizens, and manipulated individuals*. All these elements made the narratives more convincing and fuelled significant political change, ultimately resulting in a shift in power.

Disinformation as a type of harmful narratives poses serious challenges to democratic processes by undermining trust in institutions, polarizing public opinion, and creating confusion about factual information, which in turn can weaken the foundations of democratic governance. If research shows that disinformation undermines civic engagement by creating an environment where citizens either avoid political news or become confused regarding political issues, the finding that the study identified certain disinformation instances (albeit with moderate intensity) is truly concerning for the already fragile Macedonian democracy.

Numerous studies on the influence of emotions in political narratives confirm that emotions are a powerful tool for shaping electoral outcomes. Whereupon, emotions are not perceived as irrational forces in politics but as central to informed political reasoning, shaping how individuals interpret, engage with, and react to the political events. The study identified a vast number of emotionally charged words. Simultaneously, fear and anxiety lead to critical re-evaluation and more scrutinized assessments of the political developments. In other words, they activate a 'surveillance system,' encouraging individuals to seek information and reassess political choices, thereby increasing their political awareness and openness to new ideas. Fear, anger, and distrust typically reinforce negative perceptions of the opposing group, hindering opportunities for reconciliation or dialogue.

Populism, as an ideology, views society as being divided into two antagonistic groups: the *pure people* versus the *corrupt elite* and its appeal lies in its simplicity and directness, and is particularly receptive to citizens who feel excluded by the political elites. This in turn makes populism adaptable to a variety of political contexts and ideologies, from right-wing nationalism to left-wing anti-establishment movements. Hereto, populist rhetoric and strategy risk undermining democratic norms by promoting division, reducing tolerance for pluralism, and eroding institutional checks and balances. Populist narratives pose a risk to the democratic values by promoting polarisation and undermining the tolerance and the pluralism. Populism emerges as one of the five most prevalent harmful narratives in political communication in Macedonia.

Political leaders and their parties, together with the media, have the power to influence language development. The media are the channel through which linguistic innovations are spread, and politicians can be categorized as innovators, individuals with strong ties within and outside the group. Research shows that harmful neologisms constructed by the political actors on the Macedonian political scene, in a few examples, have the status of neologisms and are far from entering the dictionaries; instead, they remain in colloquial speech and on social media. Authorial neologisms, and neologisms in general, used by writers and scientists, are characterized by a high degree of thoughtfulness and linguistic knowledge and represent a good way to enrich the vocabulary of the Macedonian language. In contrast, the media often uncritically convey foreign words, either due to untranslated terms from foreign languages or due to ignorance or disinterest, thereby negatively affecting the standard Macedonian language.

# RECOMMENDATIONS AND FUTURE COMMITMENTS

## RECOMMENDATIONS FOR POLITICAL ACTORS

- Political parties are encouraged to adopt codes of conduct with standards for respecting the principle of non-discrimination, the prohibition of hate speech, and the limitation of human rights violations. It is advisable for them to work on inter-party initiatives to improve tolerance, address disinformation, prevent discrimination, and promote intercultural understanding, social inclusion, and respect for diversity. (UNHRSP, OSCE, OAS, ACHRP, 2021).
- Political actors in communicating with the public need to respect the principle of evidence-based communication because the manipulative speech, which includes disinformation, inaccurate information, and malinformation, can seriously affect the democratic processes and elections, through the creation and spread of lies, character attacks, which can result in a decrease in trust in the electoral process and institutions.
- Education of the political actors, including public relations officers and youth wings of political parties, on when narratives become harmful and their significant destructive power.
- Consciously avoiding manipulation of patriotic feelings, collective identity, and group affiliation of citizens.
- Promoting neologisms for the purpose of creative investment, constructing and encouraging a positive and optimistic reality, instead of neologisms whose purpose is to offend and discredit.
- Educating the youth of the political parties as regards the principles and standards in political communication, which relate to the obligations of politicians for transparency and accessibility, for representing the public interest, not using disinformation and unverified information in their communication with the public, avoiding hate speech, discriminatory speech, and preserving freedom of speech.

## RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE GOVERNMENT AND PUBLIC SERVANTS

- Government representatives should follow the Government's Communication Strategy, which explicitly states that content that may be offensive to individuals or a specific group of citizens should not be published or shared.

- Civil servants, in accordance with the Code of Ethics for Civil Servants, must consistently respect the principle of equality of political parties, according to which they must treat political parties equally and not subject them to discrimination on various grounds.

## RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE MEDIA

- Consistent adherence to the journalistic professional standards, especially the basic principles of truthfulness, accuracy and verification of claims made before they are published, ensuring pluralism of opinions, refraining from conveying hate speech, and striking a balance between freedom of expression and prevention of hate speech.
- Promoting self-regulation, but also strengthening (operationalization) of online media regulation in the internet space.
- Application of legal and ethical principles during election cycles, both for traditional media and online media, i.e., complementing the legal framework with obligations for informational online media when reporting during elections.
- Respect and application of ethical reporting during elections. The 2021 Guide for ethical media coverage of elections by the Journalists' Association of Macedonia serves as a guide to follow. It clearly states that journalists must not use hate speech in their reporting and should refrain from using intolerant or inflammatory rhetoric. When such rhetoric is used by political actors, journalists should be cautious in how they report it, but should not spread it further. The Global Charter of Ethics for Journalists of the International Federation of Journalists states, 'In reporting, journalists shall ensure that the dissemination of information or opinion does not contribute to hatred or prejudice and shall do their utmost to avoid facilitating the spread of discrimination on any grounds.' Finally, the ODIHR, EU and Council of Europe Handbook On Media Monitoring for Election Observation Missions recommend that the media refrain from overt or covert expressions of intolerance and 'carefully consider whether the publication of such statements contributes to defamation and ridicule on the grounds of sex, race, colour, language, faith and religion, membership of a national or ethnic minority group, social differences or other opinion' (6 OSCE/ODIHR, Council of Europe & EU (2005) European Commission for Democracy through Law (Venice Commission) Guidelines on Media Analysis during Election Observation Missions, Strasbourg).
- As stated in the Global Charter of Journalistic Ethics by the International Federation of Journalists, 'respect for the facts and for the right of the public to truth is the first duty of the journalist.' The responsibility they have towards the public is far greater than their responsibility towards employers, authorities, or political parties. Regardless of the values represented by the media outlet or its editorial policy, professional journalists must adhere to the principles of truthfulness, impartiality, and balance.



