DETERMINING HARMFUL POLITICAL NARRATIVES

Institute of Communication Studies

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The second report 'Determining Political Harmful Narratives (HARM-TIVE)' is a sublimation of the data from the monitoring of the communication practices of the political actors in **November and December 2023** in which harmful narratives were identified. Furthermore, the report includes an analysis of the manner these harmful narratives are treated in the central news editions of nine television and 11 online media outlets. Similar to the first report for September and October 2023, here also the content and volume of the harmful narratives propagated by the political actors is empirically captured, the intensity, the topics and entities towards which the negative messages are directed. At the same time, the report indicates the violations of the standards and principles for non-discriminatory and transparent political communication by the political representatives, as well as the standards for professional and ethical journalistic reporting.

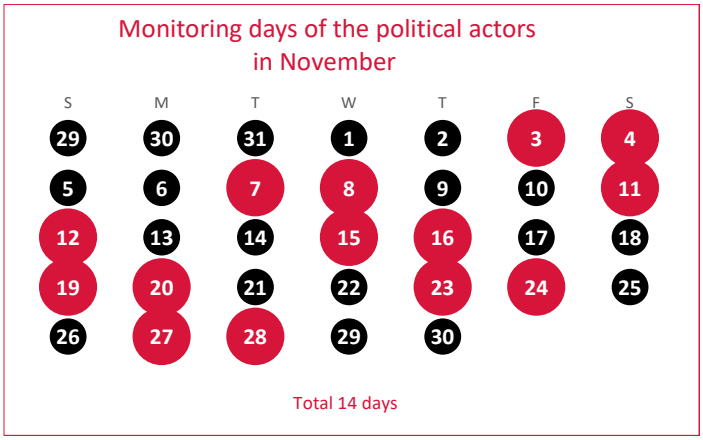
The data contained in this report were obtained by a combination of several methods and techniques: quantitative-qualitative analysis through monitoring - observation, following up and determining the presence of pre-defined indicators (14 in total), which in turn are connected to some of the 16 harmful narratives; critical discourse analysis – examining the language, the rhetoric and the framing strategies used by the political actors and the media. The methodological framework, samples and monitoring dynamics, as well as details of the entire research process are available at: HARM-TIVE .

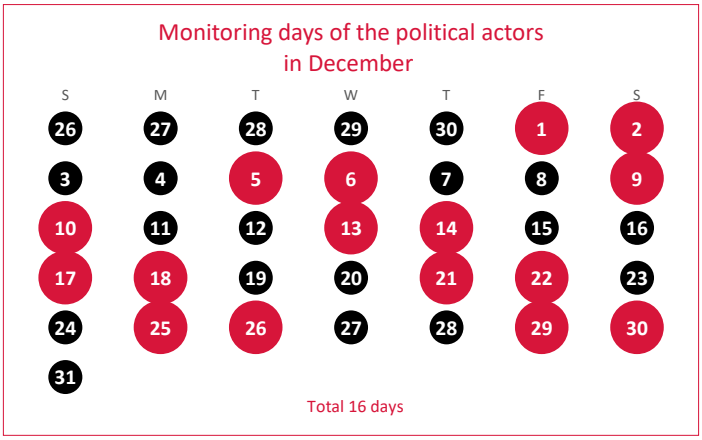
The research 'Determining Political **Harm**ful Narra**tive**s (**HARM-TIVE**)' was carried out by the Institute of Communication Studies (ICS) within the project *Use Facts: Fact-Based Journalism for Raising Awareness and Countering Disinformation in the Media Space in North Macedonia* supported by the British Embassy Skopje. The research is longitudinal and lasts during 2023 and 2024, it is carried out in several phases by a team from ICS in cooperation with researchers and experts in the field of communications and media, as well as with media professionals in the field of monitoring and control.

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

The subject of the monitoring are the websites and Facebook profiles of the 10 political parties which are represented by at least two MPs in the Assembly (Alliance for Albanians, Alternativa, DUI, Democratic Movement, VMRO-DMPNE, Levica, LDP, New Social Democratic Party, SDSM, Socialist Party). The profiles of the leaders of the political parties, as well as the profiles of the President of the Government of RNM and 13 Deputy Prime Ministers and government ministers, are also monitored on Facebook. The selected actors who are the subject of the monitoring are taken into account because they are the creators of the dominant messages, the public discourse and the narrative, and it is that narrative that penetrates the media and through them it spreads to the entire public.

During November and December, these actors are analysed in the following days, according to the dynamics 'every consecutive third and fourth day of the month'.





Monitoring days of the political actors in November:

3, 4, 7, 8, 11, 12, 15, 16, 19, 20, 23, 24, 27, 28 November (14 days in total).

Monitoring days of the political actors in December:

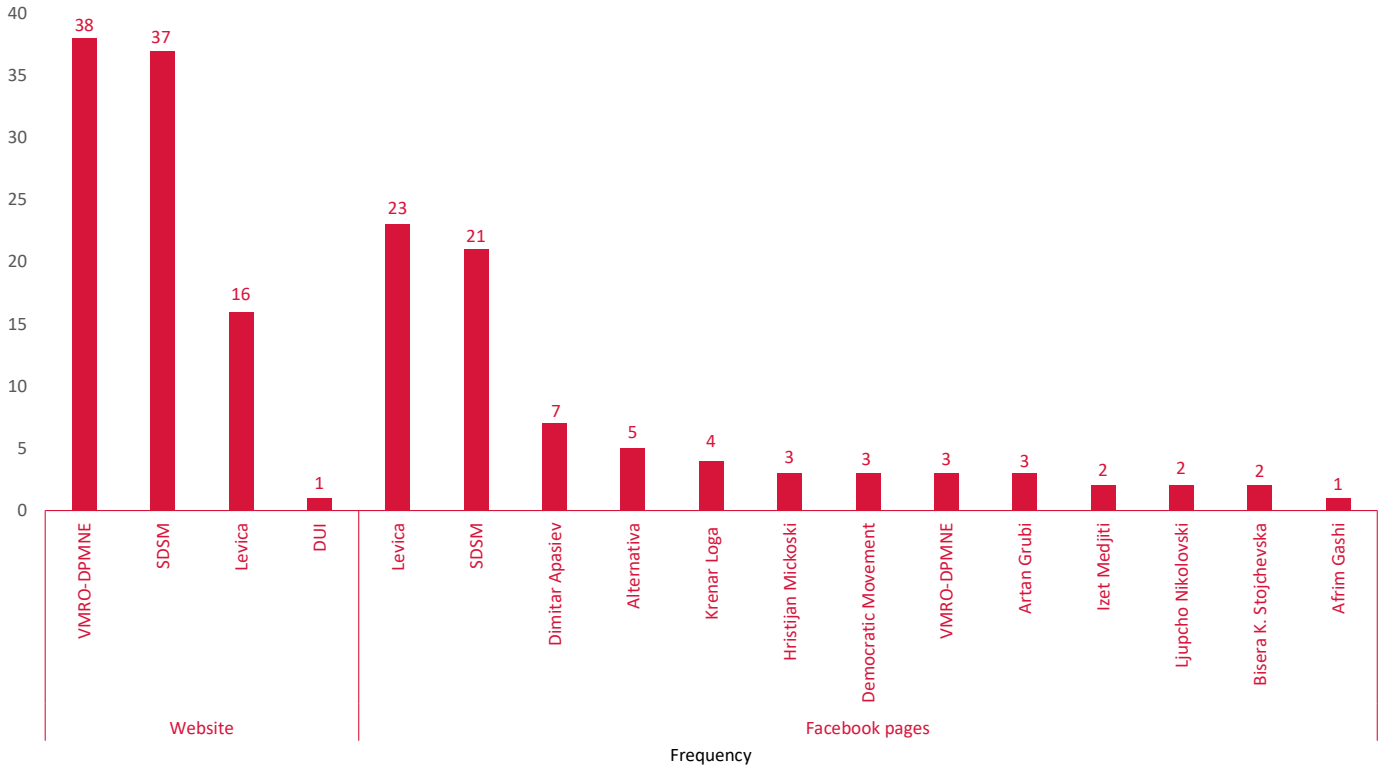
1, 2, 5, 6, 9, 10, 13, 14, 17, 18, 21, 22, 25, 26, 29, 30 December (16 days in total).

1.1. Communication practices of the political parties and their leaders in November 2023

In the period from **1 to 30 November,** on the websites and the Facebook pages of the 10 political parties and their leaders as well as the government ministers, **a total of 92 posts on the parties' websites and a total of 79 Facebook posts containing a harmful narrative were identified.** The monitoring showed that there are also political actors on whose websites and Facebook pages harmful narratives were not detected [Alliance for Albanians (AA), Liberal Democratic Party (LDP), New Social Democratic Party (NSDP), and the Socialist Party of Macedonia (SPM)]. Regarding the government ministers, harmful narratives were noted when they communicate through the official Government Facebook channels (such are the cases with the Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Political System, Artan Grubi, the Minister of Justice, Krenar Loga, the Minister of Agriculture, Forestry and Water Economy, Ljupcho Nikolovski, and the Minister of Culture, Bisera K. Stojchevska). Among the opposition parties of the Albanians, united in the European Union for Change (ESP) coalition, harmful narratives from the Alternativa and Democratic Movement parties were noted only on Facebook. As regards the third coalition partner, i.e., the Besa party and its leader Bilal Kasami, there were not any harmful narratives identified in the monitored days.

The analysis refers only to the communications of the political actors where harmful narratives were identified (harmful narrative indicator/s). Given that the political actors practice sharing the same posts both on the websites and on the Facebook pages, and in order to avoid double analysis of the quantitative data, the selection of the communication channel is used in the monitoring, i.e. these same contents are analysed either from the posts on the websites or Facebook pages. The monitoring does not analyse the comments from the audience shared on both communication channels.

Table 1: Posts containing harmful narratives according to political actors, websites and Facebook pages

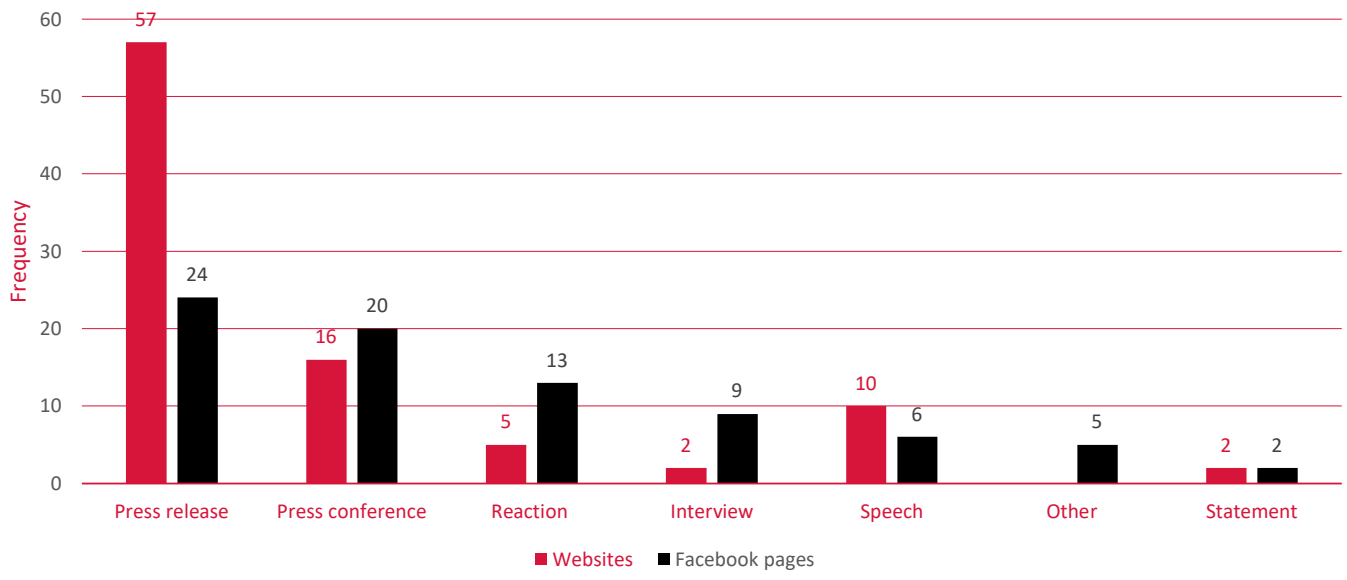


On the parties' websites, the most harmful narratives were noted on VMRO-DPMNE's (38) and SDSM's (37) websites. Levica follows behind with almost twice less (16) and only one on the DUI's website (1). On the **Facebook pages, however, the most harmful narratives are noted in Levica's pages, counting in the posts from the leader Apasiev, has a total of 30 posts (38%) with harmful narratives;** SDSM, counting in the posts of the ministers Nikolovski and Kostadinovska-Stojchevska, has a total of 25 posts (31.6%), and VMRO-DPMNE, counting in Mickoski's posts, has a total of 6 posts with harmful narratives. If we take into account the coordinated communication of the opposition bloc of Albanian parties consisting of the Democratic Movement, Alternativa and Besa parties, then a total of 11 posts with harmful narratives (or 13.9% of the harmful posts on Facebook for this month) are noted.

An analysis of the Facebook communication of the **of(cial pro(les of the government ministers showed that they were used to share content with harmful narratives.** Such is the case with the Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Political System, Artan Grubi (3 posts or 3.8% of posts with harmful narratives), the Minister of Justice from the Alliance for Albanians Krenar Loga (4 posts or 5.1% of the posts), and the Minister for Agriculture, Forestry and Water Economy from SDSM Ljupcho Nikolovski and the Minister of Culture Bisera Kostadinovska-Stojchevska also from SDSM (2 posts each or 2.5% of the posts).

According to the representation of the form in which the harmful narratives are published (Table 2), it can be noted that the **parties both on the websites and on Facebook pages mostly communicate through press releases and press conferences.** It is interesting to note that the reactions and the interviews with harmful narratives are much more common on Facebook than on the websites. The speeches with harmful narratives are more prevalent online compared to Facebook. The statements are the rarest form of posting harmful narratives, in both communication channels. Moreover, the analysis shows that SDSM and VMRO-DPMNE mostly post harmful narratives through press releases on their websites, while Levica often does so when posting speeches of party representatives and DUI's one harmful narrative is in the form of a reaction. On the other hand, on the Facebook pages, the most harmful narratives in the form of press conferences were noted by SDSM and Alternativa, on the Levica's Facebook page, the harmful narratives are mostly in the form of press releases, and regarding VMRO-DPMNE and Mickoski, the harmful narratives mostly come in form of reactions. The reason for the posts on Facebook in which harmful narratives were noted is usually a current event and a social event or topic; whereas the reason for publishing the posts with harmful narrative is current event or pseudo-event.

Table 2: Post types on the websites and Facebook



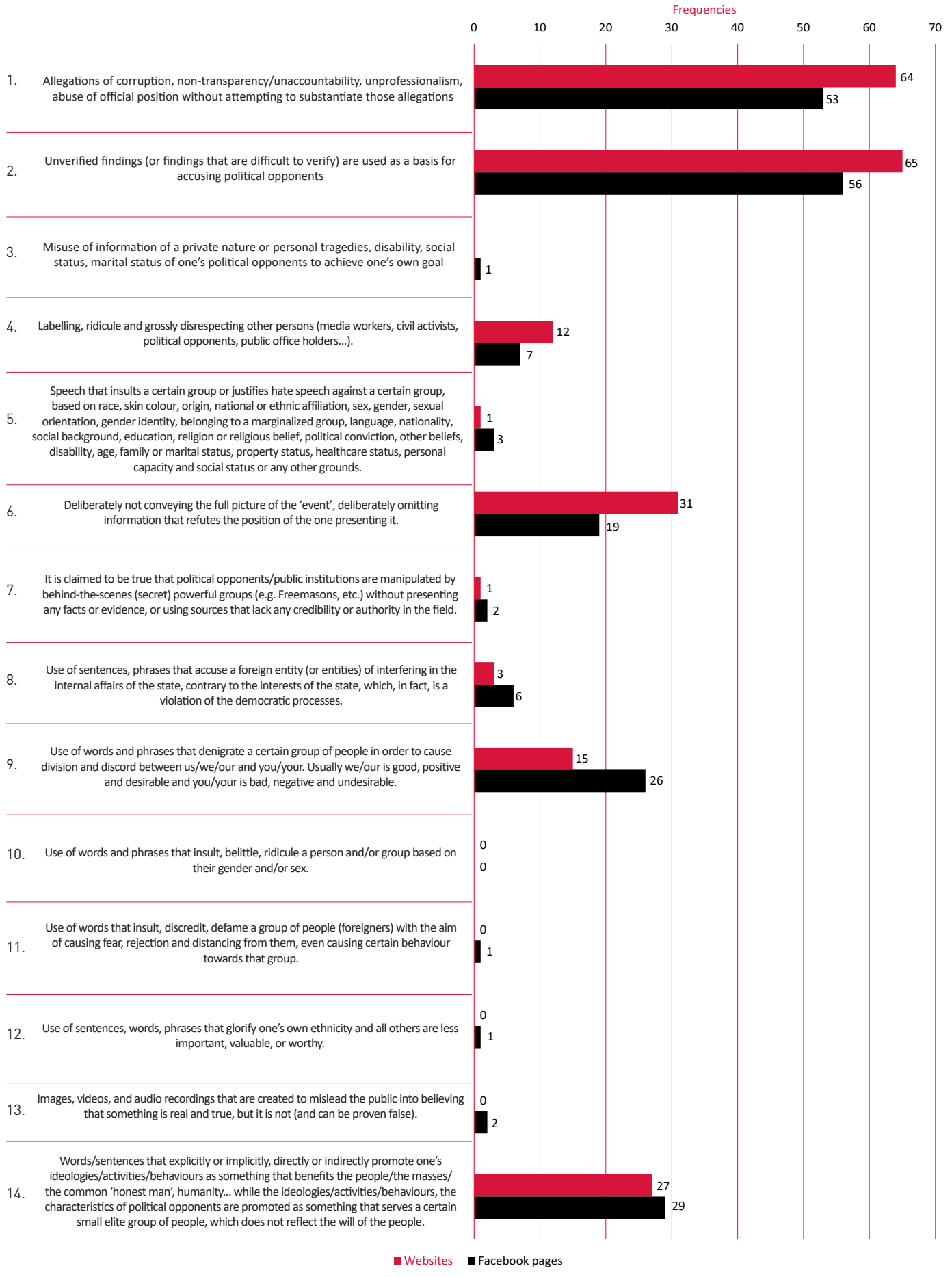
For November, **both on the websites and on Facebook, the main topic about which harmful narratives are produced is undoubtedly domestic policy.** On the websites of SDSM and DUI, all observed harmful narratives are concerning issues of domestic policy, just like Levica, even though they have one post each from the areas of justice and foreign policy. VMRO-DPMNE has almost the same number of posts with harmful narratives on the topic of domestic policy and healthcare, but harmful narratives appear on all other topics including economy, foreign policy, social policy, justice, crime, corruption etc. From the monitored Facebook profiles, domestic policy is again the only topic with reference to which harmful narratives are developed among almost all political actors, and a variety of topics is only noted on the Facebook page of Alternativa, including the topics of justice and crime, and on the Facebook page of Levica, where, in addition to the domestic policy as the most common topic, harmful narratives are also noted regarding all other topics.

Days with the most harmful narratives are the days in which popular topics were from domestic policy, such as news about possible crime and corruption in the Government, the Law on Amnesty, news about a possible coalition between VMRO-DPMNE and Levica after the next elections, the celebration of the Day of the Albanian Flag – 28 November.

Determined indicators for the presence of harmful narratives

In 70.7% of the monitored press releases on the **parties' websites, unveri(ed (ndings were recorded, which are used as a basis for accusing political opponents. The next dominant indicator is the claims of corruption, unprofessionalism and abuse of of(ce without any attempt to substantiate those claims (with 69.7%).** The dynamics are similar on Facebook-these are the two most prevalent indicators in the identified posts with harmful narratives. The next most commonly identified indicators are the deliberate failure to convey the full picture of the 'event', i.e. the deliberate omission of information that refutes the position of the person presenting it, which is more emphasized on the websites, as well as the use of words and phrases that denigrate a certain group people in order to foment division and discord between we/us/our, which is good, and you/your, which is bad, which is more common on the Facebook pages.

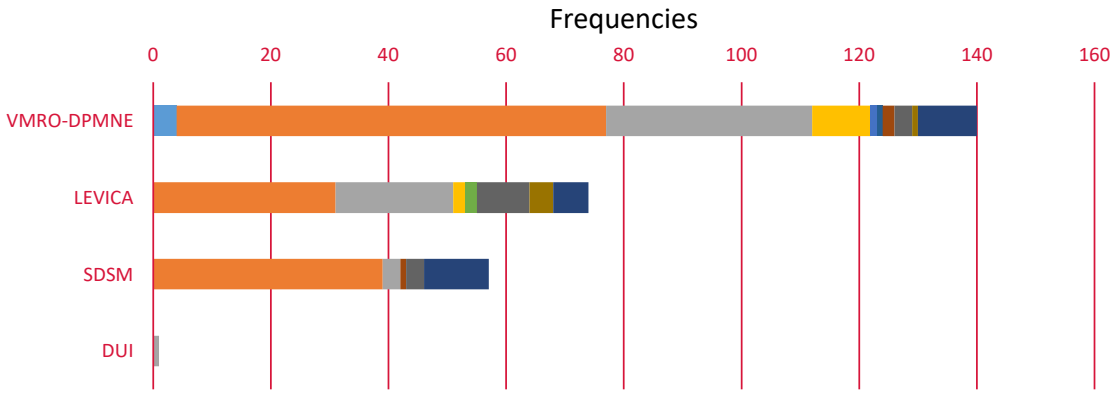
Table 3: Representation of Harmful Narratives Indicators (Websites and Facebook)



Monitoring of the websites shows that unverified findings and claims of corruption, as well as the deliberate failure to convey the full picture of the 'event' are most often used to develop the harmful narratives of undermining trust in the institutions and biased selection, but it is less often observed that the indicator of deliberate omission of information is also used to create disinformation narratives. Furthermore, the labelling, ridicule and grossly disrespecting political opponents are often used to demonize and character attack, and less often to create disinformation. The use of words and phrases that denigrate a certain group of people in order to cause divisions between 'we', as the good ones, and 'you', as the bad ones, is used to incite divisions in society, but less often also to spread panic, fear and insecurity. Harmful populist narratives are developed with words that explicitly or implicitly promote one's own characteristics as something that benefits the people, while the opponent's characteristics are promoted as something that does not reflect the will of the people and serves only a small elite group; However, the monitoring of the Facebook pages shows that less often these words are used to develop harmful narratives of extreme patriotism, conspiracy theories and claims of foreign influence.

Additionally, Facebook monitoring shows less frequently used indicators of harmful narratives, namely: speech that insults a certain group or justifies hate speech against a certain group; unfounded claims that political opponents/public institutions are manipulated by secret powerful groups spreading panic, fear and insecurity; use of wording that accuses a foreign entity of interfering in the internal affairs of the country, against its interests, and develops a narrative of foreign influence in the country; the use of words that insult, discredit, defame a group people and phrases that glorify one's own ethnicity, while all others are less important, creates a harmful narrative of ethnocentrism; the use of images, videos and audio recordings created to mislead the public were used for biased selection, character attacks and spreading uncertainty and panic. The misuse of information of a private nature to damage the reputation of political opponents is also noticed once.

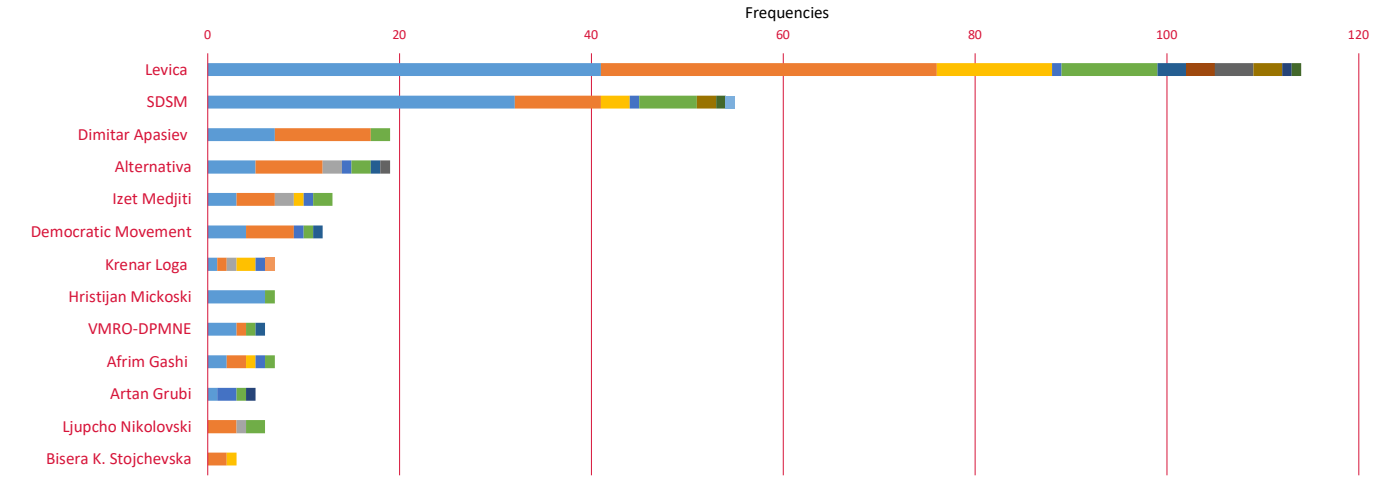
Table 4: Representation of harmful narratives in the posts of political parties on their websites



	DUI	SDSM	LEVICA	VMRO-DPMNE
Disinformation				4
Undermining of trust		39	31	73
Biased selection	1	3	20	35
Character attacks			2	10
Hate speech				1
Manipulative Audio-visual media content			2	
Conspiracy Theories				1
Foreign influence		1		2
Fomenting divisions		3	9	3
Spreading panic			4	1
Populism		11	6	10

In the 38 posts on the website, VMRO-DPMNE tried 73 times to undermine trust in the public institutions, and often used biased selection, populism and character attacks, while less often they presented disinformation, harmful narratives to incite divisions, claims of foreign influence, conspiracy theories, spreading panic and insecurity, and hate speech. Levica also the most often tried to undermine trust in the institutions and used biased selection of information, but they also had the most attempts to foment divisions of all other parties.[1] Also, SDSM frequently tried to undermine trust in the institutions at the local level, which are managed by mayors from VMRO-DPMNE, and often used populism, rarely biasedly selected information, incited divisions and talked about foreign influence. In the case with DUI only one post with a harmful narrative was noted – biased selection of information, where such an image can lead the public to wrong conclusions.

Table 5: Representation of harmful narratives in political party posts on Facebook



	Bisera K. Stojchevska	Ljupcho Nikolovski	Artan Grubi	Afrim Gashi	VMRO-DPMNE	Hristijan Mickoski	Krenar Loga	Democratic Movement	Izet Medjiti	Alternativa	Dimitar Apasiev	SDSM	Levica
Undermining trust			1	2	3	6	1	4	3	5	7	32	41
Biased selection	2	3		2	1		1	5	4	7	10	9	35
Disinformation		1					1		2	2			
Fomenting divisions	1			1			2		1			3	12
Spreading panic, fear			2	1			1	1	1	1		1	1
Populism		2	1	1	1	1		1	2	2	2	6	10
Character attacks					1			1		1			3
Hate speech													3
Manipulative audio-visual content										1			4
Foreign influence												2	3
Ethnocentrism			1										1
Extreme patriotism												1	1
Conspiracy theories												1	
Malicious information							1						

From the monitoring and the analysis of the Facebook communication of the political actors, it is again noted that attempts to undermine trust in the public institutions and biased selection of information dominate, but populism and fomenting divisions also frequently occur. What is more, it is noted that Levica developed harmful narratives with hate speech, often incited divisions and character attacks, and together with Alternativa, they were the only ones who used manipulative audio-visual content. Disinformation was presented in posts on the profiles of Alternativa, the leader of the Democratic Movement, Izet Medjiti, and the ministers Ljupcho Nikolovski and Krenar Loga. Indicators that point to the presence of ethnocentrism were observed in the posts of Levica and the Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Political System, Artan Grubi. Claims of harmful foreign influence and extreme patriotism are noted with Levica and SDSM, and also, apart from these political entities, the spread of panic and fear is also noted in Krenar Loga's posts.

1 They used a populist narrative less often, spreading panic, fear and insecurity, demonization and character attacks, as well as manipulative audio-visual content.

SDSM - Social Democratic Union of Macedonia

The public communication of the SDSM party in November continues mostly with the posting of press releases from the party on a daily basis, which are also posted on their website and on the party's Facebook page. On the **SDSM's website,** 37 posts with harmful narratives were recorded. The most common actor to whom the party posts are directed to is VMRO-DPMNE (in 31 out of 37 press releases), followed by Hristijan Mickoski (in 15 out of 37 press releases) and Levica - as the third most mentioned actor (in 5 out of 37 press releases). It is the same case regarding the **Facebook communication:** VMRO-DPMNE is the most frequently mentioned actor, followed by SDSM (the party is presented as an actor) and Hristijan Mickoski is the third.

Concurrently, similarly as in the previous two months, SDSM continues the trend of naming the opposition party as 'DPMNE', sometimes also as 'The White Palace' alluding to the party's headquarters, and their leader only as 'Mickoski.' In the analysed posts, SDSM presents itself as the 'pro-European bloc', as the defender of the people, a transparent party which is oriented towards the EU.

As regards the **topics,** in November, SDSM communicated harmfully on issues of domestic policy, more specifically the topic of European integration of the country, the report on the country's progress published by the European Commission, the scandal with the Oncology Clinic, criticism of the work of the VMRO- DPMNE Mayors.

In terms of the harmful narratives that appear in the SDSM's posts, examples of populist rhetoric are often observed, where the party is presented as a defender of the citizens that works for the people. On the occasion of two years since the holding of the local elections, there are a series of press releases in the first half of November (3 - 7 November) which are mostly dominated by allegations of undermining the trust in the local government institutions. While some of the press releases aimed at specific municipalities led by VMRO-DPMNE mayors mention projects and promises of the mayors, there are also general press releases that include several elements, while there is no any data provided to support the allegations. In the post, the main actor is VMRO-DPMNE, which is named 'DPMNE', and the tone of the press release is negative. Unverified and unsubstantiated allegations, biased selection are presented with the aim of undermining trust in the institutions led by mayors from the VMRO-DPMNE political party. Such is the example *'The result of the DPMNE local government in over 40 municipalities is 0 projects and countless unfulfilled promises from the election programmes. Instead of development, the DPMNE local authorities secured new debts and party job positions, halfway through the mandate the overwhelming incompetence of the DPMNE Mayors came to light* [Press release, 04.11.2023, 2 years of local government, DPMNE did not justify the trust of the citizens-SDSM-Social Democratic Union of Macedonia (sdsm.org.mk)]

In relation to the rhetoric used towards Levica and VMRO-DPMNE, the use of narratives that label these parties as 'anti-EU' and 'anti-Western' political parties are noticeable. In a press release that criticizes the behaviour of Levica's MPs in the Assembly, in addition to *the criticisms and the demand for responsibility, it is also stated that the citizens saw what the scenarios of Levica meant in a very bad way. What the citizens are seeing today is a confirmation of what we were saying all along. With Levica and their coalition partner, only incidents, violence and chaos are possible. The attitude of Levica towards the institution of the Assembly is an attitude towards the country, today the computer in the Assembly, tomorrow the people. SDSM will not allow the scenarios of the pro-Russian Levica to succeed.* By naming the Levica as 'pro-Russian', it is insinuated that Levica's ideology is close to and serves the interests of Russia as a foreign entity. [Press release, 20.11.2023, There must be responsibility for the rampage of Levica in the Assembly, we will not allow violent scenarios-SDSM-Social Democratic Union of Macedonia (sdsm.org.mk)] (also posted on FB).

It is noteworthy that in November SDSM intensified the use of the phrase 'VMRO-DPMNE and Levica coalition' despite the fact that these two parties do not have a formally signed coalition agreement. This tendency to produce and spread incorrect information knowingly, is very close to the definition of disinformation[2], which has been noted several times in the monitoring of the political actors and in the media reports. Such is the example of the press release on the website in which the spokeswoman of SDSM, Bogdanka Kuzeska, uses several harmful narratives such as disinformation, biased selection, labelling, attacks on the ideologies of the political opponents that they serve foreign entities, character attacks:

> Levica is a pro-Russian, anti-NATO and anti-EU party that worships dictators like Enver Hodja. Radical right, in love with the regime just like DPMNE. These are the anti-European values of the coalition DPMNE and Levica, of Mickoski and Apasiev. It has been clear for a long time, now it is only being confirmed. In the upcoming parliamentary elections, we will have two political blocs. The first pro-European bloc, led by SDSM, which fights for a European future, higher salaries and pensions, a better standard of living and European values. And an anti-European bloc from DPMNE and Levica which is for isolation and which means economic regression, stagnation and distance from the European Union and the democratic world. Citizens do not want isolation, new emigration of young people and uncertainty. Citizens want membership in the EU, higher salaries, better standard of living; they want the young people to build their future in a European country, at home, in their homeland. That is why the anti-European coalition of DPMNE and Levica will be met with defeat by the citizens in the elections of 2024 .[27.11.2023, Press release, posted on the website and on Facebook, The values of the coalition between DPMNE and the Levica are against NATO and against the EU-SDSM-Social Democratic Union of Macedonia (sdsm.org.mk)]

Similar rhetoric of labelling, serving foreign entities, undermining trust, character attacks, spreading panic is used in a party statement which ridicules a possible coalition between VMRO-DPMNE and Levica, e.g. *'Will the DMPNE-Levica coalition rest on the values of the dictator Enver Hodja? Mickoski may also go next year to pay respect to the dictator Enver Hodja, as Apasiev did.* It is stated that the values advocated by Mickoski and Levica are the same and that from being *'a partner of the democratic world, the USA and the EU, they want to bring back the country to the period when it was isolated and captured, and that Mickoski is having a 'deal' with a party that is against NATO and the EU and a factor of destabilization, isolation and endangerment of the country's European path.'* [Press release, 27.11.2023, Will the DPMNE-Levica coalition rest on Enver Hodja's values?-SDSM-Social Democratic Union of Macedonia (sdsm.org.mk)]

In the public communication of SDSM, there were also posts with a populist narrative and biased selection in which SDSM is promoted as an ally and saviour of the citizens. In a post with reference to the construction of social housing, in addition to the post in which data is given about the project and that the largest building with 312 apartments in Butel Municipality is being built, it is added that *'for SDSM everyone is important, caring for everyone is important. If a comparison is made with the period of DPMNE, the value of this building of 10 million euros is equal to 4 lions - monuments from Skopje 2014. This is an essential difference between SDSM and DPMNE. SDSM ensures the citizens to have a better life, DPMNE the monuments. SDSM does not plant palm trees and weeping willows in Vardar, but invests for the needs of the citizens.* [Press release, 19.11.2023, SDSM invests in modern infrastructure and takes care of the vulnerable-SDSM-Social Democratic Union of Macedonia (sdsm.org.mk)]

2 Despite the multitude of definitions of the term 'disinformation', in this research it is defined as 'Sharing information or claims that are not true, with the intention of causing harm or manipulating public opinion'. See more in the list of harmful narratives.

VMRO-DPMNE

In the month of November, 38 posts with a harmful narrative were recorded on the VMRO-DPMNE's website, mostly in the form of party press releases, several party reactions, several press conferences of the spokespersons Marija Miteva and Naum Stoilkovski, MPs Dragan Kovacki and Mile Lefkov, an interview of MP Bojan Stojanovski in the central news edition of TV Sitel and a speech of MP Zhaklina Peshevska in the European Parliament. Most of these posts are regarding the domestic policy (13), although 11 posts with harmful narratives are regarding healthcare were also observed, but there are also harmful narratives with regards to foreign policy, social policy, economy, justice, crime, corruption etc. Also, on the Facebook pages of VMRO-DPMNE and the leader Hristijan Mickoski, in the total of 6 posts[3] with harmful narratives, 3 in Mickoski's posts and 3 in VMRO-DPMNE's posts, the topic is domestic policy. All of them are in the form of a video, except for one post with text and photos by Mickoski, and in terms of content, they are mostly in the form of reactions, but there is also a speech and a press conference. On 19 November, a post with a harmful narrative was noticed on both Facebook pages.

In the website posts, VMRO-DPMNE is mostly presented as saviour and defender of the people and less often as defender of justice, identity and as a transparent party. Also on Facebook, Mickoski presents himself as the saviour and defender of the people, and VMRO-DPMNE, in addition to these two characteristics, also presents itself as defender of the justice on their Facebook profile.

In 30 out of 38 website posts with harmful narratives, VMRO-DPMNE is the main actor and the only source of the information presented, and less often two or more other sources appear that are used in the posts. In these posts, the Government or the 'authorities of SDS and DUI' is mostly mentioned and talked about in a negative manner, and SDSM (referred to as SDS) and DUI are often criticized individually. This month, they often criticized the Oncology Clinic, and also, there were negative mentions and criticisms of the judicial authorities, Public Prosecutor's Office, Basic Public Prosecutor's Office, the public prosecutor Vilma Ruskovska and the President of the Constitutional Court, Dobrila Kacarska. Among senior officials, Prime Minister Dimitar Kovachevski is talked about in a negative manner mostly, and there is also negative reference directed to the President of the country Stevo Pendarovski, the Minister of Foreign Affairs Bujar Osmani, the Minister of Defence Slavjanka Petrovska, the Minister of Health Fatmir Medjiti, the Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Political System and Community Relations, Artan Grubi, the Minister of Transport and Communications Blagoj Bochvarski and the Mayor of Skopje Danela Arsovska. Less often, a negative tone is noticed when mentioning Levica and its leader Dimitar Apasiev. The Parliamentary Commission of Inquiry on the Radiology and Oncology Clinic scandal, the European Commission, the OSCE, the patients of the Radiology and Oncology Clinic, the pensioners and REC Bitola are mentioned once and neutrally, and only the president of Serbia, Aleksandar Vuchikj, is mentioned with a positive tone.

Similarly, the identified Facebook posts with harmful narratives on Mickoski's profile mention 'the Government of DUI and SDSM with a negative tone, farmers with a neutral tone and the pensioners with a positive tone. The naming of the Government in which the larger coalition partner is SDSM and DUI is the smaller partner is interesting, i.e. instead of the Government led by SDSM and DUI, it is often named as the Government of 'DUI and SDS', which subtly suggests that DUI is the main leader of the Government of RNM. Additionally, in his Facebook posts, the Mayor of Strumica, Kostadin

3 In order to avoid double analysis of the quantitative data, in the case when the political actors share the same posts both on the websites and on the Facebook pages, the selection of the communication channel was applied in the monitoring, i.e. in this case, for VMRO-DPMNE, the double contents from the websites and Facebook were not analysed

Kostadinov, and councillors in the Council of Strumica Municipality are mentioned with a neutral tone, and the company Bechtel and Enka with a negative tone. Likewise, in the VMRO-DPMNE Facebook posts, the mayors from their party are mentioned with a positive tone, and with a negative tone they talk about 'SDS and DUI', the Prime Minister Kovachevski and the central Government.

In the identified website posts with harmful narratives, the most noticeable are claims of corruption, lack of accountability, abuse of office without attempting to substantiate those claims, unverified findings as a basis for accusing political opponents, and deliberate omission of information. Labelling, ridicule and gross disrespect of the political opponents, as well as direct or indirect promotion of one's own characteristics as something in favour of the people, as opposed to the elite features of the political opponents that do not reflect the will of the people, are less frequently noted. Unsubstantiated claims that the political opponents are being manipulated by powerful behind-the-scenes groups, as well as accusations of foreign entities interfering in the internal affairs of the country, use of wording that denigrates a certain group of people in order to cause division and discord among we – the good ones and you - the bad ones and hate speech are rarely seen.

For example, the 19 November online press release, titled What pleases Kovachevski so much to revel in Belgrade for 5 days, when poverty, inflation, debt are growing in Macedonia, the standard of living is declining and the economy is sinking?! abounds with harmful narratives describing Prime Minister Kovachevski's official visit to Serbia. One can notice the reporting of incomplete information, which makes a biased selection. *'We see him singing in bars and opening bottles of wine...Kovachevski rejoicing and making bacchanals in the region for days', but also allegations of corruption and abuse of office... 'when nothing works in the country except the corruption and organized crime of the Government'* and unverified findings such as *'he should ask the president of Serbia, Vuchikj how he manages to keep inflation lower than ours, how he manages to keep GDP growth higher than ours, how he manages to build highways, how he attracts foreign investments...'*, by which an attempt is made to undermine trust in the Prime Minister and the Government. The post also contains ridicule and gross disrespect towards the Prime Minister, which is a character attack: *'Kovachevski should be careful, the alcohol can cause him a nagging feeling as if someone is cutting him with a knife in the stomach, especially since he had surgery on his abdomen and still he has problems, because of which he avoided the military service.'*

In a 28 November press release titled *SDS and DUI are sabotaging the Oncology Inquiry Committee so that the truth will not be known and to protect their personnel in the 'Wild Flesh' scandal*, one can recognize the harmful narrative of biased selection of information and the attempt to undermine trust in the institutions, in connection with the scandalous case with the Oncology Clinic, which is being investigated by the Public Prosecutor's Office for abuse and selling medicines on the illegal market. As in the other 10 press releases on this topic, VMRO-DPMNE blames SDSM and DUI for the scandal and uses allegations of corruption and abuse of office- *'The nervousness in SDS from the work and conclusions of the Commission of Inquiry on the scandal of the Oncology Clinic, shows that the cancer mafia is closely connected to the Government'*, unverified findings *'Such loose-cannon healthcare was possible only with the knowledge, approval or direct participation of the highest officials in the institutions and the Government,* and deliberately not conveying the full picture of the event - *the key responsibility should be sought from the former Minister of Healthcare Venko Filipche, the then medical and economic directors of Oncology..., the then director of the State Sanitary and Health Inspectorate of the Republic of North Macedonia..., the then directors of HIF...'*, although the indications of possible abuses in this clinic date back to the term of Minister Filipche and the other mentioned directors[4]

4 The State Audit Office for PHI Clinic for Radiotherapy and Oncology made audit reports in 2008, 2012 and 2021. Source: https://360stepeni.mk/izveshtajot-na-dzr-za-onkologija-na-komisiska-rasprava-ima-brojni-propusti-koi-direktno-vlijaat-na-uslugite-shto-gi-dobivale-patsientite/

A similar trend appears on Facebook, where both on the profile of the party and on the profile of the leader Mickoski, unverified findings and claims about corruption and abuse of power, but also deliberate omission of information and explicit promotion of their characteristics as something that is for the benefit of the people. On the other hand, SDSM and the Government led by SDSM and DUI present themselves as an elite political group that works for personal, instead of people's interests. By using such phrases in the posts, harmful narratives are developed for undermining trust in the institutions and populism. For example, in a Facebook post on Mickoski's profile from 7 November from a visit to the farmers from the village Drmeni, Resen unverified findings and claims about corruption and crime are noticed without any argumentation and evidence: '*The problems they face are big, the Government is not showing any interest in finding a solution for them, because they are only interested in the criminal businesses they run*', whereby an attempt to undermine the trust in the Government is being done. Furthermore, the post makes a comparison that develops a populist narrative: *'For the new Government that will be formed by VMRO-DPMNE and the coalition, the main priority will be solving the problems of the farmers and helping them'*. Additionally, only on the VMRO-DPMNE party profile in one Facebook post from 28 November, which is followed by party press release posted on the website, a video with excerpts from the Prime Minister's statements is noted and Kovachevski is labelled and insulted in connection with the increase in the salaries of the public officials, thus developing a harmful narrative of demonizing the person: *'Kovachevski shamelessly manipulated the citizens for 8 months and promised to cut down the officials' salaries in the style 'if not today, then tomorrow for sure' and still did nothing. Everything he said, everything he promised, all of it was a lie'*.

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

Unlike the other political parties, the public political communication on the party's website and Facebook page is rather low-saturated with harmful narratives. As regards to the political party DUI, the posts dominated by ethnically motivated discourse were noticed, especially in the period around 28 November, when the Day of the Albanian Flag is celebrated, and that day is also a national holiday of the Republic of Albania. Most often, the posts are promotional for the party that presents itself as a defender of the rights of the Albanians, a pro-Western and pro-European option that works in line with the Western values.

DUI's position to present itself as a defender of the Albanian interests is also expressed in DUI's reaction to the placement of the cross on Popova Shapka, which is considered a provocation for the Muslim, predominantly Albanian community. In the post DUI puts the blame on the Mayor of Tetovo, Bilal Kasami, who is from the political party Besa, presenting criticism, biased selection and unsubstantiated allegations, labelling, character attacks, undermining trust in the institution and fomenting division of we - the god ones and they - the bad ones: *'Is the placement of this cross something previously agreed between Besa of Bilal Kasami and VMRO DPMNE, a service kept secret from the citizens for the help that VMRO offered to Besa in the local elections for the Municipality of Tetovo? The fact that the Municipality did not react and the tendency for all this to pass in silence speaks volumes for an agreement between VMRO and Besa'*. But people from Tetovo are not silent, nor will we be silent against this scandalous trade-off. (16.11.2023, Reaction, press release, posted on the DUI's website and on their Facebook page)

Levica

In November, 16 posts with a harmful narrative were recorded on **the website** of the Levica party[5], mostly in the form of speeches, less often press releases, one interview and one reaction, but content-wise almost all of them are regarding domestic policy, with the exception of one press release on foreign policy and one on justice. Also, on the Facebook page of the leader Dimitar Apasiev, all 7 noted posts with harmful narratives are regarding domestic policy, mostly in the form of reactions, but there is one post containing an interview and one post a speech. A greater variety of topics was noted on Levica's Facebook page, where 23 posts with harmful narratives were identified, although mostly with reference to domestic policy, there are also several posts on crime and corruption and one post on the topic of economy, education, social policy and judiciary each. On this profile, the harmful narratives are mostly in the form of press releases, but there are also several interviews, reactions and a statement.

In the posts with harmful narratives on the websites and on the Facebook page, Levica is often presented as saviour and defender of the people and justice, and once it is presented as defender of the identity. In the posts with harmful narratives on Apasiev's Facebook profile, an attempt to present himself as a defender of the identity was noticed.

In almost all posts with harmful narratives on the Levica's **website**, the party presents itself as the main actor and the only source of the information presented, with the exception of one post in which two sources of information were noted. In the website posts with a harmful narrative, the 'broad SDS-DUI-DPMNE coalition' and the 'SDS-DUI Government' called 'hybrid regime' are mostly mentioned and negatively talked about and the Assembly is often negatively mentioned, while the President of the Assembly Djaferi is called a 'deserter'. Moreover, SDSM or 'SDS' are called a quisling party, VMRO-DPMNE or 'DPMNE' are called a 'fake opposition', and DUI-'secessionists'.[6] Only the European Commission and the City of Skopje are mentioned in a neutral tone, while the messages about the Law on Environment, the Chegren Hydropower Plant as a national and strategic asset, the Minister of Economy Bekteshi, the Municipality of Karposh and the Ukrainian soldiers are mentioned in an ambivalent tone.

Similarly, on Levica's **Facebook page**, 'SDS' and the Government are often talked about with a negative tone, and 'DPMNE', the MP of DUI Ziberi, [People's Liberation Army] are also mentioned in a negative manner.-ONA or Ushtria Çlirimtare Kombëtare, UÇK (alb.)] and DUI are named as 'uchki', Ali Ahmeti, Dimitar Kovachevski, judges, the prosecutor Islam Abazi, the Ministers Jeton Shakjiri, Bujar Osmani and Kaya Shukova, the Mayor of Tetovo Bilal Kasami, the Mayor of Gjorche Petrov, Aleksandar Stojkoski, the Mayor of Prilep, Borche Jovcheski, the company Bechtel and Enka, the company of the former vice Prime Minister Kocho Angjushev-Brako are named as 'Hochstaplers', State Lottery, EVN and the Faculty of Law in Skopje named as 'fossils'.[7] Ambivalence in the tone is noticeable when talking about Bitola, Vlae, Chair Municipality, the European Commission and ESM Sales. Also, in the posts with harmful narratives on the Facebook page of the leader Apasiev, mostly

5 17.4% of the total number of identified website posts with harmful narratives from all monitored parties.

6 The Minister of Defence Slavjanka Petrovska, the Minister of Justice Krenar Loga, Stevcho Jakimovski and the leader of VMRO-DPMNE Hristijan Mickoski are also mentioned by Levica with a negative tone and criticism, and less often negatively mentioned are Besnik Avdija, JSP, Pucko Petrol, the mine in Probishtip, Council of Gazi Baba Municipality.

7 The content of the posts containing these negative names are analysed in more detail below.

negative things are said about 'DPMNE', 'SDS', the President of the Assembly named as 'Taljat', the international community named 'West', North Macedonia named as 'Severna (North)', Maja Kadievska called 'vmroid elite', Putsko Petrol as 'sultan', the MPs and the USA, while only the 'Macedonian people' is mentioned with a positive tone.

On Levica's website, the most posts with harmful narratives were recorded on 20 November, when five videos were posted of the speeches of MPs Dimitar Apasiev and Borislav Krmov in the Assembly, in connection with the adoption of the new Rules of Procedure, when they caused an aggressive incident by destroying equipment in the Assembly hall, which was reported in one of the videos posted on the Levica's website. On the other hand, on the Levica's Facebook page and Apasiev's Facebook page, the most posts with harmful narratives were recorded on 27 November, when Apasiev posted two reactions criticizing VMRO-DPMNE, and Levica seven posts with harmful narratives of various topics.

In the identi(ed website posts with harmful narratives, the most noticeable are claims of corruption, lack of accountability, abuse of of(ce without attempting to substantiate those claims, unveri(ed (ndings as a basis for accusing the political opponents, and the use of words that denigrate a certain group of people in order to foment divisions and discords among we - the good ones and you - the bad ones. Less frequently are noted narratives intentionally not conveying the full picture of the 'event' and sentences that explicitly or implicitly promote one's own characteristics as something for the benefit of the people, while the characteristics of the political opponents are promoted as something that serves a certain small elite group of people, which does not reflect the will of the people. Thereby, most often are created harmful narratives for undermining trust in the institutions, biased selection of information, rarely encouraging social-political divisions, populist narratives, attempts to spread panic, fear and insecurity, demonization of the political opponents and manipulative audio-visual content.

For example, on 20 November, a video and text of a speech by the leader Apasiev from the Assembly regarding the adoption of a new Rules of Procedure of the Assembly, titled Battery patriots from DPMNE, quislings from esdees and secessionists from DUI put the noose on the parlaimentarian democracy was posted on Levica's website. Even from the title of the post and other sentences like 'Disrespected deserter president', there are noted gross insults and denigration of these political actors. Furthermore, Apasiev presents unverified findings, deliberately omits information and makes claims of corruption and unprofessionalism- *'...DPMNE and DUI will smuggle all the laws with a European flag in the next parliamentary composition. What the President of the Assembly of the Republic of Macedonia will do today is unprecedented in history of the Assembly... in the future parliamentary composition, EVERY LAW, but literally EVERY law will be like the current ones, infamous with the EU flag. This means that the opposition, regardless of whether it has fifty-nine, fifty-eight, or any number of MPs, will not be able to prevent anything. It is an entry into a dictatorship...'*, thereby developing a harmful narrative of biased selection and undermining trust in the institutions. In addition, the use of words that denigrate a certain group of people in order to foment divisions and discords between we - the good ones and you - the bad ones are noticed: *'These three political dragons who suck the blood of the Macedonian people want no opposition in the future,* which incites divisions and spreads fear and insecurity. Also, a populist narrative can be observed in the post: *'President, I give you an honest pioneer word, that this will not be forgiven and a condition for any future government in which Levica will have the opportunity to participate, will be that you rot in prison precisely because of this'*, where he puts his party in the role of defender and saviour of the people, justice and democracy- *We are here with all our strength to stop you.*

When it comes to foreign policy topics, Levica also spreads narratives about supposedly harmful external influences and pressures that can undermine trust in the institutions and create panic, uncertainty and fear in the public. For example, in a press release on the party's website dated 24 November titled The policy of subjugation drags the country into war (with manipulative audio-visual content, i.e. a photo of the Minister of Defence Slavjanka Petrovska with a Ukrainian flag on which the message from the title of the post is written) Levica uses unverified findings and claims of non-transparency and unprofessionalism in order to blame the 'SDS and DUI government' and 'NATO' for dragging the country into war by allowing the training of Ukrainian soldiers in our country: *'The anti-people government of SDS and DUI enabled the training of Ukrainian soldiers in Macedonia, thus once again directly drawing the country into a confrontation with a member country of the Security Council... This is just one more proof that the country's forced involvement in NATO makes us a potential target, for the purpose of realizing the interests of third countries, to the great detriment of Macedonia... There is no doubt that Macedonia has absolutely no interest in interfering and participating in military actions that are a direct consequence of the imperialist policy led by the Collective West'*. Moreover, this narrative tarnishes the political power in the country and NATO as something bad and undesirable and creates panic in the public.

Similarly, on the Facebook page of Levica and Apasiev, unfounded claims of corruption, unverified findings and the use of words that denigrate a certain group of people were often used in order to foment divisions and discord between we - the good ones and you - the bad ones. This allowed the development of harmful narratives of biased selection, undermining trust in the institutions and fomenting divisions in society. In rarer cases, posts are noticed on both profiles deliberately not conveying the full picture of the 'event'- *'It was seen yesterday who is against whom, that means all 118 against the two MPs from Levica'*, use of phrases that accuse foreign entities of interfering in the internal affairs of the country – *'We are an experimental state and here we see the interference of the collective West of which they are exponents'*, as well as words that directly or indirectly promote their own characteristics as someone who is in favour of the people, as opposed to the characteristics of the opponents as something that does not reflect the will of the people – *'The only popular defiance you see here is the Levica. There is no other, there is no one who gives such resistance'* (Video post from an interview on Apasiev's Facebook profile, 24 November). This develops harmful narratives of populism, theories of foreign influence, as well as spreading fear and panic. Labelling and rude ridicule of the political opponents is also less often observed, which develops harmful narratives for the demonization of persons, and other entities and persons are not spared, for example, *'The same fossils at the Faculty of Law were writing the same laws for us for 300 years, only we just go round in circles'*. (Video post from Apasiev's interview on Levica's Facebook profile, 27 November) or... *'the sultan from PUCKO PETROL, to whom we gave everything we had to fill the buses with fuel.* (Video post from a speech on Apasiev's Facebook profile, 28 November).

In addition, ethnocentrism and extreme patriotism can be seen on Levica's Facebook page. For example, in a 20 November post titled SILENCE ABOUT THE SCANDALOUS AD OF 'BECHTEL AND ENKA' ABOUT THE NORTH MACEDONIAN LANGUAGE it is said that *'the results of the rule of the treacherous SDS and the secessionists from DUI are extremely disastrous for the country and the general welfare. The corporate dictatorship, which they formalized with a European flag to allow Artan GRUBI to get rich. The Government, which consists of impotent quislings from SDS and ethno-tribalism secessionists from DUI, allows a corporation to complete the project of redefining the state's identity markers. The anti-Macedonian policy of the traitorous SDS and DUI results in a complete redefinition of the anti-fascist Macedonian identity into a NATO North Macedonian identity.'* Thus, just in these few sentences, one can notice unverified findings, insults and labelling, claims of corruption, but one can also notice the ethnocentrism that blames the company and the parties in power for 'flagrant degradation of the Macedonian language' and identity. The ethnocentric narrative

also develops into extreme patriotism with the populist formulation: *'Levica in its programme advocates the annulment of the so-called Prespa agreement with Greece and the criminal illegal constitutional amendments resulting from it-for disrespecting the right to self-determination!'*

Also, hate speech (specifically towards DUI) and manipulative audio-visual content can be seen on Levica's Facebook profile, for example in 23 November post where a short message was designed with a photo of Apasiev and it says: 'The Uchki are thugs, DPMNE and SDS are their collaborators or in 12 November post it is said: *'...the political leader of the UCHK-Ali Ahmeti, today is the president of DUI who boldly claims that 'Albanians in Macedonia are the masters'. The terrorists, with Macedonian blood on their hands, are today building memorial centres, undermining our national identity, and enjoying the luxury of the stolen wealth, they decide on the political direction of Macedonia.'*

European union for change (Lidhja Evropike për Ndryshim)

The political entities Alternativa, Democratic Movement and the Besa movement as Albanian opposition parties are united in the so-called European Union for Change and it is noticeable that they state more frequently joint positions, with the press releases being posted on the Facebook profiles of all entities, accompanied by the logos of the political parties. The statements and reactions of the Democratic Movement, Alternativa and Besa mostly contain criticisms of the governing of DUI as the largest Albanian party that is part of the Government. The topics that are elaborated the most often in the monitored posts are regarding the field of domestic policy, more specifically regarding the rule of law and corruption.

In the November monitoring of the EUC, 11 posts with harmful narratives were noted, in total for all three parties and their leaders. In the posts with harmful narratives, claims of corruption, unaccountability, abuse of office, character attacks are noted most often, explicitly or implicitly promoting one's own characteristics as something that benefits the people, while the characteristics of political opponents are promoted as something that serves to a certain small elite group of people, which does not reflect the will of the people. In that direction, the most common harmful narratives are about undermining trust in the institutions, biased selection of information, encouraging socio-political divisions, populist narratives, demonization of the political opponents and manipulative audio-visual content.

In a statement on the Facebook profile of Alternativa (also shared by Izet Medjiti, the leader of the Democratic Movement): 'Stop the pressure on the judges of the Supreme Court', there is a criticism of the pressure being put on the Supreme Court and its president, Besa Ademi. At the same time, the European Union for Change presents itself as an advocate of justice, at the same time with incompletely substantiated allegations claiming that the political opponent works for a small group of people: *'DUI and SDSM continue to violate all democratic values, institutional independence, the integrity of judges and the judiciary in general, with coercion on them, to bring back Gruevski and save his life, as well as his criminals, all in favour of electoral calculations for the next Parliamentary elections. We therefore welcome this statement, which will once again help expose DUI and its missing credibility, as well as prove that it has lost and is losing support and political influence.*
(3.11.2023, Post on the Facebook profile of Alternativa, and also posted on the Facebook profile of Izet Medjiti from DD)

One of the topics that is addressed in the public communication of the European Union for Change is the corruption of senior representatives of DUI, and Artan Grubi stands out in particular. In a post regarding the work of the State Lottery, claims are made that undermine trust in the institutions run by DUI and that *'the citizens are suffering from DUI's gambling businesses and DUI has been turned into a party that deals with gambling business'*, and as reference to the State Lottery that it is a symbol of the shame of the current DUI leadership. DUI is claimed to have turned from a party that was a symbol of the struggle for the rights of Albanians into a party that deals with gambling matters. *'Unfortunately, DUI today looks more like a business-octopus that has perfected all the mechanisms for appropriating public money. All declarative commitments for full EU membership, respect of our strategic international friendships are just a facade for their personal and party business interests. After everything that we and the media reported that was happening in the State Lottery, by now we should have expected the resignation of Artan Grubi and his former assistant Parparim Bajrami, as well as the action of the competent state authorities. Since none of this has happened, as the European Union for Change we announce to the general public that in the next period we will further reveal the involvement of the DUI management in the gambling business.*
(8.11.2023, Facebook post from the profile of Alternativa)

In another post, also dedicated to Artan Grubi and the operation of the State Lottery, allegations of illegal operation are presented, with the comment that the *DUI political party is not a party, but a businessman and a sinister octopus.*

Monitoring of the communication of the members of the Government of RNM through the official Facebook pages in November 2023

In addition to monitoring the presence of harmful narratives, the Facebook profiles of the Prime Minister, Deputy Prime Ministers and ministers are monitored in order to identify possible abuse of the official government communication channels on Facebook for party communication, i.e. whether they respect The Code of Ethics for Civil Servants, according to which they should perform their work tasks in a politically neutral and impartial manner and not advocate their political beliefs in the performance of work tasks.

This month, harmful narratives were noticed in the Facebook posts by four senior government officials, namely Deputy Prime Minister Artan Grubi, Ministers of Justice Krenar Loga, Ministers of Culture Bisera Kostadinovska-Stojchevska and Minister for Agriculture, Forestry and Water Economy Ljupcho Nikolovski.

On the Deputy Prime Minister Artan Grubi's Facebook profile, three posts with harmful narratives were recorded in November. For example, in a post on Facebook, a live broadcast from the solemn academy on the occasion of 111 years of the Flag Day, there is a speech by the Deputy Prime Minister Artan Grubi, and symbols are used that express ethnocentrism and nationalism, foreign influence, fomenting divisions of we - the good ones and they - the bad ones, expression of extreme patriotism, biased selection and undermining of the trust in other political entities. In the speech, DUI is presented as a party defending the Albanian national identity, oriented towards the EU, unlike other political entities that do not respect the Ohrid Agreement, do not recognize the independence of Kosovo, do not recognize the Albanian flag and language and are against the EU and NATO:

> If November had an ethnicity, it would be Albanian. And let us finish our work, and we have left the fate of the nation to the one to whom we have given our trust. Long live the Albanian nation and flag May Albania be eternal. (28.11.2023, Facebook post, live streaming of the event)

Furthermore, this post is from a party event and was posted on the official Facebook profile of the Deputy Prime Minister in the Government, which is composed of several coalition partners, thus abusing an official profile for party propaganda.

This month, four posts with harmful narratives were recorded on the Facebook profile of Minister of Justice Krenar Loga from the Alliance for Albanians party. In an interview, the Minister, acting as the secretary general of the Alliance for Albanians, criticizes the work of VMRO-DPMNE and makes unsubstantiated allegations, instructing the Albanian parties to be careful because *'Mickoski wants to bring back the period of Gruevski'* that he is a politician who wants to take revenge on the Albanians through the future political power to carry out a real confrontation and although Mickoski did not point it out publicly, his party activists did it on the ground because he already said *'how it is possible for Albanians to hold a large number of public positions in Macedonia and this is the biggest danger for 2024'*. Via this kind of discourse, unsubstantiated allegations are presented and panic and uncertainty is spreading among the public about the political actions of certain political entities, by inciting divisions of we - the good ones and they - the bad ones, labelling political opponents as serving small groups, people and their interests, rather than the good of citizens. (7.11.2023, Facebook post from an interview of the Minister of Justice Krenar Loga and an official of the Alliance for Albanians)

A narrative using labelling, ridicule, allegations of serving to foreign entities, foreign influence, undermining trust, spreading panic and insecurity, in relation to VMRO-DPMNE and Levica is used in the post of the Minister of Culture, who presents a party position on her official profile:

> *The real values that Mickoski stands for are the same as those of his potential coalition partner, the anti-European Levica. From a partner of the democratic world, of the USA and the EU, they want to bring back the country to the time when it was isolated and captured. It will bring economic uncertainty, setbacks and blockages. The citizens do not want anti-European politicians. The citizens want politicians who work for a secure future, higher salaries, a better standard of living, so that young people can build their future in a European country, at home, in their homeland.* (Facebook post, 26.11.2023, Mickoski admitted and confirmed...-Bisera Kostadinovska Stojchevska | Facebook)

Also, the Minister for Agriculture, Forestry and Water Economy Ljupcho Nikolovski in November used the official Facebook profile for the promotion of party policies from party activity in Strumica and to square off and attack VMRO-DPMNE. By using biased selection, unsubstantiated allegations and labelling, 'DPMNE' is attacked as the biggest damage to Macedonian agriculture: *'While they took the most fertile lands from the farmers and gave them to a person named Subrata Roy, we gave back those lands to the farmers. For 6 years, 5,000 ha of fertile land remained uncultivated, captured by Subrata Roy.* Then, with a populist discourse, SDSM is promoted as the saviour of the citizens: *today this land is given back to the real farmers and is being cultivated. We put every inch of arable land into operation for food processing* and information is given regarding the measures taken by SDSM: *Last year we made available 14,000 ha of agricultural land for processing. With the new changes in the Law on Agricultural Land, we fought and for the first time created clear steps that protect the agricultural land from category 1 to 4 from possible conversions for the construction of energy facilities. We succeeded in our goal! These are facts from which there is no escape, this is the difference between us and them.'* [Facebook post, 11 November, 2023 (💯 There is nothing more beautiful when a person has a peaceful...-Ljupcho Nikolovski | Facebook)]

Among the holders of positions from SDSM who are part of the Government, a trend is noticed where the Facebook profiles that they have as holders of state positions are simultaneously used for posting content and promotion of the party activities and the SDSM party, i.e. no distinction is made between the country and the party activities.

On the Prime Minister Dimitar Kovachevski's official Facebook page, there are posts about the awarding of prizes to the most successful teams of the 'Filip Nedelkovski' basketball tournament organised by the young social democrats from the Municipal Organisation of SDSM Aerodrom' and a congratulation for '32 years of the existence of the Social Democratic Youth of Macedonia'. There is also an untitled post with four photos of the Prime Minister and SDSM President Dimitar Kovachevski and fellow party members, in local party premises in Strumica: *'Pleasant meeting with the president of the municipal organization of SDSM Strumica, the president of SDMM, the president of the Women's Forum, the chairperson of the Council of the Municipality of Strumica and the Mayor from the ranks of SDSM. The Social Democrats from Strumica know very well what a winning spirit means and how to deliver winning results that the citizens know how to value.* (24.11.2023, Facebook post)

On the official Facebook profile of the Deputy Prime Minister for European Affairs, Bojan Marichikj, a post was shared about party activities of SDSM in Kisela Voda Municipality: *Along with our comrades from MO SDSM Kisela Voda, we continue the fight for the country to move forward, to join the EU, where higher salaries and pensions are guaranteed, where the country's economy will grow. The citizens are disappointed with the management of the municipalities by VMRO-DPMNE, which only knows how to block and keep the country in incertitude.* (5.11.2023, Facebook post)

The Minister of Environment and Physical Planning, Kaja Shukova, has a post regarding an educational debate of SDSM on women's and men's healthcare. (20.11.2023, Facebook post)

There is a similar post on the official profile of the Minister of Interior, Oliver Spasovski, with posted contents from the party activities, from the debate in Kumanovo on women's and men's healthcare. (24.11. 2023, Facebook post)

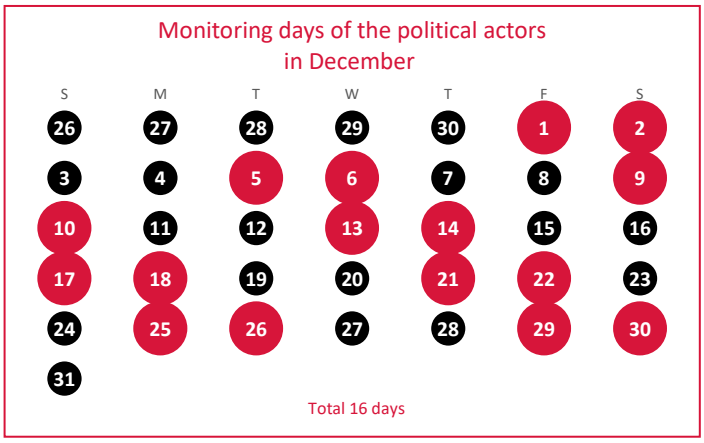
On the official profile of the Minister of Defence Slavjanka Petrovska, there is a post about the promotion of the youth of the SDSM party congratulating the birthday *'We survived many days, but together... together and we will continue, you the young people and we experienced ones. I love you my young social democrats. Happy birthday SDMM-once SDMM lifelong SDMM.'* (11.11.2023, Facebook post)

In addition to the ministers from SDSM, during the monitored period, the practice of posting promotional materials for party activities was noted on the profile of the Minister of Foreign Affairs, Bujar Osmani. A video of a DUI party event in Chair was posted in English and Albanian, *DREJTËPËRDREJT-Promotivimi i Sekretariateve të BDI-së-Dega Çair / LIVE-Promotion of BDI Secretariats-Chair Branch* (video: 1 hour 42 min.), (13.11.2023, Facebook post, video and video from a DUI party event in Kumanovo).
(16.11.2023, Facebook post)

This type of posts, in which there is not any distinction between the activities of the persons as party position holders and public offices holders, represents **a violation of the principles of professional communication with the public.** Public office holders have a duty in their relationship with the public to share decisions, policies and other information from the activity they perform. While, on the other hand, as regards to the promotion of party activities, it is necessary to have special communication channels that will be managed and maintained, as well as financed from the party's resources The communication channels that they have as state officials should be supported with resources from the public sector in which they work and by spokespersons in the public institutions.

1.2. *Communication practices of political parties and their leaders in December 2023*

Subject of the monitoring: Websites of political parties and Facebook profiles of political actors



Month: December, 2023. Days of monitoring are: December 1, 2, 5, 6, 9, 10, 13, 14, 17, 18, 21, 22, 25, 26, 29, 30 (16 days in total).[8]

In the period from 1 to 31 December, from the monitoring of the websites and Facebook pages of 10 political parties and their leaders, a total of **105 posts** on the parties' **websites** and a total of **71 Facebook posts** containing a harmful narrative were identified.

More than half, or 58.1 percent of the identified harmful narratives on the parties' websites this month are from the party of VMRO-DPMNE, followed by 30.5 percent from SDSM, and 11.4 percent or 12 posts from Levica.[9]

On the other hand, on the Facebook pages, no posts with harmful narratives have been identified by VMRO-DPMNE, except for two posts by the leader Hristijan Mickoski, and the most harmful narratives are noticed by Levica, which, together with the posts by the leader Apasiev, have a total of 31 posts (43.7 percent of the total number) with harmful narratives, while for SDSM there are recorded 16 posts (or 22.5 percent of the total number) with harmful narratives. Furthermore, on Facebook, 12 posts with harmful narratives by Alternativa were noted and together with the three posts by the leader Afrim Gashi, they represent 21.1 percent of the total number of Facebook posts with harmful narratives, while with their coalition partner Democratic Movement, four posts with harmful narratives were noted. This month, harmful narratives were noted by two government ministers, namely two by the Minister of Culture from SDSM, Bisera Kostadinovska-Stojchevska and the Minister of Economy from DUI, Kreshnik Bekteshi.[10]

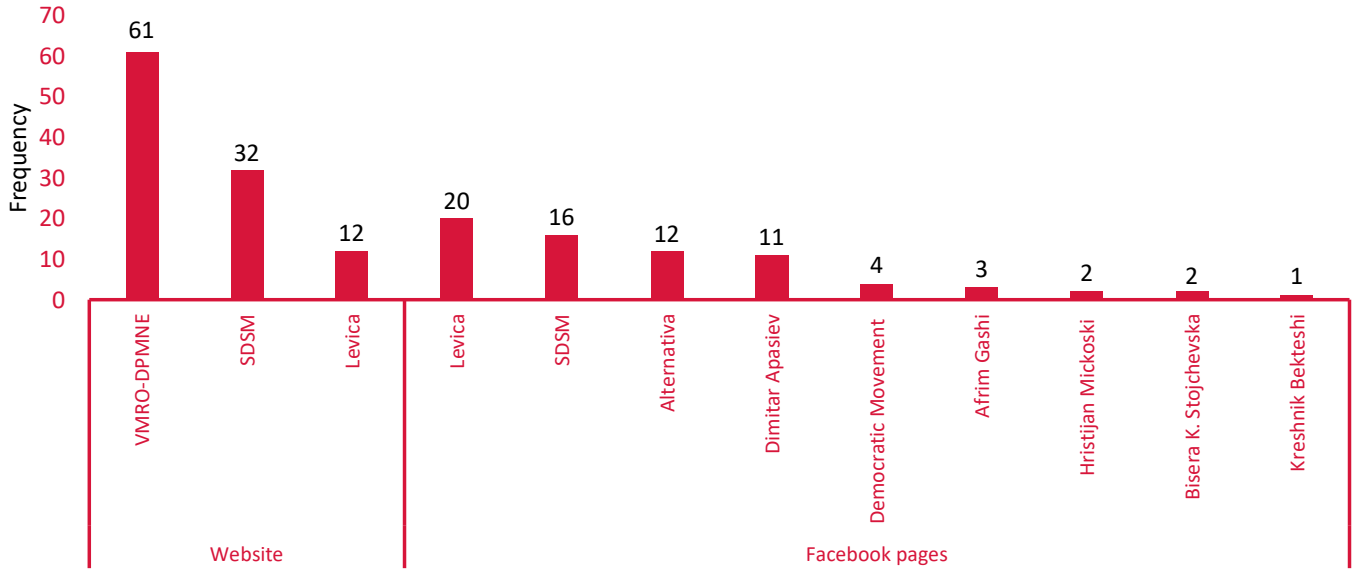
The analysis below refers only to the communications of the above-mentioned political actors where harmful narratives have been identified (harmful narrative indicator/s). In order to avoid a double analysis of the quantitative data, in the case when the political actors share the same posts both on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

8 The dynamics for monitoring the content of the political actors is 'every consecutive third and fourth day of the month'.

9 On DUI's website, Alliance for Albanians, Alternativa, Democratic Movement, LDP, New Social Democratic Party and Socialist Party, no harmful narratives were noted.

10 On the Facebook page of Arben Taravari, Ali Ahmeti, Izet Medjiti, Monika Zajkova, Goran Misovski, Ljupco Dimovski, Alliance for Albanians, DUI, VMRO-DPMNE, LDP, NSDP and Socialist Party of Macedonia, no harmful narratives were noted in December.

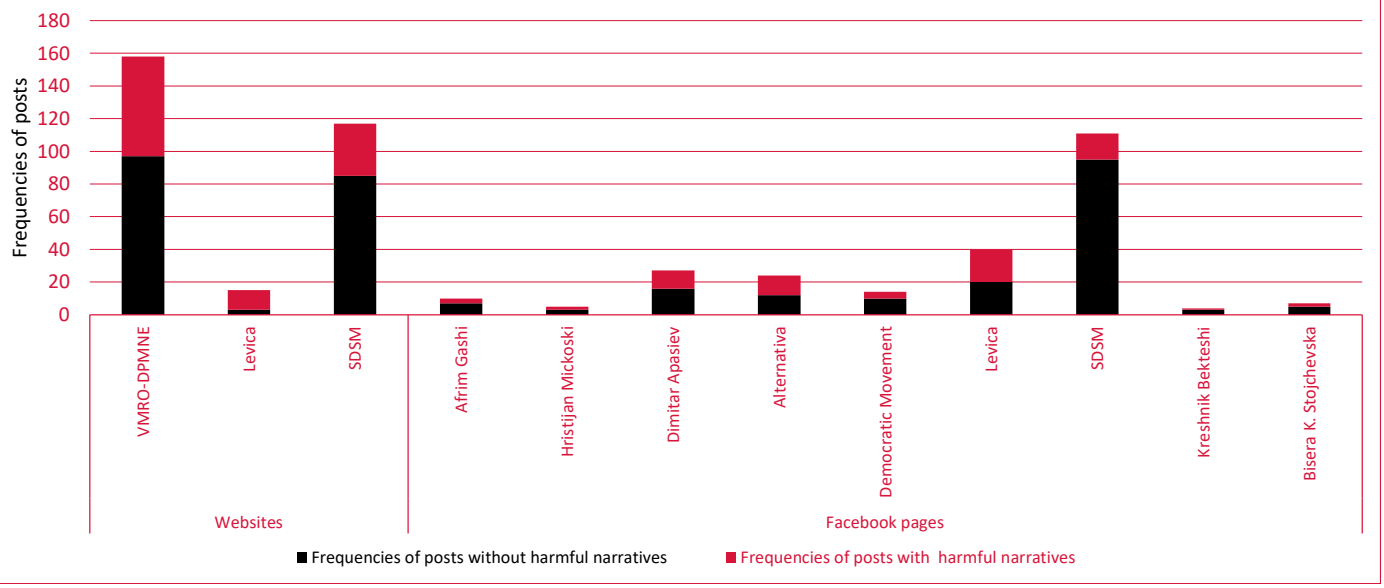
Table 6. Posts with a harmful narrative by political actor (websites and Facebook)



This month, there were not any posts with harmful narratives that were detected on the monitored websites and Facebook pages of the parties DUI, Alliance of Albanians, LDP, New Social Democratic Party and Socialist Party, as well as their leaders.

In an attempt to calculate which party had the most harmful public communication and considering that the parties differ in their size and the quantity of their public communications, a comparison was made between the number of posts with harmful narratives and the total number of posts on both communication channels of the political entities (Table 2). Thus, it can be concluded that on the websites, the communication of Levica was the most harmful, on whose website harmful narrative is noted in 80 percent of the posts, while in VMRO-DPMNE in 38.6 percent, and in SDSM in 27.3 percent from the total number of posts in the month, harmful communication is noted. Similarly, from the Facebook pages, it can be noted that 50 percent of Levica and 41 percent of the leader Apasiev's posts contain harmful narrative, while SDSM, where there is the largest number of posts (111), in only 14 percent harmful narrative is noted. Although with a significantly lower total number of posts, on the Facebook page of Alternativa in 50 percent of the posts a harmful narrative is noted, while in the case of the leader Afrim Gashi, harmful communication can be observed in 30 percent of the posts.

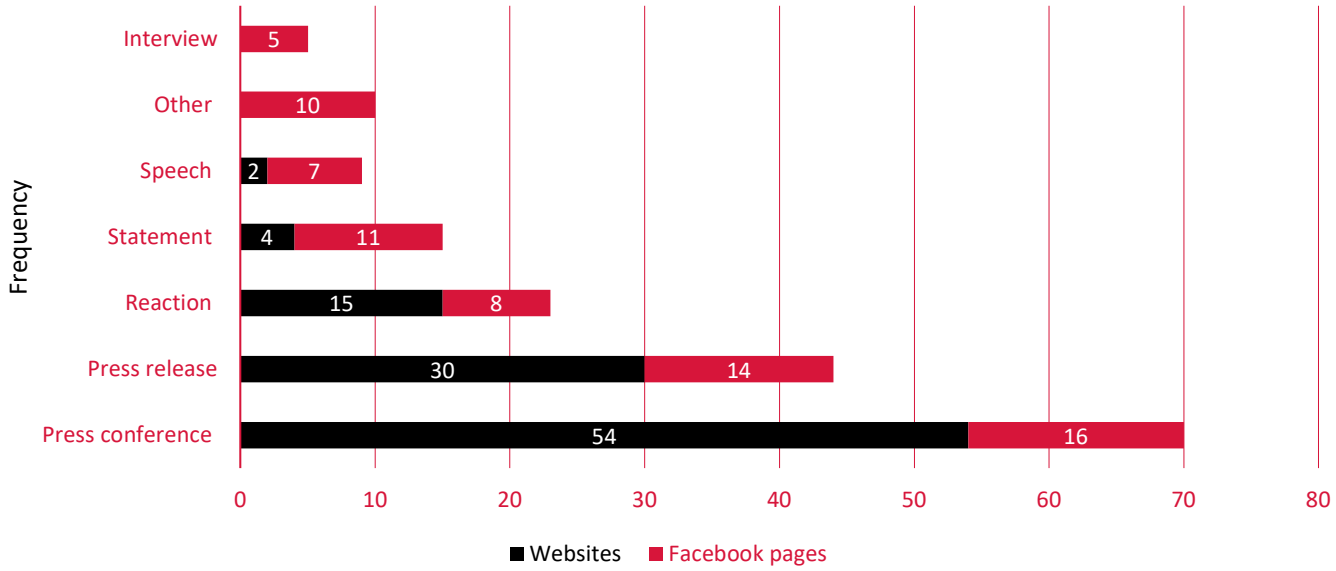
Table 7. Frequencies of posts with and without harmful narrative



Days with the most harmful narratives are 13 and 14 December, when the most common topics in the domestic media were in the area of the domestic policy regarding the composition of the future caretaker Government and proposals for presidential candidates, the case of the double murder of 14-year-old Vanja Gjorchevska and 74-year-old Panche Zhezhovski, the EU Summit - Western Balkans and constitutional amendments as a prerequisite for continuing the European integration path of the country, accusations from DUI towards the Municipality of Tetovo regarding political pressures in education and the arrest of civil servants for the demolition of the protected building Hotel Shar An in the Skopje Old Bazaar.

According to the representation of the form in which the posts were published (Table 3), it can be seen that the parties both on the websites and on Facebook pages, just like the previous month, mostly communicated harmful narratives through press releases and press conferences. It is interesting to note that statements and speeches containing harmful narratives are more present on the Facebook pages, while reactions are more present on websites. Having only seven percent representation on Facebook, the interviews are the least common form of posting harmful narratives.

Table 8: Frequencies of the post types on the websites and Facebook



As in the previous month, the main topic on which harmful narratives were produced was domestic policy both on the Internet in 60 percent of the posts and on Facebook in 73.2 percent of the posts with a harmful narrative. On the websites, all the posts with harmful narratives from SDSM were regarding domestic policy, but as a frequent topic this month we can also notice economy, especially with VMRO-DPMNE, and foreign policy, crime and corruption, especially in Levica' posts. The topics concerning which the least harmful narratives were produced on the Internet in December were social policy and education. On the Facebook pages, SDSM once again has all the posts with harmful narratives on the topic of domestic policy, as well as the two posts with harmful narratives on the profile of the leader of VMRO-DPMNE Mickoski, and with Levica and Alternativa, corruption can also be noticed as a frequent topic with reference to which harmful narratives have been produced.

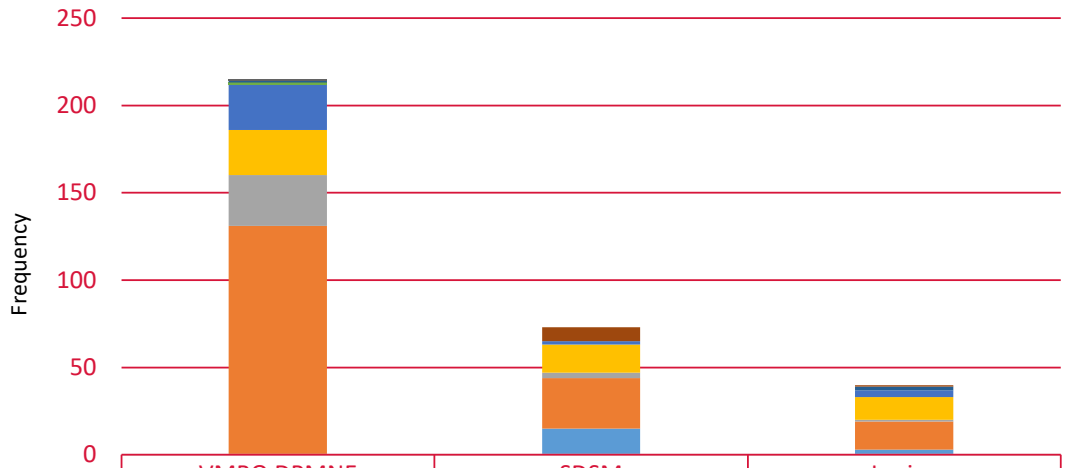
With a very similar trend from the last month, and in December, unverified findings were often used on the websites and Facebook pages as a basis for accusing the political opponents and unsubstantiated claims of corruption, unprofessionalism and abuse of office. In addition, on the websites, in almost half of the posts, the promotion of one's own ideologies is noticed as something that is in favour of the people, while the characteristics of the political opponents are promoted as something that does not reflect the will of the people. In about a third of the posts, labelling, ridicule and gross disrespect of other people, deliberate failure

to convey the full picture of the 'event', as well as the use of images, videos and audio recordings created in order to mislead the public that something is real and true, when in fact it is not, are also noted. With a lower representation of 17.1 percent, in the website posts there is also the defamation of a certain group of people in order to cause division and discord between us – the good ones and you – the bad ones, and accusations of harmful involvement of foreign entities in the domestic policies of the state, as well as speech that insults a certain group or justifies hate speech, are much less common. On Facebook pages, in addition to the same indicators of harmful narratives that are monitored on the Internet, one can notice a higher representation of accusations of foreign entities for involvement in domestic policy, but accusations that the political opponents are manipulated by background powerful groups, as well as words that insult, belittle, ridicule a person based on their gender and/or sex, are rarely present.

Table 9: Presence of Harmful Narratives Indicators (Websites and Facebook)

Unverified findings are often observed in the identified posts with harmful narratives and on both communication channels of SDSM (59.4 percent of the posts), but in the website posts one can also notice the frequent use of words that denigrate a certain group of people in order to cause divisions and discord between we – the good ones and you – the bad ones, while in the Facebook posts are more often seen labelling, ridicule and grossly disrespecting political opponents. In the posts with harmful narratives of VMRO-DPMNE on the Internet, unsubstantiated claims of corruption, unprofessionalism and abuse of office prevail (93.4 percent of posts) and unverified findings (in 82 percent of posts), but in half of the total number of the identified posts with a harmful narrative also include labelling, ridicule and gross disrespect of the political opponents, information and words that denigrate a certain group of people in order to cause divisions and discord between we-good ones and you-bad ones. Moreover, hate speech was noted in one post and accusations of harmful foreign influence was noted in another. On the Facebook profile of the leader Hristijan Mickoski were noted, in the two identified posts with harmful narratives, unsubstantiated accusations of corruption and unprofessionalism, unverified findings, information, images, videos and audio recordings that were created in order to mislead the public, words that defame a certain group of people in order to cause division and discord between we-the-good ones and you-the-bad ones and promoting one's own ideologies as something that benefits the people, while the characteristics of the political opponents are promoted as something that does not reflects the will of the people. Similarly, this is the case with the posts by Levica, in almost all identified posts with a harmful narrative on the Internet (83.3 percent), unverified findings are noted, and in more than half of the posts there are also unsubstantiated claims of corruption and less often there is also labelling, omission of information and causing divisions and discords between we-good ones and you-bad ones and accusations of the presence of negative foreign influences. The trend is similar in the Facebook posts with a harmful narrative by Levica, while one post with sexism by the leader Apasiev is also noted. A similar trend of identified indicators of harmful narratives is noted in the Facebook posts of Alternativa, the leader Gashi and Democratic Movement.

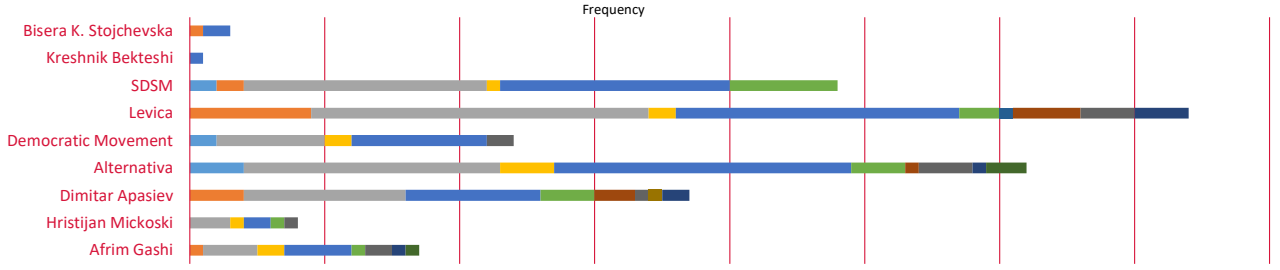
Table 10: Presence of Harmful Narratives in Political Party Posts on Websites



	VMRO DPMNE	SDSM	Levica
Hate speech	1	0	0
Spreading panic, fear	0	8	1
Foreign Influence	1	0	2
Conspiracy Theories	1	0	0
Character attacks, Demonization	26	2	4
Biased selection	26	16	13
Populism	29	3	1
Undermining trust	131	29	16
Fomenting divisions	0	15	3

With the above indicators, on the websites, all three parties most often tried to undermine the trust in the institutions: VMRO-DPMNE in its total of 61 posts, tried to undermine the trust in the institutions 131 times, SDSM 29 times in 32 posts in total and Levica 16 times in a total of 12 posts. VMRO-DPMNE, with by far the largest number of harmful narratives, in addition to attempts to undermine trust in the institutions, also developed harmful populist narratives (on 29 occasions), biasedly selected information that could mislead the public and developed a narrative for demonization of the political opponents. Furthermore, one harmful narrative of negative foreign influence, conspiracy theories and hate speech is noted. SDSM also often used a biased selection of information that could lead the public to wrong conclusions and encouraged social divisions, and more rarely developed a harmful narrative by spreading panic, fear and uncertainty. In addition, three harmful narratives of populism and two with character attacks and demonization of a person are also observed. In the case of Levica, with the lowest number of harmful narratives compared to the other two parties, they often used biased selection of information, and less often created harmful narratives demonizing a person, fomenting divisions, foreign influences and spreading fear, panic and insecurity.

Table 11: Presence of Harmful Narratives in the Political Party Posts on Facebook



	Afrim Gashi	Hristijan Mickoski	Dimitar Apasiev	Alternativa	Democratic Movement	Levica	SDSM	Kreshnik Bekteshi	Bisera K. Stojchevska
Disinformation				4	2		2		
Fomenting divisions	1		4			9	2		1
Undermining trust	4	3	12	19	8	25	18		
Populism	2	1		4	2	2	1		
Biased selection	5	2	10	22	10	21	17	1	2
Character attacks, Demonization	1	1	4	4		3	8		
Conspiracy Theories						1			
Foreign Influence			3	1		5			
Spreading panic, fear and insecurity	2	1	1	4	2	4			
Sexism			1						
Manipulative audio-visual media content	1		2	1		4			
Extreme patriotism, and/or nationalism	1			3					

The monitoring and the analysis of the Facebook pages shows the same trend of the most frequent harmful narratives of undermining trust in the institutions (total of 89) and biased selection of information that leads to wrong conclusions in the public (total of 90). It is important to mention that in December, eight harmful narratives with disinformation were identified on Facebook, four on the Facebook page of Alternativa, two on the Facebook page of Democratic Movement, and two on the Facebook page of SDSM. Levica has the most harmful narratives of fomenting division, harmful foreign influence, and the use of manipulative audio-visual media content compared to others, and only in its posts, conspiracy theories and sexism are noted. Harmful narratives of extreme patriotism and nationalism were noted on the Facebook pages of Alternativa and the leader Afrim Gashi. The populist narratives are noted less frequently among all political entities except Dimitar Apasiev, and the spread of fear, panic, and insecurity is also less frequently present among all except SDSM. On the other hand, SDSM has the most character attacks compared to other political entities. The identified posts with harmful narratives by the ministers Bekteshi and Kostadinovska-Stojchevska are attempts for biased selection of information that can lead the public to wrong conclusions and in the posts by Kostadinovska-Stojchevska, an attempt to foment social divisions is also noticed.

Social Democratic Union of Macedonia - SDSM

The communication to the public of the SDSM political party in December continues with a focus on domestic policy issues, and EU membership is placed in that context. The most frequent topics are the topic of the European integration, where criticism is often expressed towards VMRO-DPMNE and Levica as political options which do not support the European integration of the country, accusations against VMRO-DPMNE regarding the murder of Vanja Gjorchevska and Panche Zhezhovski and regarding ties with crime, criticism of the local government, i.e. mayors of VMRO-DPMNE. The monitoring showed that the day with the most harmful narratives is 10 December, the period when details of the investigation into the murders, as well as the decisions for the caretaker government that should be formed before the elections, at the beginning of 2024, are published. In the period after the meeting of the Council of the EU on 15 December, when there was not positive decision on opening the chapters of the negotiations, there are more posts criticizing VMRO-DPMNE and Levica as anti-EU political options. The harmful narratives noted in the monitoring are mostly related to undermining trust in the institutions, biased selection, unsubstantiated findings and fomenting division between we- the good ones and you- the bad ones. Mostly the focus of the harmful narratives is the opposition parties VMRO-DPMNE and its leader Hristijan Mickoski, as well as the Levica party.

Often the posts that are press releases on the SDSM website are previously statements made by functionaries or officials from the party, or that are sent to the media as press releases, are uploaded to the website, and are also posted on the Facebook page of the party, i.e. the same content is posted on several communication channels (cross-posting), in order to strengthen the message in the public media space. For example, if the Prime Minister and President of SDSM makes a statement, a press release, photo and video material is sent from it to the media, it is uploaded to the website, and a video clip with an introductory text is posted on the Facebook page. The same practice is used when the spokeswoman of the SDSM, one of the MPs in the Assembly in the capacity of the SDSM, a high official of the party makes statements, or it is a matter of speeches from party or government activities.

In the **32 posts** with harmful narratives on the **SDSM website, in 19 posts (59.4%) it was noted use of (ndings that were not veri(ed and not supported by arguments, and biased selection was often used. Out of 32 posts on the SDSM website, in 19 examples unveri(ed (ndings were used,** or findings that are difficult to verify, and which are used as a basis for mutual accusations of the political opponents, in 15, words and phrases were used to denigrate a certain group of people in order to cause division and discord between we-the good ones and you-the bad ones. In nine examples there are claims of corruption, non-transparency, unprofessionalism, abuse of office without any attempt to substantiate those claims, in two examples labelling and gross disrespect of the political opponents was used by using negative words and deliberately not conveying the full picture, deliberately omitting information that refutes the position of the person presenting it.

In the harmful narratives noted on the SDSM Facebook page, it can be noticed that the most **frequently mentioned actor is VMRO-DPMNE (in 14 out of 16 posts), Hristijan Mickoski (in 4 out of 16 posts) and in 3 posts Levica is mentioned.** The Facebook posts also continued the practice of naming VMRO-DPMNE as 'DPMNE' and their leader as 'Mickoski.' In the website posts, out of 32 posts with a harmful narrative, in 23 posts there is negative talk about VMRO-DPMNE, in 10 posts about Mickoski, in 6 about VMRO-DPMNE local government, in 7 posts about Levica. On the other hand, they talked about the EU (in 5 posts) in a positive and neutral manner and positively about the citizens (in 3 posts with a harmful narrative).

When analysing the attitude towards the actors to whom the messages are addressed, SDSM mostly talks about VMRO-DPMNE, Hristijan Mickoski and Levica – with a negative tone, less often about the local government of VMRO-DPMNE, but even then with a negative tone, and in the rare cases that they talk about the EU and the citizens – with a neutral and positive tone. At the same time, they present themselves as 'oriented towards the EU', 'saviour', 'defender of the people' and once as 'defender of identity', 'justice' and

'transparency'. SDSM often publishes press releases related to the current events, reactions or speeches of the party president and the party officials in which it presents itself as the European option that leads the country and should continue to lead the country. The political opponents are presented as 'anti-European', 'anti-democratic', 'anti-EU', as a political option that is not good for the country, which is a 'blocker of the European integration'. With such narratives that project we-the-good ones and you-the-bad ones, without providing arguments, facts, reasons why SDSM is the European option and their opponents are not, a populist narrative is produced that foments divisions in society and encourages additional polarization.

In statement the president of SDSM, Dimitar Kovachevski, commenting the statement by a senior American official, he presents his party as the saviour of the people, oriented towards the Euro-Atlantic values, as the saviours of the Macedonian people, declaring that *If you look at the past years, we promised the country's integration into NATO, we delivered it. Compare that to a car you're looking at. It is a car that drives you to Washington where the signatures for NATO membership are deposited. It is a car that ensured the start of negotiations with the EU, takes you to Brussels... It is a car that realizes Corridor 8 and in fact it is a car that is worth having.'* On the contrary, the political opponents, VMRO-DPMNE are portrayed as *'on the other side, you have a car made of styrofoam which no one would buy.* (Press release, 2.12.2023)

This type of posts is especially frequent after 15 December, i.e. after the EU Council meeting, after which it was already known that due to the impossibility of making constitutional amendments in accordance with the country's European negotiation framework, there will be no political intergovernmental conference and the opening of the accession negotiation chapters for EU membership.

Such an example is the press release in which there is a statement by MP Darko Kaevski in his capacity as spokesperson of SDSM it is pointed out that the only obstacle of the country is the anti-EU and anti-NATO coalition of DPMNE and Levica. Although we have a successful screening, although we have strong support in the Union and open doors, due to the active blockade of Mickoski and Apasiev in the Macedonian Assembly, the process of opening chapters has not started. The culprit has a name and surname: Mickoski and DPMNE. Mickoski humiliated the Macedonian citizens and the Macedonian people. After all the lies with which they scared the Macedonian people that someone would change our identity, that we would have been assimilated and Bulgarianized, had failed. Now it is crystal clear to the citizens: with DPMNE and Levica, there is no European Union, no future. DPMNE lost its ideological matrix and began to go mad together with Levica.'

Through the use of unsubstantiated allegations, biased selection, with populist discourse, the political opponent is labelled as an anti-EU option that does not work for the good of the citizens, while SDSM presents itself as a progressive option that works for the good of the citizens and it is the defender of the people and the national interests. Thus, in the statement it is said that *SDSM profiles itself as a party that only defends the national interest of the Macedonian people to be part of the big European family, recognized and respected. By means of SDSM, we have a protected Macedonian language and identity and definite EU membership, a better standard of living, higher salaries and pensions. Therefore, in these elections, those who put obstacles, the active blockers, the anti-European bloc of DPMNE and Levica will face a great punishment and defeat. The active blockade on the European road breaks in just a few months and it will be defeated. With a vote for SDSM and the European Front, a European future is ensured, we continue on the European path and full membership in the EU. SDSM will form the new pro-European Government which will take the country to the European Union and which will ensure a European future, European standards and European values.'* (Press release, 17.12.2023)

The next day press release is posted which is very similar to the above statement, in order to strengthen the public discourse. In this press release, it is directly pointed out that *'the blockades of the anti-European coalition of DPMNE and Levica are the only reason why the country did not start the process of opening the chapters, despite the successfully completed screening process, the strong and unequivocal support and the open doors of the EU. The destructive active blockades of DPMNE in the Macedonian Assembly are to the*

detriment of the country and all citizens.' These allegations point to the responsibility of the political parties that did not agree to the constitutional amendments necessary for holding the political Intergovernmental Conference with the EU and opening the chapters of EU negotiations. Thus, it is also stated that *'in the elections, the blockers of the European road, DPMNE and Levica will be punished and defeated. The active blockade is a temporary blockade.'* In this press release, through the use of unsubstantiated allegations and biased selection, given that there were other political parties that, for example, did not support the constitutional amendments, and the opposition of VMRO-DPMNE and Levica are not the only reason why there were not constitutional amendments, SDSM is presented as a saviour, modern and European option for the citizens, a populist discourse is used on the behalf of the citizens, creating a division between we-the good ones and you-the bad ones for the political opponent that is labelled as a political actor that does not work for the good of the citizens (Press release, 18.12.2023).

In a press release commenting on the appearance by VMRO-DPMNE leader Hristijan Mickoski in an interview, he is talked about and the party as anti-EU with a negative tone: *'It is clear as day that with Mickoski and DPMNE there will not be membership in the EU even in 100 years. Mickoski publicly confirmed this in front of the entire public, on television, in an interview for 360 degrees show, saying 'it may be a hundred years' and 'it may never be'*. SDSM presents itself as saviour, on the side of the people and with a pro-European orientation. Using unsubstantiated allegations and populist discourse, VMRO-DPMNE is accused of hindering the European integration, and the Levica Party is also placed in that context, indirectly alluding to their possible joint work: *Blocking the European path is to the direct detriment of the citizens, to the higher standard, the bigger salaries, the bigger pensions, a better future for the youth.* The positions are also put in the context of the future elections, saying that *'the blockades of DPMNE and Levica to the European integration are a threat to the future of the country and must be defeated,* and that in the elections the citizens will choose between the two blocks that will face *the pro-European one led by SDSM and the anti-European one led by DPMNE and Levica. A vote for the pro-European coalition led by SDSM in the presidential and parliamentary elections is a vote for EU membership, progress and a secure future* (Press release, 21.12.2023).

The President of SDSM and Prime Minister Dimitar Kovachevski at the 'More for All' party forum in Negotino states that *with DPMNE there is less for the citizens and there is less for the country as well. The worst thing is that there is no future with DPMNE. This party lost its ideological orientation and from being pro-Western it became an anti-Western party, against NATO and the EU. Publicly on television, Mickoski himself confirmed that with DPMNE there will be no EU even in 100 years. DPMNE is the only party that in the report of the European Commission is listed by name as an obstacle to the European path and the reforms. We know very well what DPMNE means, for 11 years we were stuck, far from NATO membership, far from the EU. We lost 11 years, and young people moved out and worked in restaurants in European countries. We have an obligation to the current and even more to future generations and we must not allow that again* (Press release, 22.12.2023). By using insults about the political opponents, ridicule and criticizing that they are not working for the strategic course of the country, with biased selection of facts, a populist discourse is created that encourages the labelling of we-good ones and you- the bad ones among the political actors.

Fomenting divisions of we - the good ones and they - the bad ones is also noticed in posts by SDSM that are related to the murder of Vanja Gjorchevska and Panche Zhezhovski and the prime suspect Ljupco Palevski, who, according to the ruling party, is known from business and political life in Macedonia and is associated with VMRO-DPMNE. *Palevski, who is suspected of the double murder that shocked the entire Macedonian public, was a close associate of the DPMNE regime and publicly supported Mickoski, as well as their coalition partner Levica. With radical views, Palevski was a tool of DPMNE in the smear campaign against SDSM, but also against everything that signifies democracy in Macedonia and for fuelling ethnic tensions. His marginal political party with a radical and pro-Russian orientation is a product and tool of the policies of silent aggression by the DPMNE for the past two decades. As part of 'I boycott', together with DPMNE and*

Levica, they were against NATO membership. They were also part of the violent protests against the French proposal and set up a guillotine in front of the Assembly (Press release, 6.12.2023). Moreover, there are posts that reinforce the message about the alleged connection of Palevski and VMRO-DPMNE, presenting unsubstantiated allegations, biased selection and gross insults to the political opponent, creating a discourse of we - the good ones and you - the bad ones: *Palevski's radical views were a tool of DPMNE, the relations with Mickoski should be investigated. Hristijan Mickoski's statements and the acts of his DPMNE take on a dangerous dimension. Their twisted need to abuse the case of Vanja's death shows their inhumanity. It has been three days and yet there is no answer to the question regarding Mickoski's meeting with Paleski. What was discussed at that meeting? What was agreed? Why are you silent? Mickoski should show up before the citizens and answer these questions. The attempts for manipulation, undermining the investigation and spreading panic among the citizens raise serious doubts about the goals of DPMNE and Mickoski* (9.12.2023, Facebook post, video and text, SDSM MP in the capacity of spokesperson). Also, the statement of SDSM MP Martin Kostovski, in his capacity as SDSM spokesperson, is similar, in which there are criticisms of VMRO-DPMNE and Levica regarding a current event-the murders of Vanja Gjorchevska and Panche Zhezhovski, using gross insults to the political opponents, biased selection and unverified findings in order to disparage and undermine trust in them as credible political actors: *'While the whole of Macedonia mourns, and the institutions completely investigated the case, DPMNE and Levica wanted to profit from the tragedy and the human victims. Unfortunately, this is not the first time. Obviously, DPMNE and Levica have a perverted necrophilic understanding of politics, the question is, is there a grain of humanity in DPMNE and Levica?* (Press release, 6.12.2023). Such a discourse of a manipulative nature contributes to fomenting divisions in the society between we - the good ones and they - the bad ones, where the political opponent is defamed, grossly insulted and labelled as a political actor who is in close relations with persons who commit serious crimes, as well as ideologically that it is associated with persons who are against the European integration of the country, i.e. the strategic goals.

Therefore, it should be mentioned that the personal tragedies and sensitive topics that arouse strong interest among the public should not be misused for political purposes, and the political actors should communicate responsibly with the public. Additionally, by presenting unsubstantiated allegations and biased selection, trust in the political opponent is undermined and while further division is encouraged among the citizens and populist discourse is used to show one's own party as the defender of the people and justice.

Fomenting divisions, populism and biased selection can also be seen in the posts of SDSM's, which are aimed at other political parties from the opposition, but they are correlated with their main political opponent, VMRO-DPMNE. In a press release, the Mayor of Tetovo Bilal Kasami is criticized for cooperating with VMRO-DPMNE and that this cooperation at the municipal level is not in the interest of the Municipality, but for party's interests. It is stated that *proof of the close cooperation and mutual consent of all decisions in Tetovo between Mayor Kasami and DPMNE, are almost half of the director and management positions in the Municipality of Tetovo, which are made by Hristijan Mickoski's staff, including the secretary of the Municipality, second by importance municipal function. Their goal is to incite nationalism and religious divisions among citizens. These are the destructive policies of DPMNE, which divide the people and pull the country back. DPMNE is behind all of Kasami's harmful decisions in Tetovo* (Press release, 26.12.2023). Via the contradictory text, in which VMRO-DPMNE and Besa are first accused of co-operation, and then of fomenting nationalism and religious divisions among citizens, unsubstantiated allegations are presented without adequate evidence, biased selection and labelling of we - the good ones and you - the bad ones, which brings out manipulative information, spreads populist discourse and encourages division in the society.

VMRO-DPMNE

In the month of December, 61 posts with harmful narratives were recorded on VMRO-DPMNE's website[11], mostly in the form of party press releases, then press conferences and least reactions. Days with the most (i.e., five each) posts with harmful narratives are 2, 9, 14 and 17 December.

This month, VMRO-DPMNE is again the main actor and source of the presented information, and it mostly speaks negatively about the Government, naming it as 'the government of SDS and DUI' and Prime Minister Dimitar Kovachevski called 'Tache' and 'deserter', but they often criticize the Minister of the Interior Oliver Spasovski, SDSM named as 'SDS', and Stevche Jakimovski, DUI, the President of the Assembly Talat Djaferi called 'the Despot from Forino' and a 'deserter', the Ministry of Interior, the President Stevo Pendarovski are less often mentioned in a negative manner and the judiciary. The citizens/people frequently and less often the EU are mentioned with a neutral tone.

In the identified posts with harmful narratives on VMRO-DPMNE's website, 67.1 percent do not have any particular intention to portray themselves in a certain light, but, as in the previous month, when they want to portray themselves in a certain way, then it is as saviours and defenders of the people and less often as defenders of justice. It is also noted that most of the other parties tried to present themselves as a transparent party.[12]

The most common topic in the posts with harmful narratives is domestic policy, specifically the nomination of Talat Djaferi as Prime Minister of the future caretaker government, such as Stoilkovski's press conference: *SDS, after installing the deserter Kovachevski, now it installs the deserter Djaferi as Prime Minister, only because Mala Rechica told them so* (press conference, 9.12.2023) or *SDS is also negotiating for the Prime Minister's seat, the servant Kovachevski will get up so that the landlord from DUI, Talat, can take the spot* (press release, 10.12.2023), accusations against SDSM for pre-election party employment, such as the press conference of spokeswoman Marija Miteva: *Over 1000 jobs in 4 months before elections, Kovachevski should not hope that this will reduce their defeat* (press conference, 26.12.2023) or *It has never been worse-In a panic, Kovachevski massively fills the public sector with party henchmen to motivate them and soften the defeat* (press release, 29.12.2023) and reactions in defence of the leader Mickoski from political attacks. (reaction, 13.12.2023).

For example, in one of the posts talking about the nomination of Talat Djaferi for Prime Minister, titled *With Prime Minister Talat, a complete dualization of Macedonia is taking place, made possible by SDS and Kovachevski* (Press release, 9.12.2023), VMRO-DPMNE uses unverified and unsubstantiated findings of corruption and abuse of office: *'SDS and Dimitar Kovachevski have completely destroyed Macedonia... Once again it has been shown in action and proven that DUI is the government, and SDS subcontractor. As Ahmeti plays the music for them, that is how Kovachevski and SDS dance'*, labelling and demonizing Talat Djaferi: *'Djaferi, or Commander Forina, deserted from the Macedonian army in 2001 and transferred to the UCK... The public has also witnessed a series of violations of Assembly procedures by Djaferi, such as the use of the European flag to laws that had nothing to do with European regulation, only to do with DUI crimes...'*, deliberate failure to convey the full picture of the event – *'SDS and Kovachevski did not accept the proposal of VMRO-DPMNE to abolish the caretaker government, so that Djaferi could be Prime Minister...'*, and harsh

11 This month, there were no posts with harmful narratives on the Facebook page of VMRO-DPMNE. In order to avoid double analysis of the quantitative data, in the case when the political actors share the same posts both on the websites and on the Facebook pages, the selection of the communication channel was applied in the monitoring, i.e. in this case, for VMRO-DPMNE, the duplicate content cross posted from the website to Facebook was not analysed.

12 On the Facebook profile of the leader Mickoski there is not noted any intention of self-representation in the two identified posts with harmful narratives.

accusations of crime and corruption towards SDSM and DUI – *'By appointing Talat Djaferi as caretaker Prime Minister, Macedonia is undergoing complete dualization... Kovachevski, just to hang on for another month, is ready to cede everything to DUI and Ahmeti, to the detriment of the Macedonian people... The criminals from DUI completely took over the governance of the country, that is why crime and corruption are flourishing in Macedonia...'*. Together with these harmful attempts to undermine the trust in the institutions of the country (specifically the Government and the Assembly), demonization of the Prime Minister and the President of the Assembly, the post ends with a populist pre-election narrative – *'Macedonia is undergoing dualization, and Kovachevski is directly responsible for it... .. Therefore, in the next elections, SDS and Kovachevski must be defeated. For Macedonia to move forward, SDS and Kovachevski must leave!'*

Also, this month there are more attacks against the Minister of Interior Oliver Spasovski, mainly with regard to the case of the double murder of Gjorchevska and Zhezhovski– *'Spasovski has been a minister for 8 years, the fact that the system does not work is his fault, Vanja could have been saved'* (reaction, 17.12.2023), however there are accusations with negative labels towards the minister and for inefficiency in solving the crime- *'He is so confused that he does not realize that agreeing is also an acknowledgment of his own failure and non-fulfilment of his obligation, for which he must bear responsibility... In these cases, the people say, the pot calls the kettle black.* (Press release, 17.12.2023) and regarding the problems with changing personal documents of the citizens (Press release, 22.12.2023), *'Spasovski succeeded in devaluing the service and damaging the reputation, efficiency and effectiveness that the Ministry of Interior has always had... With Spasovski in the Ministry of the Interior, the people cannot even hope for the basic services they should receive from this Ministry. It has never been worse. It is important to defeat them* and with these negative labels, claims of unprofessionalism and corruption and populist messages by which they present themselves as defenders of the people and winners in the future elections, while presenting the institutions led by SDSM officials as completely destroyed, are developed the most common harmful narratives of VMRO-DPMNE for this month, i.e. attempts to undermine trust in the institutions and biased selection of information that may mislead the public.

Additionally, this month, the economy is also a frequent topic, with a focus on criticism of the Government for its anti-crisis measures, such as *After each package of measures of the SDS and DUI government, the people are poorer, the economy is more devastated, and the country is more indebted - and this package is for a cheap pre-election bribe* (reaction, 13.12.2023), the increase in the price of electricity –*Attention, the Government congratulated the New Year, there is no broadcasting fee, but electricity is more expensive by 400 denars on each bill* (Press conference of Miteva, 29.12.2023), criticism with reference to the high salaries of the public officials -*Kovachevski has higher salary by 50 euros every working day, and deceives the people with 1,000 denars for the whole month* (Press release, 1.12.2023), as well as for the state budget for 2024, for example a press conference of MP Bojan Stojanoski by the title *The 2024 budget is by far the highest in history, unrealistic, pre-election and composed so that it can be stolen* (Press-conference, 2.12.2023), where unverified findings and unsubstantiated findings about corruption, unprofessionalism and unaccountability, populist rhetoric and attacks (labelling) of persons for crime and the 'inability' of 'SDS and DUI' to govern the state institutions, thus developing a seriously harmful narrative of undermining trust in the institutions.

This month, the topics of justice, crime, foreign policy, corruption, education and health are represented less often. Especially on the foreign policy topic, i.e. the integration of the country into the EU and the current blockade on the planned constitutional amendments, the narrative of VMRO-DPMNE is that the 'corruption and crime' of 'SDS and DUI' and their incompetence in conducting foreign policy are to blame for 'the failure' of the country's European integration process, evident in the press conferences of spokeswoman Miteva *The European friends that Kovachevski bragged about are invisible, because of the crime and corruption at the top of the Government, Macedonia did not start the negotiations* (17.12.2023) and *The crime of Kovachevski and Ahmeti is the reason for the blockade of Macedonia in the EU* (18.12.2023), the reaction *A handkerchief for Kovachevski's fake tears, the failure of Macedonia as a result of crime and incompetence* and the press release *Why did not SDS lobby with Scholz from their sister party to remove the Bulgarian Prime Minister from the meeting while voting for Macedonia to start negotiations?* (18.12.2023).

On the Facebook profile of the leader Hristijan Mickoski, two posts with a harmful narrative, which is mostly accusatory, with labels towards SDSM for incompetence, crime and bad governance were noted. In a 6 December post on an edited video, titled *Spasovski admitted that they knew everything about Palcho. Why did not they take any actions?* An analysis was made of the recording of the press conference of the Minister of Interior Spasovski in connection with the case of the double murder of Vanja Gjorchevska and Panche Zhezhovski, with comments in the ticker. The comments are mostly a count of moments when the minister says he has already answered a question or when someone prompts him from the side, and manipulative questions are asked like *How can a minister of interior during the biggest investigation not know key details?* This press release is actually an audio-visual record created with the aim of misleading the public, because it is full of unsubstantiated claims about the unprofessionalism and lack of accountability of the Minister Spasovski, thus developing a harmful narrative of demonizing the minister and concluding that *Macedonia does not remember a worse minister! Resign immediately!* thereby undermining the public trust in the Ministry of Interior and biased selection of information that may lead the public to wrong conclusions. The second identified post with a harmful narrative on Mickoski's Facebook profile, dated 13 December, is a reaction to an alleged 'smear' campaign by SDSM against him, and contains text and a photo of a court verdict for defamation by the media Brif.mk, reached in his favour. The text of the post begins with a deliberate omission of information about a certain event – *'I see that SDSM these days is running a campaign by showing photos with people who are neither my collaborators nor have any closeness to me'*, and further unverified findings can be noticed – *'That is their choice to defocus from the big topics and the running of a permanent smear campaign against me that gets back to them as a boomerang every day'* and unsupported claims about the unaccountability and unprofessionalism of the SDSM, *'They have been convicted several times in a row and that by their judiciary for spreading false news, slander and untruths'*, which develop a harmful narrative of biased selection of information and undermining trust in the institutions led by SDSM. Likewise, a populist narrative can be observed with the promotion of one's party and denigration of SDSM- *'The eviler they are in their lies, the more motivated I am to defeat them, change them and build Macedonia. It is important to create a quality society based on principles, values and morals. It is important to have responsibility and bring the future.'*

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

During the monitored period, a very small number of harmful narratives by DUI's party officials were noted. Most of them refer to the misuse of official Facebook profiles of government officials to send party messages or promote party events. In the posts of this political party, it is noted that press releases such as party positions appear less often, and more often the communication to the public is carried out by the senior officials of the party with statements such as the Minister of Foreign Affairs Bujar Osmani who is also the spokesperson of the party, Deputy Prime Minister Artan Grubi who is often present in the public, and less often through interviews of the President of the Assembly Talat Djaferi and the President of the DUI Ali Ahmeti. DUI rarely posts comments on current daily topical issues; it does not have much social media traffic as a political party.

Posted on the Facebook page of the Minister of Economy Kreshnik Bekteshi is a video from party activities of DUI in which he addresses as an official of DUI by sending messages to the opposition bloc of Albanian politicians whom he says only have ambitions and desires to be part of the Government, as a replacement for VMRO-DPMNE. *'The only request announced today is exactly this, Democratic Movement, Besa and Alternativa to replace VMRPO-DPMNE in the caretaker government. Why replace VMRO-DPMNE? Because of the personal interests, personal ambitions, personal wishes or agreements they made before, to divide the Albanians, and they cannot hide that for such a short period.*
(Facebook post, 14.12.2023).

Levica

In December, 12 posts with a harmful narrative were identified on the website of the Levica party, the most on 14.12.2023 (4 posts in total), while 21 posts were identified on the party's Facebook page, and 11 posts with harmful narratives on the Facebook page of the leader Dimitar Apasiev. On the three communication channels, the posts are mostly in the form of press releases with a photo, but the forms of speeches, reactions, statements, press conferences and interviews are used less often. The most common topic in the posts with harmful narratives on the party's website is domestic policy,[13] and foreign policy, crime and corruption are less often discussed. On the Facebook pages of Levica[14] and Apasiev[15] the most common topic is the domestic policy, and the topics less often noted are: crime and corruption, economy, social policy and healthcare.

Posts with a harmful narrative on Levica's website again show the greatest diversity of offensive names. The most frequent discourse is about the SDSM, which is called 'SDS' and is called the 'the fifth-estate SDS' and about the Government, which they call the 'hybrid regime of SDS and DUI'. Moreover, Strumica is described as 'the last stronghold of Zaevism'. VMRO-DPMNE is named as 'DPMNE', the leader of the party as 'Mickoski, the Minister of the Opposition', and the mayor of Tetovo Bilal Kasami is called 'fascist', 'secessionist' and 'irredentist'.

On Levica's Facebook page, the Government, i.e. the Government and the SDSM, is often negatively mentioned, and less often DUI, the Prime Minister Dimitar Kovachevski, the previous Prime Minister and leader of SDSM Zoran Zaev, the leader of Alternativa Afrim Gashi and the State Election Commission (SEC). In the identified harmful narratives on the leader Apasiev's Facebook profile, the most prominent political topic that is negatively spoken about is DUI, but also the Government named as 'the authority', SDSM named as 'SDS' and VMRO-DPMNE named as 'DPMNE'. This month, Apasiev calls the Government 'unpopular', and also mentions Stevcho Jakimovski and the US ambassador, Angela Aggeler, naming her as 'governor', and the Prime Minister as 'Tache' and the leader of VMRO-DPMNE as 'Micko'.

13 Specifically regarding domestic policy, the topics are: Bilal Kasami's message on the occasion of the Day of the Albanian Flag, Levica's meeting with MEPs and their comment on the demands for constitutiol amandments, Mick Wallace's criticism of the EU and NATO, the construction of a 34-storey building in Karpos, opening of an Albanian class in Chashka, general criticism of the current Government, criminal charges by Levica against Talat Djaferi, non-punishment of domestic violence, denial of VMRO-DPMNE's press release that Levica made a quorum in the Assembly in favour of the Government, physical attack on a Levica's activist by the director of the prison in Shtip, criticism of Medarska's election as a member of the State Commission for Prevention of Corruption and accusations that she is close to Zaev, Krmov's parliamentary question about the attacked member of Levica in Shtip.

14 Specifically, the topics of domestic policy are: Dependence of Macedonia on foreign factors in the conduct of domestic policy, filibustering by Levica on the Rules of Procedure of the Assembly, illegal landfill in Bunardjik, social repercussions after the murder of Vanja Gjorchevska/political tolerance of criminals, the relationship of capitalism to the people, Ilovica mine, construction of 34-storey buildings in Karposh, criticism of the Prespa Agreement/use of the 'North Macedonian' coinage, criticism of the personal tax refund, criticism of the Government for the low prices for the purchase of tobacco, urban mafia in Gevgelija, abolition of official appropriations, accusations of the Government supporting polluters instead of taking care of clean air, an unbuilt student city promised by the Government, the work of the SEC before the upcoming elections, threats from Bilal Kasami to demolish the cross of Shara, criticism that the party of the Kosovo Prime Minister will participate in the elections in Macedonia, criticism of the unrealized programme for the economic development of Sveti Nikole, response to the upcoming parliamentary elections, criticism of the unpaid pensions for December before the New Year, the Government's decision-on Sunday, 31 December, for commercial facilities to work.

15 In particular, the domestic policy topics are the digging of the 'Black Stone' site for the motorway that Bechtel and Enka are building, the speech of a guest at Levica's plenum against NATO, criticism of the pre-New Year's passing of laws in the Assembly in the area of urbanism, the Levica's visit to Strumica, the criticism of the leadership of the Municipality of Dolneni, the criticism of the attitude of the authorities towards the American ambassador, the accusation against the SDSM that it destroys the Emergency Medical Service, the polluted air in Skopje, the opening of an Albanian class in Chashka, the authorities' commitment to the EU in contrast to their un-European behavior, the criticism of VMRO -DPMNE for messing with the Government.

Similar to the previous month, on Levica's website and Facebook page and the leader Apasiev's, usually no special intention for self-representation is noted, but attempts to present themselves as saviours and defenders of the identity and the people are less frequently noted.

Dimitar Apasiev usually publishes short messages and/or audio-visual content, but he also publishes posts from the party's Facebook profile and close associates. Again, the trend of using hashtags where offensive labelling is most prominent, as well as the anti-Western narrative, is evident. For example, in a post where sexism (in the hashtags) and character attack and anti-Western sentiment is identified, a photo was published showing the Minister of Culture Bisera Kostadinovska-Stojchevska and the US Ambassador Angela Aggeler greeting (hugging) with a message *In the Claws of the Governess (colorized)*, with two hashtags - '#VassalMentality' and '#MissisMinister' (Apasiev's Facebook post, 18.12.2023).

In addition, Apasiev continues the narrative that VMRO-DPMNE is actually in a coalition with SDSM and DUI and that the only opposition in the country is Levica, for example, in one reaction:

THE URBAN MAFIA seizes the Assembly!

In the last days of the mandate, before the New Year, all kinds of laws from the urban planning sector arrive-for illegal constructions, privatization of state lands, extension of deadlines for submitting requests, etc.
This is the result of the #BroadCoalition (SDS + DUI + DPMNE), which is already functioning to a great extent in the Assembly-during the adoption of the Budget, the certain voting of the joint Government of Przhino, and also through the presidency of the Commission responsible for the smuggling of these laws.
RESISTANCE will give-who if not us!
*p.s. Keep your wits in your head for the next election, after that don't you say 'f*ck it'* 😘
#LevicaFromAssembly
#TwoagainstAll'(Facebook post, Apasiev, 14.12.2023)

The post uses unverified findings and omissions of information concerning the laws in the urban planning sector in the Assembly and unsubstantiated claims of corruption and crime by the '#BroadCoalition' which make a biased selection of information and undermine trust in the institutions, but the use of derogatory words that encourage divisions and discords between the good is also evident - the 'resistance' by Levica and the bad - 'SDS + DUI + DPMNE' or the 'URBAN MAFIA'. Fomenting divisions through the denigration of groups in society is also noted in a short post by Apasiev in regards to the opening of an office of Levica in Strumica, in which it is said *We have also entered the den of ZAEVISM.* (Facebook post, Apasiev, 14.12.2023).

Also, this month, in the public harmful communication of Levica and the leader Apasiev, a low degree of inter-ethnic tolerance can be noted, especially on the occasion of the opening of an Albanian class in Chashka,[16] but also regarding the demolition of the cross on Popova Shapka and on the occasion of the Day of the Albanian Flag.

For example, in a statement on the website of Levica titled *Kasami called for the overthrow of the constitutional order - Basic Public Prosecutor's Office should act urgently* (1.12.2023) with manipulative visual content, i.e. a photo of Kasami and a mounted flag of Greater Albania in the background, unverified findings are noted as *'This statement represents a kind of culmination of a long series of extremely nationalist, ethno-tribalistic and maximally secessionist attitudes and works of the so-called Albanian political parties*

16 https://levica.mk/pres-centar/soopshtenija-reakcii/protesti-protiv-nasilieto-na-ministerot-shakjiri-vo-naselba-chashka/

in Macedonia on the occasion of the Day of the Albanian Flag' and demonization of Kasami, which foments hate speech – *'Kasami called for the overthrow of the constitutional order. The first person of the Besa Movement and current coalition partner of DPMNE in the Council of Tetovo, the secessionist Bilal Kasami, congratulating the Albanian Flag Day, sent a clear IREDENTIST MESSAGE... irredentists like Kasami openly undermine the constitutional order and sovereignty of Macedonia.'* One can also notice the spreading of fear and panic and the fomenting of divisions – *'We publicly call on the 'patriots' from DPMNE and the 'Europeans' from SDS to condemn this statement by Bilal Kasami and to explain to the Macedonian citizens – in what manner with such secessionist Albanian political parties, which openly express their views on SEPARATION from Macedonia and the creation of Greater Albania, can form a coalition and 'plan a European future'?!'*

Similarly, in a statement on Levica's Facebook page titled *THE FASCIST KASSAMI WILL DEMOLISH A CROSS ON A PRIVATE MONASTERY PROPERTY-THE ALBANIAN EXTREME RIGHT IS LEADING TO A CRISIS* (25.12.2023) there is gross labelling and unverified findings and allegations of corruption by Kasami, which undermines trust in the Municipality of Tetovo, as well as claims of negative foreign influences. *'The State, but also Europe, should expose them to the public, see and hear soon such 'democratic leaders' blinded by Great Albanian and Pro-Kosovo dreams.' An attempt to incite discord and divisions along ethnic lines, as well as spreading panic, fear and uncertainty, can also be noted: The Mayor of Tetovo, Kasami, is continuously the most distinct secessionist mayor in the country, besides other mayors from the Albanian extreme right, who constantly and in every way undermines the principles of Macedonian statehood. The extreme right wing-fascist and anti-secular policy constantly fuels inter-ethnic tensions and targets Macedonians, both for their identity and country as well as for their religious feelings.*

Allegations and accusations of negative foreign influences and the spread of panic and fear on that issue are also evident in the post on Levica's Facebook page titled THE KOSOVO RULING PARTY IS DIRECTLY INTERFERING IN THE INTERNAL AFFAIRS OF MACEDONIA (26.12.2023), where it is said that the *KOSOVO RULING PARTY DIRECTLY INTERFERES IN THE INTERNAL AFFAIRS OF MACEDONIA. The 'Self-Determination' party of Kosovo Prime Minister Albin Kurti will be part of the election race in the upcoming parliamentary elections in Macedonia. It was announced that Kurti's adviser, Bekim Kjoku, will be part of the candidate list of MPs-because he has dual citizenship. The iconography characteristic of the ballistic idea of a greater Albania is not absent in any occasion of which Kurti's party is a part. It was the same during his recent visit to Tetovo, and it was the same now at the opening of the office of the aforementioned 'European Union for Change', where flags with the map of greater Albania were flying.'*

Additionally, one can notice the harmful narrative of spreading fear, panic and insecurity and accusing foreign entities of harmful interference in the domestic state processes, in the reaction with criticism of a gathering of diplomats abroad and the use of a 'North Macedonian' coinage'-*OTTOMAN DIPLOMATS WITH 'NORTH MACEDONIAN' IDENTITY!'* (reaction, Levica's Facebook page, 17.12.2023). Although the reaction is valid, because indeed domestic diplomatic representatives made a mistake during the public communication, regarding which all competent domestic institutions and foreign missions are working to correct it in the wide domestic and foreign public after the signing of the Prespa Agreement, however, in the criticism by Levica, a development can be seen of a harmful narrative concerning the case: *The damages from the 'Prespa Agreement', tailored in foreign embassies, and implemented by the SDS and DUI authorities, headed by Zaev and Dimitrov, seem irreparable! The heirs of this Agreement, Kovachevski and Osmani, continue to humiliatingly implement its nullity for the Macedonian identity. #Levica remains the only parliamentary party whose basic commitment is the termination of this quisling Agreement, which in practice as we witness is one of the killers of the Macedonian identity.*

European Union for Change - EUC (Lidhja Europjane për Ndryshim)

The opposition political parties of the Albanians-Alternativa, Besa and the Democratic Movement are united in one bloc, the European Union for Change-EUC (Lidhja Europjane për Ndryshim) and act in sync, presenting themselves as an alternative to DUI. The party Alternativa has two MPs, Besa has one MP, and the Democratic Movement has three MPs, i.e. a total of 6 MPs. The focus of the EUC remains criticism of the work of the parties that are part of the government coalition and their officials, namely DUI, which is the main political opponent. It is noted that the practice of posting the press releases that are given as a joint position of the opposition parties of the Albanians on their Facebook pages continues. Most frequently they present themselves as saviours and defenders of the people, defenders of identity and justice, transparent actors who advocate for the fight against corruption and the rule of law.

In a post on the occasion of the report of the State Statistics Office, which stated that there is a significant emigration of the population, and that a further decrease in the number of inhabitants is expected in Macedonia, the European Union for Change posted a press release in which it claims that the exodus of Albanians is sponsored by DUI because the period in which 200,000 residents moved out of the country coincides with the period of DUI's ruling: *Although the report does not make an ethnic division, with a simple calculation, if half of this population that migrated are Albanians, we can easily conclude that approximately 125,000 Albanians left the country during the period when DUI was in power. That being so, Ali Ahmeti and DUI are the main culprits for the migration of around 125,000 Albanians to Western countries. It adds that this is Ali Ahmeti's 'success' because no other force or state terror has succeeded in displacing more Albanians than Ali Ahmeti has done with crime and corruption.'* In that direction, the EUC presents itself as the saviour of the people that is on its side and is strongly committed *to reversing this terrible trend for the country's perspective, firstly by fighting corruption, secondly by providing efficient measures and policies for economic well-being and, thirdly, by raising the standards of education, justice and security of citizens.* (Facebook post, 21.12.2023,)

The political party DUI is the focus of the EUC and in the criticisms presented with the intention of undermining the trust in DUI that they are not working for the interest of the Albanian people. The occasion is the publication of the information that Talat Djaferi, the current President of the Assembly, will be the caretaker Prime Minister in the pre-election period, while he is being talked about with a negative tone that he will be a 'puppet in the Prime Minister's seat' as a technical-administrative Prime Minister: *'The European Union for Change is definitely in favour of having an Albanian Prime Minister. However, DUI itself is against the Albanian Prime Minister, as they lost the opportunity to have an Albanian Prime Minister four years ago when it tricked the Albanians into voting for Naser Ziberi, while DUI voted for Zoran Zaev and then for Dimitar Kovachevski as Prime Minister in the Assembly. Why? Because DUI is not interested in high state positions to work in the interest of Albanians and the country, but only to manipulate the public and steal, and bring investors for casino and betting houses from Serbia and Russia. With the caretaker Prime Minister, DUI cheats the Albanians twice, because the Albanian Prime Minister will be the failed official in 20 years. Adding to the latest scandals that they are in contact with Nikola Gruevski to work against the Albanian opposition. DUI proposed a candidate for Albanian Prime Minister, a person who will not have any authority, but will be a puppet in the Prime Minister's seat, just to reorganize the elections. Also, speaking of the Albanian Prime Minister, any Albanian would be acceptable as Prime Minister, even a caretaker (because DUI has so much capacity), but not Talat Djaferi. How can we expect fair and democratic elections to be organized by a Government led by Talat Djaferi, who, from the position of the President of the Assembly, prevents the Albanian opposition voter from having a representative in the SEC? With Talat Djaferi's candidacy, DUI provides another proof that it is preparing to manipulate the elections!* (Facebook post, 9/12/2023)

On the occasion of the protests in the Municipality of Chashka for the opening of a new class of pupils who would attend the classes in Albanian language, the European Union for Change criticizes DUI, with allegations in which it sets out we-the good ones and they-the bad ones, where the EUC is presented as a representative of the interests of the Albanian community, and the ruling parties SDSM and DUI in a negative image- *'Chashka, proof that DUI and SDSM are anti-Albanian and anti-European: What is happening with the Albanian classes in Chashka is scandalous, communist and dictatorial, just like in the time of Yugoslavia once, like now in Russia and Serbia.' SDSM is also criticized and an appeal is sent to 'them not to continue with hypocrisy, as they have been doing for decades. On the one hand, they sell the concept of an equal society for all, and on the other hand, they take their MPs to protests against the Albanian classes. In this situation, when their MPs are part of the chauvinist calls against Albanian education, it is indicative that North Macedonia is not moving forward but is returning to the former Yugoslavia or to the Serbia of, Kovachevski and Ali Ahmeti's friend, Aleksandar Vuchikj.*

Criticism is also addressed to VMRO-DPMNE, where it is requested from *'VMRO and the Mayor not to encourage citizens and parents for such nationalist protests. No one must lie that they are striving for ethnic equality, when they encourage and increase chauvinistic actions.* In addition, the political opponents are criticized, and their political party presents itself as a protector of the Albanian national interests: *No one has the right to sell big ideas like an ALBANIAN PRIME MINISTER, and in fact, Albanians are still being harmed in learning the Albanian language. Albanians do not need corrupt puppets, but leaders who love their people and have a pro-European vision. However, this is DUI, the vassal of SDSM, which with the Minister and Deputy Minister cannot open any Albanian classes, it cuts the finances of schools in Albanian municipalities and invests in casinos and betting shops. In the end, if you have at least a little respect and conscience in front of the people, you will not talk about another topic, when the issue of learning the Albanian language remains unresolved for Albanians, a basic right that is guaranteed by the Constitution.* (Facebook post, 13.12.2023)

Monitoring of the public communication of the members of the Government of RNM through the official Facebook pages in December 2023

The use of official profiles for the promotion of the party policies and the party activities is often noted among the government officials.

On the Prime Minister Dimitar Kovachevski's Facebook page also information is posted with regards to the party activities, which represents the misuse of an official profile for party promotion, thereby blurring the boundary separating the party from the state. Consequently, there is a post with a photo *'Workshop in Veles with the first people of the party commissions of SDSM. We are finishing the process of preparing the winning programme of the SDSM for the elections in 2024..., SDSM is ready and we are going for a double victory for the European front in the presidential and parliamentary elections next year 2024'.* (3.12.2023 Facebook post)

Workshop on SDSM's strategic priorities together with the young social democrats in Ohrid, supported by the Danish Institute for Parties and Democracy, as well as the Institute for Social Democracy, Progress - with a message: SDSM's victory in the presidential elections and a pro-European Government led by SDSM is a double victory for Macedonia and a key victory for the young people, for the future generations'. (8.12.2023, Facebook post)

On the Facebook page of the Deputy Prime Minister in charge of European affairs on 13.12.2023, on the official profile of Bojan Marichikj, a post was shared in relation to Dimitar Kovachevski's speech at the party debate of SDSM 'We are Europe': *Our Government directs the funding to those who need it most, instead of styrofoam facades and weeping willows.* (13.12. 2023, Facebook post, and also on 21.12.2023 there are posts regarding the party debates of SDSM 'More for everyone' in Gevgelija and in Valandovo)

The Minister of Foreign Affairs, Bujar Osmani, has posts promoting DUI on his official profile. Several videos have been published, originally as the events were held and in the language in which they were held - Albanian, such as the appointment of DUI's leader Ali Ahmeti as an honorary citizen of Tropoja (5 December 2023, Live from the Palace of Culture 'Dardania' in the city of Bajram Curri, the manifestation for Ali Ahmeti's declaration of honorary citizen of Tropoja) and Ali Ahmeti's speech on the same occasion (5.12.2023, Speech by BDI Chairman, Ali Ahmeti at the ceremony for his declaration of 'Honorary Citizen' of Tropoja), post from a reception organised by the president of DUI (22.12.2023 Live from the end-of-year reception organised by the Chairman of the Democratic Union for Integration, Mr. Ali Ahmeti), post from the Election Assembly of the youth of DUI – Chair branch (22.12.2023 Live from the Electoral Assembly of the Democratic Union Youth Forum for Integration - Chair Branch), a post of an interview with Ali Ahmeti (28.12. - (LIVE) BDI Chairman Ali Ahmeti's Interview in Opinion with Blendi Fevziu).

On the Facebook page of the Minister of Interior, Oliver Spasovski, the practice of posting content promoting party or personal promotion activities continues. Such is the post referring to energy projects, an area that is not under the competence of the Ministry of Interior, and it refers to activity in the Municipality of Kumanovo as part of the 'We are Europe' campaign: *'Tomorrow, in my Kumanovo, 'We are Europe' open debate for my people from Kumanovo, let's discuss European values, the benefits and opportunities that the EU membership offers us on the topic of energy- #WeAreEurope,#MKinEU* (10.12.2023, Facebook post). There is also a post promoting the so-called European front and that '*from 2006 to 2018 the integrations stopped, the citizens have a clear idea of who is the one who gets things done, and who is only declaratively advocating for something'* (14.12.2023, Facebook post). The post gives general qualifications that SDSM is the better option for the country, without providing specific measures, with a populist discourse presenting its own party as an ally of the people and a defender of the national interests. In addition to the official profile of the Minister of Interior, there is also a post with reference to the party decisions: *'The Central Board of #SDSM made several decisions and conclusions for securing the European future of North Macedonia'* (26.12.2023, Facebook post), in which information is presented about the party's nominations for the caretaker Government in the pre-election period. Another example is the post: *'We are not deviating from the concept of 'More for everyone'- with social democratic economic policies we managed to return the money to the citizens!'* (15.12.2023, Facebook post), which talks about measures taken to raise the standard of living in the Ministry of Interior. However, it is added at the end of the post *'We are heading for a double victory for the European Front led by SDSM against the anti-European coalition of DPMNE and Levica!'*

1.3 SUMMARY

The monitoring of the communication practices of the political actors for November and December 2023 shows that there are several trends of the manner in which the parties communicate with the public. It is noted that the press releases sent to the media are published in full on the parties' websites, with text, photo and video format, i.e., in the same form in which they were delivered to the media and are also shared on the Facebook pages.

The main theme in the harmful narratives for November and December is domestic policy, with a focus on attacks on the political opponents, criticism of the Government and other institutions from the central and local government. Additional topics on which harmful narratives have been developed are healthcare, economy, social policy, justice, foreign policy and corruption. In particular, current events and processes regarding which harmful narratives were most often produced are the case of the Oncology Clinic, the Law on Amnesty, the new Rules of Procedure in the Assembly, news about a possible coalition between VMRO-DPMNE and Levica after the next elections, the celebration of the Day of the Albanian Flag – 28 November, EU integrations and the constitutional amendments.

The monitoring and the analysis of the party public communication for November and December show that in the public discourse represented on the websites and Facebook posts by the political actors in North Macedonia, rhetoric is often used where unverified findings and unsubstantiated allegations of corruption, non-transparency, unprofessionalism, abuse of office are used as a basis for accusing the political opponents. SDSM usually does this when it criticizes the mayors from the ranks of 'DPMNE', and tends to put 'pro-Russian' Levica and VMRO-DPMNE in the same group and label them as 'against the people' and 'anti-EU' political bloc, differing themselves as a 'pro-European bloc', a transparent and EU-oriented party, which is a defender of the people's interests.

For the ruling party Social Democratic Union of Macedonia - SDSM, the European integration of the country is a separate topic regarding which it communicates with the public most frequently. It is noted that on a daily basis there are posts in which, through various messages, SDSM is presented as the political option for Macedonia's EU membership, in contrast to the opposition VMRO-DPMNE and Levica, which are presented as anti-EU, anti-European, and Levica as pro-Russian. SDSM presents itself as the party that advocates for and practices the European values of freedom, equality, justice, openness and that it is a political option that is pro-Western, i.e., that it shares the same values with the Western democracies. Considering that 2024 is an election year, it is necessary to monitor whether this discourse of we–the good ones (pro-EU, pro-reforms) and you–the bad ones (anti-EU, anti-West) is also formed as the basis of SDSM's campaign for the upcoming parliamentary elections.

The harmful narratives that were noted in the monitored period are mostly related to undermining trust in the institutions, biased selection, unsubstantiated findings and encouraging division among we–the good ones and they–the bad ones.

As regards to DUI in the month of November, there are harmful posts dominated by ethnically motivated discourse and ethnocentrism, especially for the Day of the Albanian Flag, and the self-presentation is mostly in the line of a defender of the rights of Albanians, a pro-Western and pro-European option that works in line with the Western values. Nevertheless, in both November and December, DUI is generally 'quieter' when it comes to the harmful narratives, and during both months, with the government ministers from this party posts were noted about party activities from profiles of the government officials from DUI.

Among the opposition parties of the Albanians - Alternativa, Besa and the Democratic Movement, a unified, joint appearance can be observed as the European Union for Change, especially in expressing views that are critical of the ruling parties, and especially the Democratic Union for Integration - DUI, which is their main opponent. Thus, they are trying to get a message to a wider audience, i.e., a larger number of voters, bearing in mind the 2024 election year, and considering that the EUC presents itself as an alternative to DUI. The communication messages are accusations of corruption of senior officials of the DUI, with a focus on the Deputy Prime Minister, Artan Grubi, in particular the gambling business. At the same time, in the messages to the public, the EUC presents itself as an option that will bring a better future, justice and eradication of the corruption.

VMRO-DPMNE, on the other hand, often presents itself as the saviour and defender of the people, and it uses unverified and unsubstantiated allegations when it criticizes the Government of 'SDS and DUI' for corrupt and irresponsible work. The naming of the Government as 'DUI and SDSM' is also noticeable, which alludes to the narrative that DUI is the more powerful coalition partner in the Government.

Levica, on the other hand, is the harshest in its criticism and alludes to a narrative where they are 'one against all', i.e., they are fighting against the 'corrupt' and 'susceptible to foreign influence from the imperialist West' Government of 'SDS-DUI-VMRO'. In December, the most harmful narratives were noted around the incident that was caused in the Assembly for the voting of the new Rules of Procedure.

In almost all major parties that are quite communicatively proactive, practices for **defaming political opponents and personal attacks** were noted. In SDSM, the focus of the negative labels is on VMRO-DPMNE's leader Hristijan Mickoski; the opposition VMRO-DPMNE uses labels and insults towards the Prime Minister Dimitar Kovachevski, calling him an 'incompetent', 'dishonest' politician. Demonization of the personality of Deputy Prime Minister Artan Grubi from DUI is noticed, present as a trend in the European Union for Change, but also in Levica and VMRO-DPMNE. In reference to Levica, on the other hand, the main messages are aimed at SDSM and DUI, often followed by a range of insults such as 'the impotent quislings from SDS and the ethno-tribalism secessionists from DUI', referring to DUI as 'uchki' and 'thugs', and the President of the Assembly as a 'deserter'.

The rhetoric of almost all political parties is based on the use of words and phrases that denigrate a certain group of people in order to cause divisions and discord between pro- and anti-European, which is more common on the Facebook pages and is used to encourage divisions in the society, but less often to spread panic, fear and insecurity.

Levica is the party where attempts to foment social divisions are most noticeable, especially the narrative by which they try to denigrate the alleged 'hybrid regime' of 'SDS, DUI and VMRO' under the dictates of the 'imperialist West', which do not represent the interests of the citizens in Macedonia. Here the narratives about conspiracy theories and alleged harmful foreign influences are added, i.e., SDSM and DUI are labelled as parties under the dictates of the West, and Levica is labelled as pro-Russian and anti-Western and VMRO-DPMNE as anti-European. The posts with harmful narratives on the websites and Facebook pages show similar trends in the communication, although a greater diversity of harmful narratives is observed on Facebook.

Publishing information that is manipulative, disinformation, inaccurate information and malicious information violates the principle of evidence-based communication. Through such discourse in the public communication by the political actors, the democratic processes and the elections can be seriously affected, by creating and spreading lies, attacking individuals, which can result in a decline of trust in the electoral process and in the institutions. Creating and sharing disinformation is not a crime, but it is unethical and can be extremely harmful to the democratic processes of a country.

A discourse in which harmful narratives are present violates the principle of ethical communication, as well as the impartiality and professionalism in the public communication, which is expected from the political actors. Elected and appointed officials, as well as party officials, have an obligation to practice ethics in their communication with the public and the media. This means that the approach they will apply is an '*Approach that is applied at work and which implies honest, conscientious, timely and responsible performance of work duties. Respecting the professional standards and the human rights of the persons involved in the work, policies and principles are implemented that respect the moral principles for ethical behaviour in the work process.*[17] The political parties are encouraged to adopt codes of conduct which, among other things, oblige their members, officials, candidates and elected and appointed persons to address speech that incites intolerance, discrimination or hatred.[18] Furthermore, the guidelines of the OSCE joint declaration call on the politicians during their press conferences to treat the participants with respect, to practice equal treatment in handling issues and to refrain from labelling the media workers and the human rights activists. Similar to the joint declaration, the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe calls[19] for adoption of codes of conduct, which will provide for internal processes for sanctioning hate speech.

17 Dictionary of Media Literacy, Institute of Communication Studies, 2023, https://recnik.medium.edu.mk/termin/etic-ki-pristap-moralen-pristap/

18 OSCE Joint Declaration on politicians and public officials and freedom of expression https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/9/4/501697.pdf

19 Recommendation CM/Rec(2022)16[1] of the Committee of Ministers to member States on combating hate speech (Adopted by the Committee of Ministers on 20 May 2022 at the 132nd Session of the Committee of Ministers) https://search.coe.int/cm/Pages/result_details.aspx?ObjectId=0900001680a67955

In addition, the trend of using official government channels of communication for party propaganda, i.e. posting party content on the Facebook profiles of the Prime Minister, Deputy Prime Ministers and government ministers, is concerning. In both months, additionally to the party propaganda, harmful narratives were also noted by Deputy Prime Minister Grubi and three government ministers.

With the posts with party promotion and propaganda on the official Facebook profiles, the Prime Minister and the ministers directly violate the principles of professionalism and impartiality in the communication of Government representatives, but the Government's Code of Ethics for Civil Servants is also violated,[20] thereby negatively affecting confidence in their ability to work impartially for the benefit of all citizens. This type of posts, in which no distinction is made between the activities of persons as party position holders and public office holders, represents a violation of the principles of the professional communication with the public.

Freedom of expression also includes an obligation, not just a right. According to Article 10 of the European Convention on Human Rights[21] *Everyone has the right to freedom of expression. This right shall include freedom to hold opinions and to receive and impart information and ideas without interference by public authority and regardless of frontiers. This Article shall not prevent States from requiring the licensing of broadcasting, television or cinema enterprises. The exercise of these freedoms, since it carries with it duties and responsibilities, may be subject to such formalities, conditions, restrictions or penalties as are prescribed by law and are necessary in a democratic society, in the interests of national security, territorial integrity or public safety, for the prevention of disorder or crime, for the protection of health or morals, for the protection of the reputation or rights of others, for preventing the disclosure of information received in confidence, or for maintaining the authority and impartiality of the judiciary.*

The Council of Europe has created different definitions of 'hate speech' depending on the context. In Recommendation No. R (97) 20 regarding 'hate speech' it recommends that member Governments of the Member Countries take the steps to combat hate speech set forth in the document. This is especially true of hate speech spread through the media. The Recommendation attempts to define the term 'hate speech' as follows: The term "hate speech" shall be understood as covering all forms of expression which spread, foment, promote or justify racial hatred, xenophobia, antisemitism or other forms of hatred based on intolerance, including: intolerance expressed by aggressive nationalism and ethnocentrism, discrimination and hostility against minorities, migrants and people of immigrant origin. Furthermore, the Recommendation specifically calls on the governments of the member states, public authorities and public institutions at the national, regional and local levels, as well as officials, to have a special responsibility to refrain from statements, in particular to the media, which may reasonably be understood as hate speech, or as speech likely to produce the effect of legitimising, spreading or promoting racial hatred, xenophobia, antisemitism or other forms of discrimination or hatred based on intolerance. Such statements should be prohibited and publicly disavowed whenever they occur.[22]

In the Macedonian legislation, the Law on Prevention And Protection Against Discrimination prohibits discrimination[23] on multiple grounds such as: race, skin colour, national or ethnic origin, sex, gender, sexual

20 Code of Ethics for Civil Servants, Government of the Republic of Macedonia, 2011, Microsoft Word - BA05988178DB784D9BB9FB116ED438F1.doc (vlada.mk)

21 European Convention for the Protection of Human Rights, https://www.echr.coe.int/documents/d/echr/convention_mkd

22 Hate Speech Monitoring Guide AAVMS. Guide for monitoring 'hate speech' (avmu.mk)

23 Law on Prevention and Protection against Discrimination https://www.mtsp.gov.mk/content /% D0%97% D0%B0%D0%BA%D0%BE%D0%BD%20%D0%B7%D0%B0%20%D1%81%D0%BF%D1% 80%D0%B5%D1%87% D1%83%D0%B2%D0%B0%D1%9A%D0%B5%20%D0%B8%20%D0%B7%D0%B0%D1%88%D1%82%D0%B8% D1%82%D0%B0%20%D0%BE%D0%B4%20%D0%B4%D0%B8%D1%81%D0%BA%D1%80%D0%B8%D0%BC% D0%B8%D0%BD%D0%B0%D1%86%D0%B8%D1%98%D0%B0.pdf

orientation, gender identity, belonging to a marginalised group, language, nationality, social background, education, religion or religious belief, political conviction, other beliefs, disability, age, family or marital status, property status, health status, personal capacity and social status, or any other grounds and in that direction it is necessary that the public communication of the political entities does not contain speech that insults a certain group or justifies hate speech against a certain group, not to use speech that is inflammatory, intolerant or contains calls to attack a certain group.

Holders of public offices have a duty in their relationship with the public to communicate decisions, policies and other information from the work they perform. Whereas, for the promotion of party activities, it is necessary to have special communication channels that will be managed and maintained, as well as financed by resources from the party, while the communication channels that they have as state officials should be supported by resources from the public sector in which they work, as well as from spokespersons in the public institutions.

2. Monitoring of the media coverage of political actors

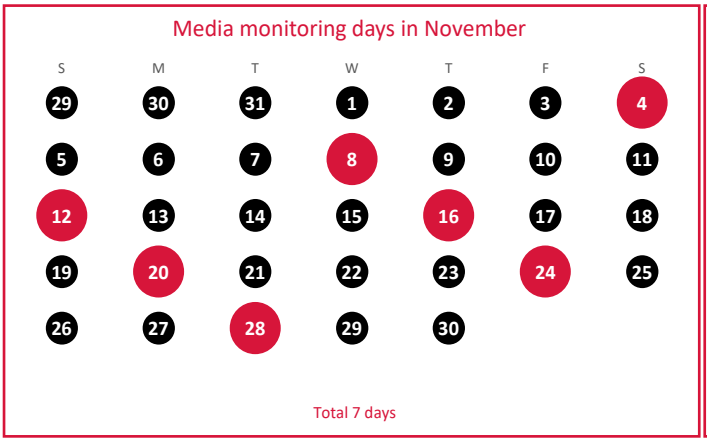
Analysis of the online media and television stations' coverage of political actors is the second, parallel process in the Determining Political Harmful Narratives research. It is complementary to the first type of monitoring, i.e. the monitoring of the political actors' communication with the public. While the analysis of the political parties and their leaders is focused on determining the dominant harmful narratives in the context of compliance with the standards of public communication, the media monitoring should provide an answer as to how this toxic and polarizing public discourse penetrates the media arena. During the monitoring, it was analysed who the actors that most frequently 'sow' harmful narratives in the informative content are, whether and how they manage to infiltrate the primetime and the headlines, which topics are proving to be fertile ground for such narratives, and most importantly - what the role of journalists is in this process: do the media comply with the professional and the ethical standards to provide accurate, fair and impartial information or, on the flipside, do they, unquestioningly follow the agenda dictated by political actors.

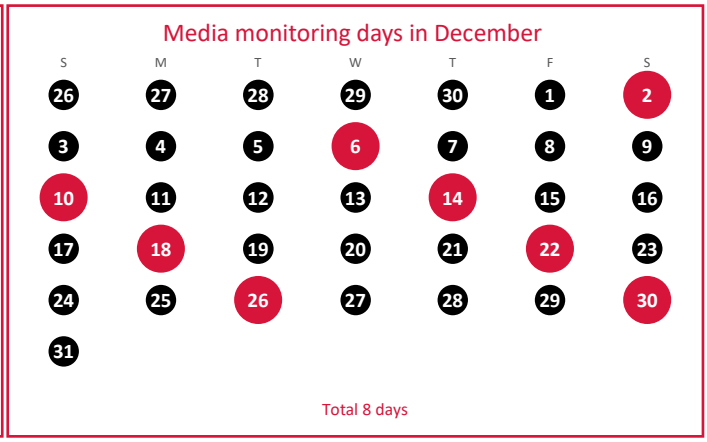
The media sample includes the following 11 online media outlets and 9 television stations:

Online media outlets: Lokalno; Nezavisen; Sloboden peat; A1on.mk; MKD.mk; Republika; Kurir; Almakos; Tetova Sot; Nova TV; Vecer.mk.

Television stations: public and private TV stations at the national level with the highest viewership, nine in total: MTV 1 (state-owned); MTV 2 (state-owned, in Albanian); Alfa TV (private); Kanal 5 (private); Sitel TV (private); TV 24 (private); Telma (private); Alsat M (private, in Albanian); TV 21 (private, in Albanian).

A single post or a single news item is considered a unit for analysis. More details about the methodology and the ethical and professional reporting standards, is available at HARM-TIVE Research.





The monitoring was carried out over a total of 15 days during November and December, spread over four-day intervals ('every fourth day in the month'). Days for media monitoring were the following days **in November:** 4, 8, 12, 16, 20, 24, and 28 November (a total of seven days) and in December: 2, 6, 10, 14, 18, 22, 26 30 (eight days).

2.1. Monitoring report on online media coverage of political actors

Report for November 2023

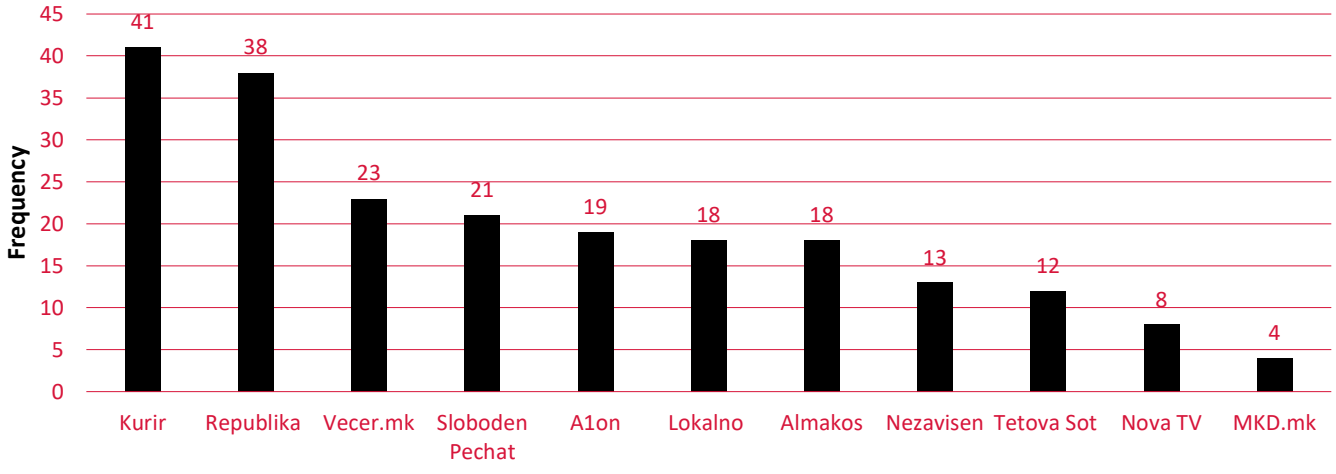
Over the period that was subject of analysis (a total of 7 days in November) a total of **215 posts** which contained harmful narratives were identified in the monitored online-media. In terms of genre, they were dominated by 'reported press release', communicating the official position of a certain body (a political party, the Assembly, the Government, ministries) on a current event (73 news items) and 'reported speech of a politician' at a rally or at a different type of a gathering (49 news items). Put together (122 news items) these make up for 56.8 % of all the analysed news items. The largest number of them rely on a **single source (178 or 82.8 %)** and one-sided information dominates, meaning that the media outlet had only consulted one side (187 or 87.0 %). The reason for publishing the news item is most often a pseudo-event created to attract media attention, such as press conferences by political parties, statements by political actors, etc. (75 posts or 34.9 %), followed by current events (54 or 25.1 %) and socially relevant topics that require more time, resources and dedicated reporting effort on the part of the journalist (33 or 15.3 %).

The largest number of these posts were **not signed - as many as 181 news items (84.2 %)**. Thematically, domestic politics dominates (153 news items or 71.2 %), with economy (19 news items or 8.8 %) and healthcare (10 news items or 4.7 %) lagging far behind it. There are very few occasions where in addition to the main topic, there is also a secondary one, and it is mainly also within the framework of domestic politics, and most of the time it refers to the EU-integration of the country, crime and corruption, and the upcoming parliamentary and presidential elections.

Presence of harmful narratives in online media

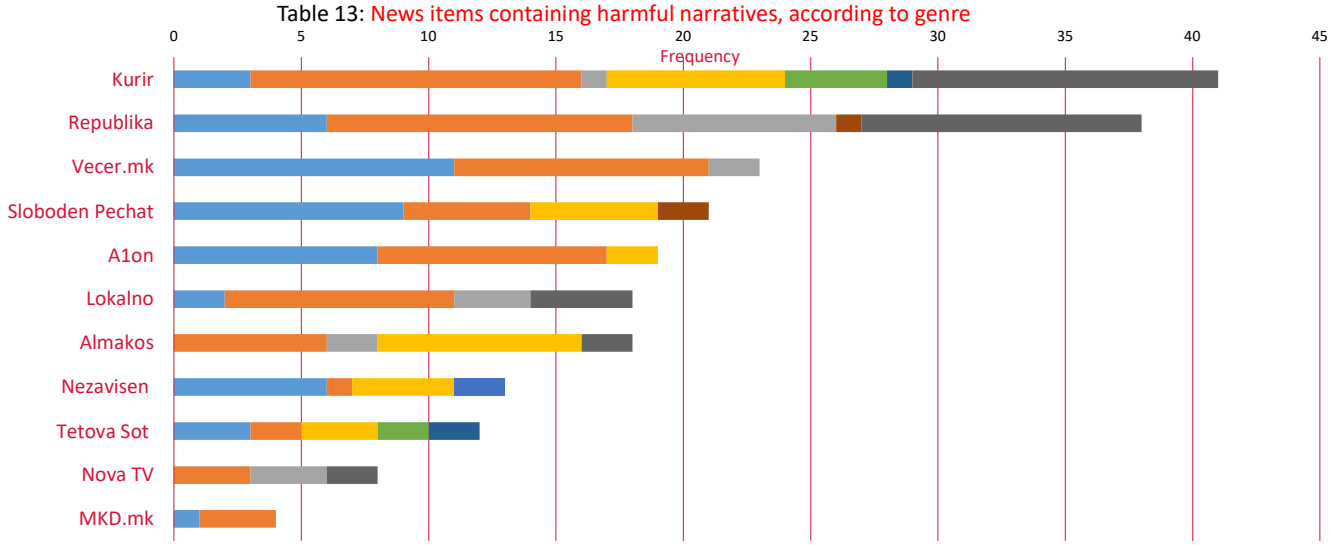
Two news portals, Kurir and Republika, have the highest number of posts with harmful narratives (79 or 36.8 %), followed by Vecer.mk and Sloboden Pechat (44 or 20.5 %), meaning that together they make up for more than half (123 or 57 %) of the total number of 215 identified news items containing harmful narratives over the entire monitored period. MKD.mk and Nova TV have the lowest number of this kind of news items (12 or 5.6 %).

Table 12: News items containing harmful narratives



In terms of genre, the structure of the texts spreading harmful narratives in all the online media predominantly consists of reported press releases, especially the ones in Kurir, Republika, Vecer.mk, Lokalno and A1on; politicians' speeches, above all in Vecher.mk, Sloboden Pechat and A1on, while Almakos and Kurir have the highest number of reports, while Republika has news items. **The category 'other' particularly stands out** (31 news items or 14.4 %), predominantly present in the Kurir and Republika portals, and in most of the cases they are featuring statuses taken over from social media, parts of interviews taken from other media outlets, press conferences by the political parties (VMRO-DPMNE and SDSM), as well as viewpoints, answers and retorts by MPs and spokespersons of political parties as excerpts taken from their appearances on TV-debate shows.

Table 13: News items containing harmful narratives, according to genre



	MKD.mk	Nova TV	Tetova Sot	Nezavisen	Almakos	Lokalno	A1on	Sloboden Pechat	Vecer.mk	Republika	Kurir
Reported speech of a politician	1	0	3	6	0	2	8	9	11	6	3
Reported press release	3	3	2	1	6	9	9	5	10	12	13
News/News with a statement	0	3	0	0	2	3	0	0	2	8	1
Report	0	0	3	4	8	0	2	5	0	0	7
Analytical reportage news item	0	0	0	2	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Analysis/comment	0	0	2	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	4
Comment	0	0	2	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
Interview	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	2	0	1	0
Other	0	2	0	0	2	4	0	0	0	11	12

Thematically, domestic politics dominates all of the internet-portals, with highest prevalence in Kurir and Republika, as well as Sloboden Pechat and Almakos. Even in the portals with a lower number of harmful narratives, domestic politics is nearly the sole topic, for example Nezavisen (out of 13 news items identified as containing harmful narratives -12 are in the area of domestic politics, and one is in the area of economy) or Sloboden Pechat (where 19 out of the 21 news items with harmful narratives are from domestic politics, one from the economy and one from the judiciary), as well as Almakos (16 out of 18 news items refer to domestic politics).

When presenting the daily events, the portals communicate with the public in a nearly identical way. In the case of news items with harmful narratives dominated by one-sided reporting on a speech by the political actor or political press release by a specific political party, the headlines are nearly uniform – featuring the name of the actor (his last name or the name of the party), and the text that follows is sparse, consisting of few paragraphs, even reduced to just a few sentences of their statements or views on a certain issue. At the same time, since it is not a news item (the shortest genre in journalism that needs to answer five key questions – who, what, when, where and why), a reader who may not be keeping up with the current affairs on a daily, hour by hour basis, would struggle to understand the information, what was said, why, when and where. A few examples:

- SDSM: We have a billion euros available from the EU for the Macedonian economy. News item taken from the SDSM press release, consisting of a few short sentences about the EU plan for the growth of the economies of the Western Balkans, the amount of funds that would be allocated to our country, and therefore the blockades by VMRO-DPMNE and Mickoski on the European road must be defeated. (**Nova TV, 12.11.2023**)

- Levica: SDS-DUI-DPMNE ready to adopt the new Rules of Procedure by means of force. It is a short news item based on a social media post of the leader of Levica, Dimitar Apasiev, consisting of three short passages about the plenary session of the Assembly, where preparations are being made to 'violently and illicitly' adopt the new Rules of Procedure. (**A1on, 20.11.2023**)
- Mickoski: Macedonia's Government is failing the economy. News item taken from 'Telegraf', consisting of three short paragraphs, about the alarming and disastrous state of the state budget, with a lot of crime and black-market economy, and therefore VMRO-DPMNE would pass a law that will reduce the salaries of officials. (**Almakos, 12.11.2023**)
- SDSM: Mickoski is undermining the Oncology investigation, if he is in possession of evidence he should submit it to the PPO. A text citing the party's press-release, consisting of two short paragraphs, which demands from Mickoski instead of presenting untruths, if is in possession of evidence on the Oncology investigation, to submit it to the Public Prosecutor's Office. (**Sloboden Pechat, 4.11.2023**)
- Tomovski: VMRO-DPMNE has concrete plans, visions and a strategy. News item compiled from Ivica Tomovski Facebook status, as a member of the Central Committee of VMRO-DPMNE, with two paragraphs about the alms that SDS gives to old age pensioners, students, high school students and farmers, while VMRO-DPMNE offers concrete plans, visions and a strategy for the pensioners, taxes, municipalities. Although brief, the news item has a strapline ('SDS commits bribery'), a headline and a subhead which are completely repeated in the text itself. (**Kurir, 28.11.2023**)
- Mickoski: With the organization of the OSCE Summit, the government proved its desire for crime. Press-release consisting of two paragraphs, in which Hristijan Mickoski, answering a journalist's question (unknown to the readers, where and when), comments on the OSCE Summit held in Skopje, which instead of a good, beautiful event turned into a show (because of the millions of euros spent to rent passenger vehicles for the needs of the Summit). (**Republika, 28.11.2023**)
- Alternativa: Alijansa and Medjiti are playing with the dignity of the Kumanovo doctors. News item, consisting of only two paragraphs, about the election of the Director of the Kumanovo hospital, and then immediately after his appointment - return of the former director, interpreted as playing games with the professional dignity, the dignity of the people of Kumanovo and the dignity of an Albanian doctor. (**Lokalno, 8.11.2023**)
- Almost a million euros in two days, Osmani rents vehicles at six times the price. News item, based on the press-release by VMRO-DPMNE, consisting of three short paragraphs, about Osmani and the tender-coalition DUI-SDS which rents vehicles at six times the price for the needs of the OSCE Summit in Skopje. (**Vecher, 8.11.2023**)

In this context, a question that inevitably arises is what the occasion that led to the publication of such information is, or, more specifically, the mechanism of selection and creation of informative content in the media. The monitoring determined that for one third (75) of all the analysed news items containing harmful narratives, the occasion was a pseudo-event – 'something is communicated on the occasion of something', and that, above all, those were political party press releases, press conferences, statements, reactions... of political entities. This was followed by current (past) and current planned events (a total of 58 news items or 27.0 %), social developments (33 news items, or 15.3 %), but the ones that stand out the most are in the category of 'other' (32 news items or 14.9%), as they refer to sharing excerpts from interviews and debate shows from television stations. If the pseudo-events and those filed under 'other' are combined (and they also constitute statements, regardless of whether they were taken from interviews or debate shows of individual political subjects), then their total number of 107 news items (or half of the analysed 215 news items or 49,9 %) clearly speaks about the share of political entities in 'creating' media content with harmful narratives. In addition, when it comes to certain media outlets (Kurir, Republika and Vecher.mk) there is a blatant practice to make several news items (on different issues, topics) from a single event (press-conference, debate show).

The political actors in the analysed news items

The representation of political actors in news items with harmful narratives is different from one portal to another, depending, above all, on the topic (the issue, the matter) that is being informatively processed, but those with two actors dominate (in 52 news items or 24.2 %), followed by those with three (in 35 news items or 16.3 %) and those with four actors (in 32 news items or 14,9 %). Individually, several portals stand out, such as Republika, which has the highest number of news items with three (9 news items), four (11 news items) and five actors (10 news items), while Vecher.mk has an equal number of news items with two actors (10 news items), to the number of news items with only one actor (11 news items) or Kurir, where in addition to news items with two (28 news items) and three actors (5 news items), there are also news items with a single actor (6 news items). These two portals stand out compared to all the other portals that were monitored, according to the number of news items with only one actor. The actors represented in Vecher.mk are most frequently Hristijan Mickoski, Dimitar Kovachevski, Bujar Osmani, the Government, SDSM, DUI, while in Kurir, in addition to those mentioned in Vecher.mk, VMRO-DPMNE is also featured, along with the MPs, spokespersons and mayors from VMRO-DPMNE.

From the numerous actors mentioned in the analysed news items, both individuals and collectives, it is difficult to single out someone who 'takes precedence'. To what extent Hristijan Mickoski, or Dimitar Kovachevski, or VMRO-DPMNE, as well as SDSM are represented is hard to assess. This time, unlike in the previous month (October) when we conducted monitoring, and above all, due to several current political developments (the OSCE Summit in Skopje and the adoption of the Rules of Procedure of the Assembly of the RNM), new political entities have entered the arena, such as the Minister of Foreign Affairs and Vice President of DUI, Bujar Osmani, and the Levica political party and its president and MP Dimitar Apasiev. At the same time, if we take a look at it through the lens of representation of the political parties combined with their members such as spokespersons, vice-presidents, MPs, members of central committees, mayors, then VMRO-DPMNE rises to the 'top'. Namely, whenever the portals inform about various social activities, developments, in addition to the name of the political actor, they regularly mention their credentials: 'the MP ... from VMRO-DPMNE', 'the vice-president of VMRO-DPMNE and former Deputy Minister of Finance', 'MP... and member of the Executive Committee of VMRO-DPMNE'. On the other hand, no special attributes were used for the party presidents, but simply 'the president of VMRO-DPMNE Hristijan Mickoski', 'Prime Minister Kovachevski', 'Levica president Dimitar Apasiev', the President of DUI, Ali Ahmeti'. Incidentally, one may encounter a description such as the: opposition party VMRO-DPMNE, the Head of the Macedonian Diplomacy Bujar Osmani or just the Minister Bujar Osmani, Hristijan Mickoski the leader of the opposition party VMRO-DPMNE, Dimitar Kovachevski Prime Minister and President of SDSM. However, it is becoming common practice to refer to the political party SDSM as 'SDS', above all by VMRO-DPMNE, and often this is authentically reported by the media.

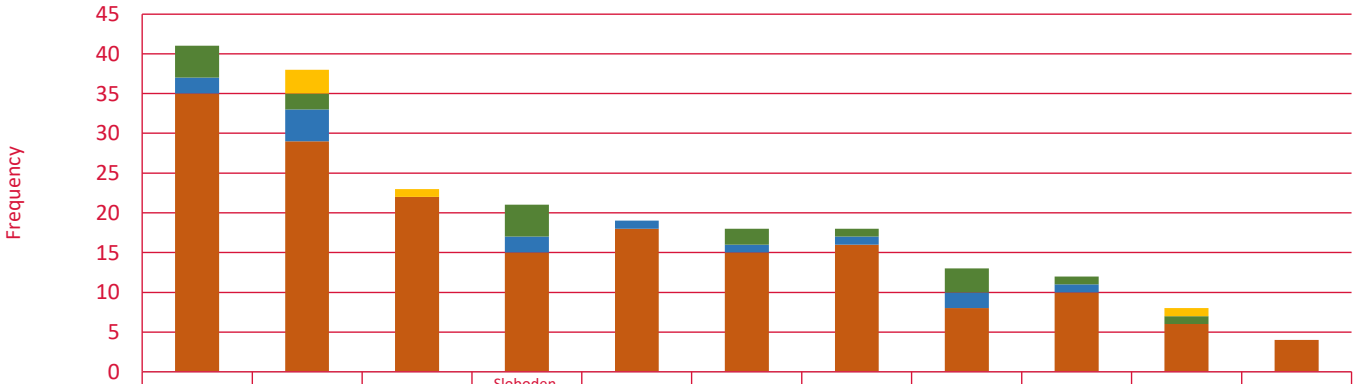
In terms of the **access and assessment of the political actors**, portals 'value' them differently. Kurir is mostly neutral (does not attach attributes) or positive towards the main actors, i.e. VMRO-DPMNE, the members of its bodies, its deputies, mayors, spokespersons, and is negative (one-sided) towards the other actors, particularly the Government by DUI and SDSM, the Prime Minister Kovachevski, SDSM, DUI. In Vecer.mk, negative attributes are most common, for both the main, as well as the supporting actors. Those attributes are not penned by the media outlet/journalist, rather, they are left to be articulated by the other actors, and they are crucially aimed at the Government, Prime Minister Kovachevski, SDSM, DUI. Republika rarely provides any attributes for the main actors; those are mostly left to the actors featured in the news items, or some third actor, and descriptions are positive and neutral (for the leader of VMRO-DPMNE, his vice-presidents, MPs, party members), while negative ones dominate when it comes to the secondary actors in the news item (mainly the authorities, the SDSM-DUI Government, Deputy Prime Minister Artan Grubi, DUI, SDSM or SDS). In the content promoted by the other portals, such as Sloboden Pechat, the journalist's approach to political entities is neutral, with sporadic negative attributes, which are articulated by some third

actor. Or, Nezavisen and A1on.mk, where the assessments, and attributes attached to political entities are also sporadic, both negative and positive, but given by third actors. In Tetova Sot, the journalist has positive attributes for the main political actors from time to time, while the negative ones are left to other actors (for DUI, VMRO-DPMNE, Ali Ahmeti, the SDSM-DUI Government). On the other hand, in Almakos, the journalist often employs an ambivalent approach, both positive and negative, for both the main and secondary actors.

(Non)professionalism in journalism

One thing that is typical of all the monitored internet portals is the one-sided reporting. Out of a total of 215 analysed news items, 187 were dominated by one-sided reporting, with rare and incidental inclusion of two, three or more sides. This is most striking when it comes to Kurir and Republika, precisely because of the fact that they have the highest number of news items with harmful narratives. At the same time, **a common feature of all internet portals is also the reliance on a single source of information.** Thus, in 178 news items (82.8 %) only one source was indicated, while 14 (6.5 %) pointed to two and 18 (8.4 %) to three or more sources. This approach is the result of the dominance of the two genre forms, i.e. 'reported press-release' and 'reported speech', where the portals shared, in full or partially, the press release or position of a specific political entity (party, party leader, spokesperson, MP) on a specific issue. Consequently, as expected, there is only one source and that's where 'the story ends'. Hence, regardless of the number of analysed news items with harmful narratives by individual portals, whether the largest in Kurir and Republika or the smallest in MKD.mk, Nova TV or Tetova Sot, a constant in all of the reporting is the dominance of a single source of information. See the graphic representation:

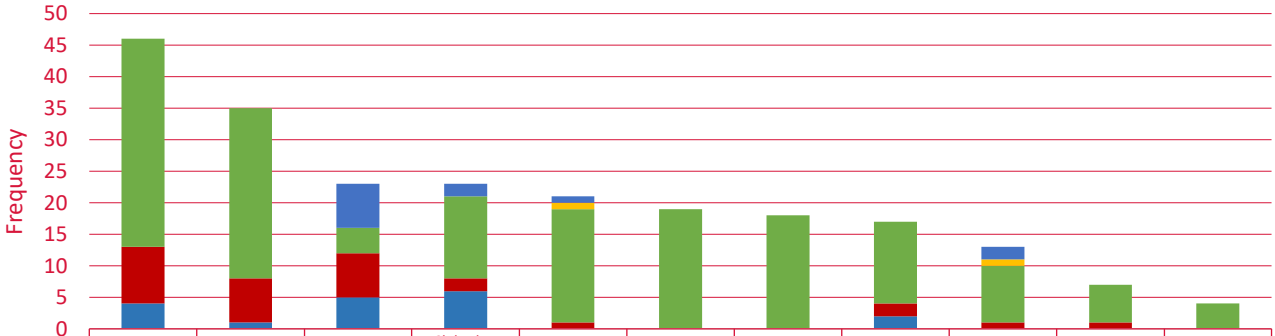
Table 14. Number of sources by online media outlet



	Kurir	Republika	Vecher MK	Sloboden Pechat	A1on	Almakos	Lokalno	Nezavisen	Tetova Sot	Nova TV	MKD.mk
No source	0	3	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0
Three and more	4	2	0	4	0	2	1	3	1	1	0
Two	2	4	0	2	1	1	1	2	1	0	0
One	35	29	22	15	18	15	16	8	10	6	4

The same applies to the types of sources in the analysed news items. The monitoring determined largest number of precise sources of information (164 or 72.57 % of the total of 226 sources), 30 were imprecise (13.27 %), 18 were unclear (7.96 %), 12 came from another media outlet (5.31 %) and 2 from the journalist as a source (0.88 %). They are concentrated in Kurir and Republika, as portals with the largest number of news items with harmful narratives and news items dominated by reported press releases and/or speeches of political actors (individual or collective). When it comes to the other portals, it can be observed that all sources at A1on are precise, followed by Almakos, Tetova sot and Nezavisen. For clarity, see the graphic below:

Table 15. Type of sources by online media outlet



	Kurir	Republika	Vecer.mk	Sloboden Pechat	Almakos	A1on	Lokalno	Nezavisen	Tetova Sot	Nova TV	MKD.mk
Other media outlet	0	0	7	2	1	0	0	0	2	0	0
Journalist as a source	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	1	0	0
Precise	33	27	4	13	18	19	18	13	9	6	4
Imprecise	9	7	7	2	1	0	0	2	1	1	0
Unclear	4	1	5	6	0	0	0	2	0	0	0

The **visualization of the analysed news items** is of no lesser importance, that is, how it 'functions' in the text, whether it amplifies or minimizes the harmful narrative. The analysis shows us that all the analysed news items were supported by at least one photo, but there are also news items with several photos. In all analysed portals, archival photos (114 or 38.13 %) and current photos (98 or 32.78 %) were the ones most frequently used, while a smaller number had video statements (21 or 7.02 %), with the occasional graph and even collage of multiple photos or screenshot of posts on Facebook. However, outside of the professional standards in journalism, almost none of the photos were credited, especially the archival ones, and the name of the photojournalist could only be found sporadically in a few news items. Therefore, in the analysis, indirectly, based on the content of the news item and its genre, the 'picture' of the visualization is formed. There are numerous examples of this: a post with a statement of a political actor from a debate show on television with a photo of the actor in question in front of their party's headquarters; text from a Facebook post of a political actor with a photo from a gathering of the political party or a press conference; text about the reaction of a political entity, and the photo shows the leader/representative of the party at the press conference, text – a political party's press release about an incident in the Assembly with a photo of the headquarters of the party that sent the press release.

Dominant harmful political narratives

The analysis identified **215 press releases with harmful narratives**, and as many as 434 of them were press releases (words, sentences, formulations) that most frequently contain claims of corruption, impartiality/lack of accountability, lack of professionalism, abuse of office without an attempt to substantiate those claims (103 cases), unverified findings (or findings that are difficult to verify) as grounds to accuse the political opponents (91 cases), labelling, mocking and grossly disrespecting other persons (media workers, civil activists, political opponents, public office holders...) use of negative words (61 cases) and directly or indirectly promoting one's own ideologies and activities as something that benefits the people, in contrast to the activities and ideologies of the political opponents (58 cases). In fact, news items that serve to undermine the trust, negatively target, attack and demonize a certain person and spread populism, similarly to what was found in the previous (October) monitoring period.

Their 'concentration' is noticeable in the speeches of political entities and their press releases. They are most prevalent in Kurir and Republika, portals that come to the front when it comes to these two genres. When it comes to the rest of the online media outlets, fewer news items with harmful narratives were identified, primarily coming from the number of non/reported speeches of political subjects and their parties' press releases.

What is most striking, there is the practice of creating multiple press releases from a single event, for example from a press conference, from an interview (even if it is for another media outlet), participation of political actors in debate shows on different television stations. Plainly speaking, 'churning out' – proliferating information, news items, news items about an event, in other words, making separate news items for each of the topics or issues raised by, spoken or debated about by a specific politician, MP, spokesperson, or member of a particular political party (primarily from VMRO-DPMNE). In that way, in fact, not only does the daily feed of the portal seem richer compared to the rest of the online media outlets, but also the number of harmful narratives is 'multiplied', and thus the media outlet itself becomes the creator of harmful narratives. A few typical examples:

The Kurir portal reports on the same event, the visit of Hristijan Mickoski to municipality of Prilep within the VMRO-DPMNE campaign 'It is important! - change is up to you', in two news items published on 4 November 2023. The news items: *Mickoski: Let's not do calculations, let's merge the elections and avoid making additional costs to the budget and the citizens and Mickoski: Macedonia is on its knees, it is necessary for the coalition led by VMRO-DPMNE to have 61 MPs* refer to the same topic - the upcoming presidential and parliamentary elections. Another example are the following two news items, published on 24.11.2023, with titles: *Miteva: DUI, who are the centre of crime, are the reason for the emigration of both Albanians and Macedonians, we proposed abolition of the caretaker government as it has proved to be non-functional and Miteva: The report of the European Commission, which is the most critical so far, best speaks about the situation in Macedonia now.* **Two issues that VMRO-DPOMNE spokesperson Marija Miteva is talking about during an appearance in the 'Samo Vistina' (Only Truth) Show on Kanal 5 TV, are singled out in the news**

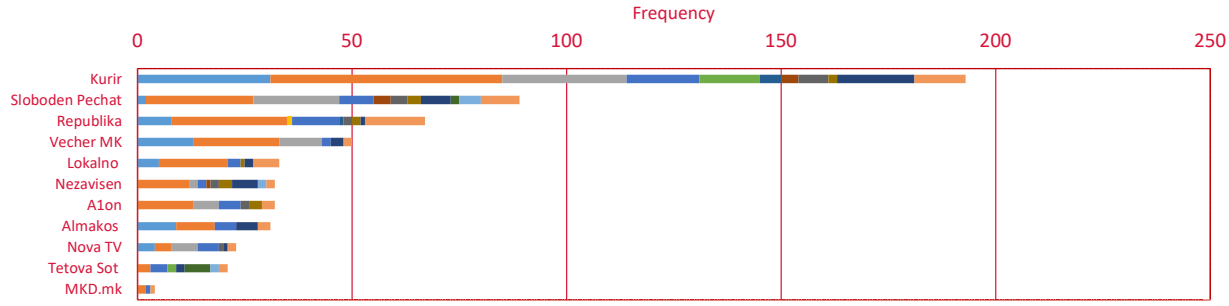
items. At the same time, the news item *Miteva: The report of the European Commission, which is the most critical so far, best speaks about the situation in Macedonia now,* **was published on the same day, with the same title, but condensed in terms of content, in Vecer.mk.**

The **Vecher.mk** portal, used the guest appearance of MP Dragan Kovachki from VMRO-DPMNE in the show 'Za ili protiv' (In Favour or Against) on Alfa TV, to 'cut out' two news items, published on 20.11.2023. *One, under the title Kovachki: With SDS, the budget was almost doubled, and there is not a single investment, they just waste the citizens' money like there's no tomorrow,* where he talks about the elections and the Brussels report on Macedonia, using archaic, stylistically coloured words (of Turkish origin), both in the title and in the text, about SDS as an 'azdisana' political party (trans. spending money like there's no tomorrow) – or in more formal vocabulary 'crazy, insane'. The second news item *Kovachki: The scandal in the Assembly was directed by Djaferi and Apasiev as a red herring to deflect from the elections,* is related to the adoption of the Rules of Procedure by the Assembly and the submission of 1,500 amendments by the 'Levica' political party.

The **Republika** portal also published two news items (20.11.2023) about a single event, the incident in the Assembly caused by the 'Levica' Party during the adoption of the Rules of Procedure and the rejection of the over 2000 amendments they submitted. In the first one *Djaferi and Misovski were given minor roles in the cheap drama staged by 'Levica' in the Assembly,* the event is described and SDSM-DUI-Levica are apostrophized as the bearers of these staged debates and incidents, but it is unclear who the author is, while the second, shorter news item *Staged incidents by 'Levica's' Apasiev who was arranging 'slaps, kicks and punches'* for Veljanoski, which is almost identical in terms of content (especially in relation to the SDSM-DUI-Levica arrangement and their drama), is clearly indicated as a reaction by VMRO-DPMNE.

In all the internet portals, regardless of the number (higher or lower) of news items with harmful narratives, undermining the trust in the institutions is the most prevalent narrative, followed by biased selection, disinformation, character attacks, populism and inciting divisions. Below find a graphic representation of the prevalence:

Table 16. Prevalence of harmful narratives in online media posts



	MKD.mk	Tetova Sot	Nova TV	Almakos	A1on	Nezavisen	Lokalno	Vecher MK	Republika	Sloboden Pechat	Kurir
Disinformation			4	9			5	13	8	2	31
Undermining of trust	2	3	4	9	13	12	16	20	27	25	54
Biased selection			6		6	2		10		20	29
Malinformation									1		
Character attacks, demonization	1	4	5	5	5	2	3	2	11	8	17
Hate speech		2									14
Manipulative Audio-visual media content									1		5
Conspiracy theories						1				4	4
Spreading panic, fear, insecurity			1		2	2			2	4	7
Foreign influence					3	3	1		2	3	2
Fomenting divisions		2	1	5		6	2	3	1	7	18
Ethnocentrism		6								2	
Extreme patriotism, nationalism		2				2				5	
Populism	1	2	2	3	3	2	6	2	14	9	12

The Kurir portal which is at the top of the list by the number of news items with harmful narratives (41 news items), most often, with 54 posts (sentences, paragraphs, parts of texts) tries to undermine trust in the institutions, but is also at the top of the list when it comes to disinformation (31 posts) and biased selection (29 posts). In VMRO-DPMNE's press release 'Pensioners will get what they deserve' (published on 28.11.2023) in which the party 'promises' that when they come to power they will linearly increase pensions by 5,000 denars, and the government is discredited as being 'alienated from the people', i.e. *DUI and SDS are only interested in making a few more millions for themselves, in getting their children and grandchildren...*The following news item also speaks about the Government as illegitimate, unpopular, one of the most incompetent governments in the history of Macedonia, drowning in crime and corruption: *VMRO-DPMNE: The rating of Kovachevski and Pendarovski is like 'Black Friday' - with each new statement, it drops by 20 %* (published on 24.11.2023). The press release (also published in Republika), according to the title, should refer to a public opinion poll, but in the content, there is only one sentence and no other additional data, which mentions that *all relevant public opinion polls show that SDS has lost the support of the citizens.* The entire text is an enumeration of tragedies, poverty, high inflation, crumbling standards, sinking economy, lack of textbooks, medications, low pensions, the donors of the parties in power etc., the main culprit for which is the Government. The news item - the VMRO press release (from 20.11.2023) ***Kovachevski drinks and parties smiling from 'ear to ear' in Belgrade with taxpayers' money, while the people are drowning in poverty,*** elaborates on the Prime Minister's wine excursion at the expense of the citizens, and he is disparaged as a person, a as someone who empties bottles, goes wild, drinks, sings and has fun in restaurants, but nowhere does it mention that Kovachevski, together with the Serbian and Montenegrin presidents, were attending the 'Wine Vision of the Open Balkans' Fair in Serbia. **This is one of the most explicit examples of how harmful narratives propagated by political actors in the media are 'multiplied':** the same VMRO press release would go on to be published by the portals Republika and Vecher.mk, with identical headline and text, but followed by many other portals, news agencies and TV stations, emphasizing his inappropriate behaviour. If we add news aggregators to this, the numbers become even higher: in this specific case, there were 35 news items on Grid.mk, and 19 on Time.mk, from various media outlets. The same can be said about the other news items, but their prevalence is far lower. Hence the question, what is the reason for this event to attract so much media attention - is it its relevance, the main actor - the Prime Minister of the country or the sensationalist headline of the first person who published the information, which is then identically mirrored in other media.

Republika comes second on the list (38 news items) with 27 posts undermining the trust in the institutions, followed by populism. The news item *Will SDSM give up on the 'Pse jo' Prime Minister?*(published on 24.11.2023) very briefly, with a few paragraphs, states that VMRO-DPMNE is against a caretaker prime minister from the ranks of DUI, since the party and its officials are labelled as 'corrupt, compromised, criminal', something that is widely known, with the words *Whenever crime and corruption are mentioned, even small children think of DUI. A party that does not have a single official that has not been compromised, cannot be a party that would produce a prime minister, even if it is only for 100 days.* The photo in the news item is from the Skopje Kale (City Fortress), where the graffiti 'Pse jo' ('why not' in Albanian -) is written on the wall. Or, the news item *VMRO-DPMNE: DUI and SDS consider their black-market businesses to be more important than reforms, that's why the EU report is the worst in history'* in which VMRO-DPMNE blames DUI and SDSM for the worst EU country report on Macedonia's progress, categorising them as 'corrupt DUI, SDS, Kovachevski, Ahmeti and Grubi'. VMRO-DPMNE sends even more impressive sobriquets for the Government of 'SDS and DUI' in the news item (both in the title and in the text) *VMRO-DPMNE: The affair 'Wild Flesh' in the Oncology Clinic shows the existence of a cancerous mafia* (published on 4.11.2023). According to them, 'with the Government of SDS and DUI, crime and corruption have penetrated every pore of society', 'the cancer mafia is making money off of the backs of the citizens' and 'their crime and callousness is appalling'. In this case, the media outlet takes over the narrative produced by the political actor in full and without any reservations, although it is full of negative attributes for its political opponents, as well as generalizations.

In Vecer.mk, in addition to undermining the trust, disinformation and biased selection were also present. News item about MP Mile Lefkov's (a member of the Executive Committee of VMRO-DPMNE) press conference states, *In DUI, there is no single uncompromised and not-incriminated member worthy of being appointed caretaker prime minister.* The title, text, and the video footage repeats the same harmful narrative about DUI as a criminal and compromised party several time, while Artan Grubi, Ali Ahmeti and Bujar Osmani are also highlighted. Lefkov states that 'DUI has been at the epicentre of all the criminal scandals quakes in Macedonia for months... Artan Grubi and his brother's shops, Shapka's hotels and gambling laws is the most criminal politician in Macedonia... Bujar Osmani who wants to stay sheathed was caught giving tenders worth millions to a DUI party donor. Ali Ahmeti's family juggles around businesses and million-dollar deals. DUI, as a party, represents the notion of illegal operation.' (24.11.2023). The same information, with nearly identical content was then published by **A1on**, but under a different headline: *Lefkov: VMRO-DPMNE would give up on the caretaker government, if only DUI gives up the position of a caretaker prime minister.*

The other portals, for example, Lokalno, in the news item Mucunski: *VMRO-DPMNE is against DUI having a president of the caretaker government,* (published on 28.11.2023), an interview with the Mayor of Aerodrom, Timcho Mucunski, in 'Topic of the day' on Sitel television, quote, or paraphrase (narrate) VMRO-DPMNE's views on the caretaker government and the upcoming parliamentary and presidential elections, and what the future government should be. Two quotes related to the political opponents that Mucunski gives attributes to, stand out. For SDSM (and in relation to the EC Progress Report on Macedonia) he says that after six, seven years of 'absolute failures, corruption, no capacity to deliver predictable measures, but does everything based on several-month long policies', they are trying to create division in the political system. For DUI he says that it is a political party, i.e. its leadership in the executive branch is a 'source of scandals and corruption', and that they are inadequate of leading the future government, but also uses a disclaimer stating that his party (VMRO-DPMNE) has come to learn about all this from the media, the investigative media, the online media and various civil society organisations. It is striking that the same interview (and the same headline), that is, parts of the interview, can also be found on **VMRO-DPMNE's website**, but in a much shorter form and by leaving out what was said about SDSM. The Kurir portal, on the other hand, by sharing parts of the interview with Timcho Mucunski (with a few paragraphs), under the headline *Mucunski: DUI as a party is a source of corruption,* also creates harmful narratives.

The **A1on** portal in the news item *Mickoski: The latest selection of judges in the Court of Appeal are feverish attempts by the government to appoint yet another party-affiliated judge or prosecutor* (published on 16.11.2023), where the president of VMRO-DPMNE, Hristijan Mickoski, at the opening of the General Assembly of the youth branch of the European National Party (ENP) in Skopje, while commenting on the election of the new judges in the Court of Appeal, expressed strong, negative words that it is 'rigged prosecution and judiciary' with the appointment of party-affiliated judges and prosecutors, i.e. forcefully imposed and undemocratically adopted (which is mainly used for the law or the constitution). Sloboden Pechat also has a news item about this event, but with a different headline *Mickoski: Desperate EC report and desperate attempt to elect judges to save the government from crime,* in which Mickoski qualifies the government as 'criminal', while his words regarding the selection of judges in the Court of Appeal are paraphrased as the last attempts of the government to appoint another party-affiliated judge and prosecutor thinking that coupled with the changes to the Criminal Code they would provide them with amnesty and political impunity for all the crimes and misdeeds they committed over the past six years.

Nezavisen in the news item *The opposition claims: In Grubi's Ministry, ten portals operate with state money* (published on 24.11.2023),'The European Union for Change' - the coalition of the joint Albanian parties from the opposition - the Democratic Movement, the Besa Movement and Alternativa, informs the public at a press conference about the portals of Deputy Prime Minister Artan Grubi located in the Ministry of Political System and Community Relations. They call them a 'criminal organization' that had previously been unimaginable, but proof of the crime and corruption of Artan Grubi and Ali Ahmeti, which has become 'society's cancer'. The news item in Republika builds up on this with the strapline *The Albanian opposition accuses* and the headline

Ten portals operate in the building of the Ministry of Finance with state money - in terms of content the text is the same, with the addition of another paragraph - ***We all know that Artan Grubi heads the Ministry of Political System, that he manages the media centre, but no one could imagine that he would take such criminal dimensions. Instead of using the ministry for the interest of the citizens, he has turned it into a propaganda machine to attack his political opponents. The media unilaterally and in its entirety re-published these claims of corruption, unprofessionalism, abuse of of(ce, made by the members of the European Union for Change, without offering their veri(cation.***

Report for December 2023

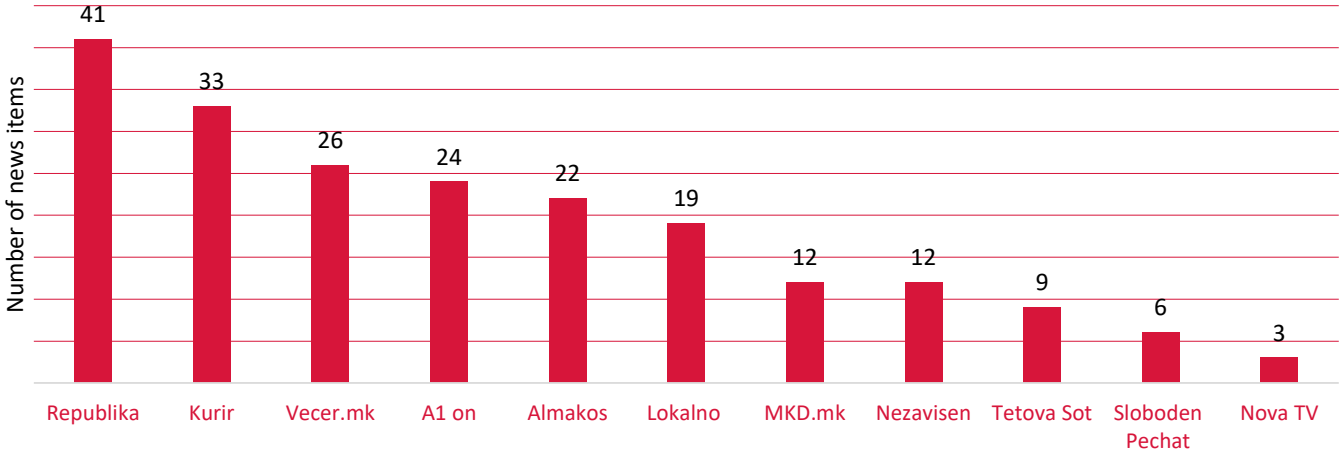
The monitoring of online media (conducted over eight days) in December found 207 news items with harmful narratives. The largest number of them, this time too, were in terms of genre, press releases that had been taken over (an official position, above all, of the political party) or 76 news items (36.7 %), reported speech (mostly parts of it) of a politician, i.e. 39 news items (or 18.8 %), but also reported interviews, Facebook posts and press conferences of political actors, accounting for a total of 43 news items (or 20.8 %). **When put together, they (158 news items) make up for 76.3% of all the analysed news items with harmful narratives.** There are far fewer news and reports, and sporadic analyses, comments and interviews. Furthermore, the largest number of these news items have precise sources (175 news items), but most frequently **it is a single source (185 or 89.4 %) and the media only consulted one side (188 news items or 90.8 %).** The pseudo-events, party press conferences, statements of political actors are the most frequent reason to publish the news (90 news items), followed by current affairs (45 news items) and social developments (44 news items).

The number of news items/posts signed with the author's/journalist's name and surname or initials is very low (only 9 or 4.3 %), as opposed to 187 news items (or 90.3 %) **without an author**, while 11 news items (5.3%) were taken over from other portals (Telegraf), television stations (TV Shenja, TV 21, Alsat M, TV Klan) and news agencies (MIA, META). Thematically, similarly to the previously analysed periods, domestic politics is the most prevalent topic (111 news items or 53.6%), with foreign policy, crime, corruption and economy lagging far behind. The focus on domestic politics is on the upcoming elections, the country's EU integration, the establishing of the caretaker government, the local self-government. The number of news items having a secondary topic apart from the main topic is low, and even the secondary topic also refers to domestic politics.

Frequency of harmful narratives in online media

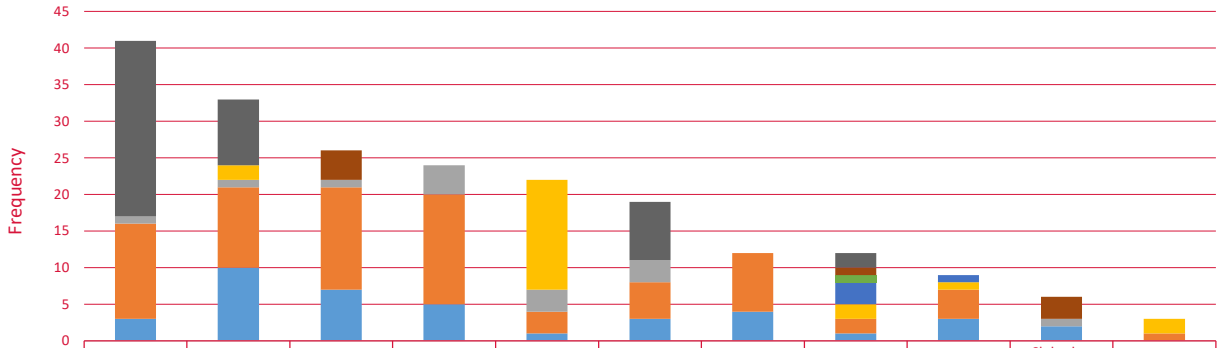
The portals with the largest number of news items with harmful narratives, similarly to the previous period of analysis, are Republika and Kurir (with 41 and 33 news items respectively), which compete for the first place from time to time, followed by Vecher.mk, A1on and Almakos, while the fewest news items with harmful narratives are in Sloboden Pechat and Nova TV.

Table 17. News items containing harmful narratives



In terms of genre, as a constant, the most common are party press releases, the reporting of politicians' speeches, their Facebook posts, interviews given to other media and the press conferences. Vecher.mk (in 14 out of a total of 26 news items), A1on (15 out of a total of 24 news items), Kurir (10 out of a total of 33 news items) and MKD.mk (8 out of a total of 12 news items) have the highest number of reported press releases. In **Kurir**, there is almost equally prevalence of party press releases (11 out of a total of 33 news items), politicians' speeches (10 out of a total of 33 news items) and reported interviews, Facebook posts and press conferences of political actors (9 out of a total of 33 news items), thus **the overall information on this portal about political actors (30 out of a total of 33 news items analysed) 'relies' almost exclusively on reporting /taking over press** releases, reactions, speeches, interviews, debates of current political subjects, most of the time coming **from the VMRO-DPMNE party** and its members. When it comes to **Republika**, apart from press releases (13 out of a total of 41 news items), they give most space to reporting interviews, Facebook posts and press conferences (23 out of a total of 41 news items), and those are mainly aimed at following and informing about the activities of political parties and their presidents (**above all VMRO-DPMNE**, its members, spokespersons, MPs, mayors). In comparison, in **the Lokalno portal** almost half (8 news items) out of a total of 19 news items with harmful narratives, refer to conducted interviews, press conferences of **the VMRO-DPMNE party** and its president (5 news items), and the rest (3 news items) press conference of the SDSM party and its president/Prime Minister, while in **Kurir**, out of a total of 23 of this type of news items, all, without an exception are from press conferences or taken from interviews on TV stations of members, spokespersons and MPs of **VMRO-DPMNE**. Almakos stands out in particular with the highest number of reports (15 out of a total of 22 news items).

Table 18. News items containing harmful narratives by genre



	Republika	Kurir	Vecher MK	A1on	Almakos	Lokalno	MKD.mk	Nezavisen	Tetova Sot	Sloboden Pechat	Nova TV
Other	24	9	0	0	0	8	0	2	0	0	0
Interview	0	0	4	0	0	0	0	1	0	3	0
Comment	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Analysis/comment	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0
Analytical reportage news item	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	3	1	0	0
Report	0	2	0	0	15	0	0	2	1	0	2
News/News with a statement	1	1	1	4	3	3	0	0	0	1	0
Reported press release	13	11	14	15	3	5	8	2	4	0	1
Reported speech of a politician	3	10	7	5	1	3	4	1	3	2	0

Thematically, domestic politics dominates all of the internet portals most prominently Vecer.mk and Republika, but also Kurir and Almakos. Even when it comes to the portals with the least number of news items with harmful narratives, such as Nova TV and Sloboden Pechat, domestic politics is almost exclusively the main topic of interest. Other topics, such as foreign policy, crime or corruption are far less prevalent, while education, social policy, and especially culture are almost completely neglected. Political entities, and hence the media, mostly communicate with the public and inform them about everything that happens in the area of domestic politics.

This month too, just like in the previously monitored ones (September, October and November), **the presentation of the topics** - the issues related to domestic politics, regardless of whether they are views, statements of political subjects or press-releases, views, reactions of their political parties - usually follows a standard format. **In the headlines of the news items, almost regularly, the main actor is given front position (the party or its president, member, spokesperson, MP) with one 'punchline' extracted from his/her position, a statement on a speci(c issue which is also visually supported, usually with a current or archival photo of the main actor.** This is followed by a short text - the content of the topic, what the actor or the political party says, points out, urges on. Often, these news items are so short (from two to three paragraphs) that they practically have no content, but what is more important and attracts the attention of the reader is precisely the sensationalist headline (so-called clickbait-headline) which contains a harmful narrative. But what is indisputable is that in this way the media goes beyond the scope of professional reporting. A few examples:

- *Mickoski: The sycophants of the government, while at the same time courting the international community, keep on stealing to their hearts' content.* News item with excerpts from Hristijan Mickoski's guest appearance in the show '360 Degrees' on MTV 1, consisting of three short paragraphs about crime, corruption and the dysfunctionality of institutions in the state **(Vecher.mk, 18.12.2023). The same news item, with the same headline and content, was published on the same day in the online media outlet Republika.**
- *Zdravkovska: A catastrophe of huge proportions, a natural disaster of an unprecedented kind - it is the SDS government with a DUI, with a subheading Citizens keep asking, are there serious problems with discipline in the prisons, and are the physical confrontations frequent?* It is impossible to understand what the news item is about by just reading the headline and subheading and one would need to read the entire text (or watch the video) to understand that it is a press conference of VMRO-DPMNE's Municipal Committee Bitola, directed at the Director ('from SDS') of the prison in Bitola, about the reconstruction of the prison, the physical confrontations in it and the use and trafficking of drugs. (**Kurir, 2.12.2023**)

- Miteva: *Kovachevski's and Ahmeti's crime is the reason for Macedonia blockade on the road to EU.* Press release from VMRO-DPMNE spokeswoman Marija Miteva's press conference about *the foreign policy, crime and corruption of Kovachevski and Ahmeti, which earned Macedonia a new blockade* (**Republika, 18.12.2023**).
- *There are no negotiations because of the crime and corruption of these bandits in power.* A text created based on the guest appearance of the vice-president of VMRO-DPMNE, Aleksandar Nikoloski, in the program 'ClickPlus' on TV 21. The news item has only two paragraphs about the problem with the rule of law and corruption as reasons why the negotiations with the EU have not started (**Vecher.mk, 14.12.2023**).
- *VMRO-DPMNE: Macedonia has no progress towards the EU due to unemployment and crime.* News item which has nothing to do with the content of the text, and is actually VMRO-DPMNE's reaction of to the guest appearance of Prime Minister Kovachevski in the programme 'Studio 10', consisting of a few short sentences, quoted and paraphrased, about European integration into the EU and the hurdles on the road to Europe (**Lokalno, 12/18/2023**).
- SDSM: A new scandal is shaking DPMNE and Mickoski, the president of local party committee caught with cocaine. News item, a press release by SDSM, consisting of 7-8 very brief sentences about an associate of the Mayor of Ohrid and Mickoski, detained for possession of items with cocaine (source, **A1on. 10.12.2023**). **The same news item, on the same day, but with a different headline** *SDSM: A close associate of Mickoski caught snorting cocaine in a café was also published by* **Lokalno**.
- *VMRO-DPMNE: Kovachevski is not giving up on the caretaker government, he is obsessively fighting for the criminalized DUI to get the position of a Prime Minister.* A short text, consisting of two paragraphs, based on VMRO-DPMNE's press release about the corrupt government and blocked municipalities (**Republika, 2.12.2023**).

With regards to the issue of **the cause of publication** of this information, the monitoring determined that almost half of the analysed news items that contained harmful narratives **are pseudo-events (90 news items or 43.5 %)**, i.e. press releases, press conferences, statements, reactions of political entities, planned and created to attract the media attention and ensure publicity of the Government, a political party, a political leader, a minister, a public figure. The guest appearances and interviews of political actors in other media outlets need to be added to this number (above all those on TV stations), i.e. 14 news items (or 6.8 %), which adds up to a number of 104 news items, i.e. 50.3 % of all analysed news items, which **clearly speaks about the participation of political entities in the creation, and 'designing' of media content with harmful narratives.** This is followed by current affairs and planned events (56 news items or 27.0%) and social developments (44 news items or 21.3%). From the analysed online-media outlets, pseudo-events are most common with Republika, Vecher.mk and Kurir, which is understandable, because they have the largest number of reported press releases of political entities, broadcasted politicians' speeches, Facebook posts, interviews given to other media and press-conferences.

The political actors in the analysed news items

Political actors have different prevalence in the news items with harmful narratives, and those with two actors dominate (55 news items or 26.6 %), followed by those with three (37 or 17.9 %) and four (30 or 14.5 %) actors. If we take a look at the portals, Republika, Kurir and Vecher.mk stand out. In Kurir, all analysed news items are with two actors, in Vecher.mk the largest number of news items are with a single actor (18 out of a total of 26), which is expected because they have the largest number of news items with a broadcasted politician's speech and a political party press release, while in Republika, the news items with three actors are the most prevalent (15 news items), followed by those also with four (9 news items) and five actors (8 news items). In portals with a smaller number of analysed news items, for example, in Lokalno and Mkd.mk there are usually three actors, five actors in the news items of A1on, four in those by Almakos.

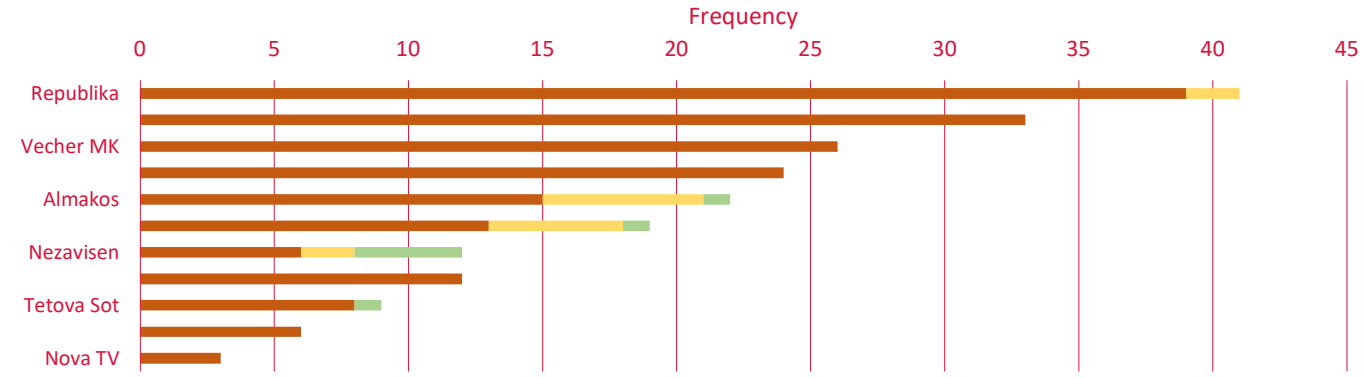
In doing so, the entire narrative/story revolves around several individual groups or collective actors who change places at the top of the 'the pyramid', from time to time, depending, first of all, on what is currently most relevant on the political scene. This month, t**he most prevalent were the collective ones, VMRO-DPMNE, SDSM, the Government and DUI, and from the individual ones: VMRO-DPMNE's President Mickoski, Prime Minister Kovachevski and the Minister of Interior Spasovski** (first of all, related to the investigation into the murder of Vanja Gjorchevska and Panche Zhezhovski, the suspects and their party). The VMRO-DPMNE party is the most prevalent in the media, through numerous party press releases and press conferences and statements, interviews of its members, MPs, mayors. No special attributes were used for the political actors, but VMRO-DPMNE has an established practice to refer to its political opponent SDSM as 'SDS' and vice versa, SDSM to refer to its political opponent VMRO-DPMNE as 'DPMNE', ignoring the fact that the name (collective or individual) is an essential marker of its identity. This kind of approach is a regular practice in their party press releases, which in turn gets amplified when transferred to the online sphere.

When it comes to the prevalence of political actors, the portals have a different approach, but their quotes and observations in context of the topic are still dominant. Of the portals with the largest number of news items with harmful narratives, Republika and Vecher mostly talk about the actors in the context of the topic, and Kurir with an almost equal frequency quotes, paraphrases and talks about the actors in the context of the topic. This also applies to Almakos and Tetova Sot. In Lokalno and Nezavisen, the actors are mostly discussed in the context of the topic, but they are often quoted, while in A1on, Sloboden Pechat and MKD.mk, the actors are mostly discussed in the context of the topic. At the same time, the portals have different access and attitudes towards the political actors. Cumulatively, the most numerous are the negative attitudes from another political entity, and the journalist usually takes the role of a 'neutral informer'. In particular, in Kurir, the journalist is mostly neutral, and the negative attitudes towards the SDSM/DUI Government, Minister Spasovski and SDSM, are Levica's or someone else's. In Vecher.mk and Republika there is no evident attitude of the journalist, but the negative attitudes dominate stated by someone else, primarily towards SDSM/DUI Government, Minister Spasovski. In Tetova Sot, the journalist occasionally expresses a neutral assessment, while negative ones are expressed by others, and they are directed to SDSM, DUI and VMRO-DPMNE. In Almakos, the journalist usually has a neutral attitude, and the attitudes are expressed by others, mostly negative towards VMRO-DPMNE, the Government, DUI and a few positive ones (towards the Government, again) or neutral (towards SDSM). Lokalno and Nezavisen are also dominated by negative assessments coming from another entity, addressed most frequently to SDSM and VMRO-DPMNE. In Sloboden Pechat, the journalist does not make assessments but negative assessments from other entities are prevalent, directed towards VMRO-DPMNE, in A1on the negative assessment is aimed at the SDSM and DUI Government, but also at VMRO-DPMNE, and in MKD.mk, mainly towards SDSM and DUI.

Lack of professional journalism

A common feature of all analysed online media outlets is the one-sided information. In as many as 188 news items (or 90.8%) out of a total of 207 monitored, the portals consulted only one side, and occasionally two or more sides. This applies both to Republika, Kurir and Vecher.mk as portals with the largest number of news items with harmful narratives, **as well as the portals with a far smaller number of such news items**. Moreover, in Vecher.mk (26 news items) and Kurir (33 news items) all analysed news items have only one side, and the same picture is painted in MKD.mk (in 12 out of 12 analysed news items) and Sloboden Pechat (in 6 out of all 6 analysed news items). Furthermore, as expected, and above all because of the dominance of both '**hybrid' genre forms (reported press release and reported politician's speech), the portals mainly rely on one source of information. Such are 185 news items (or 89.4 %)**, and in Kurir, Vecher.mk, A1on, Mkd.mk, Sloboden Pechat the one and only source is the main actor. Examples with two, three and more sources, such as Almakos, Lokalno and Nezavisen, are rare.

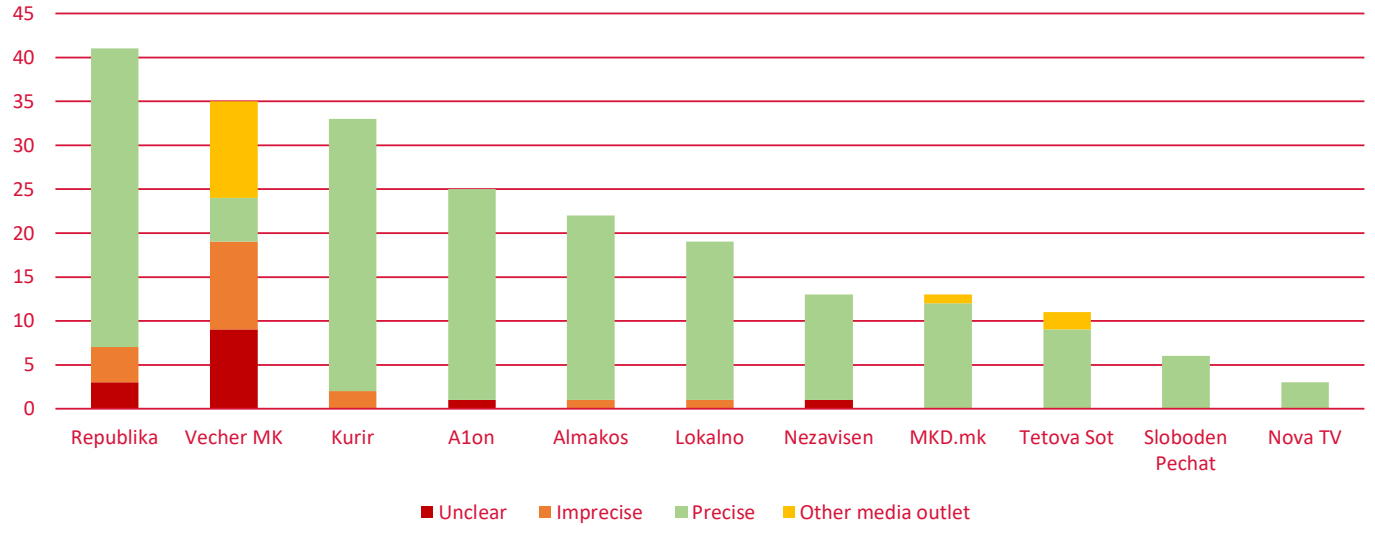
Table 19. Number of sources by online media outlet



	Nova TV	Sloboden Pechat	Tetova Sot	MKD.mk	Nezavisen	Lokalno	Almakos	A1on	Vecher MK	Kurir	Republika
One	3	6	8	12	6	13	15	24	26	33	39
Two	0	0	0	0	2	5	6	0	0	0	2
Three and more	0	0	1	0	4	1	1	0	0	0	0

The conclusion is the same when it comes to the type of source in the analysed news items. Among all portals, the most numerous are precise sources of information (175), and there are far fewer unclear or imprecise ones, as well as other media as a source (46 in total). An exception to this is Vecher.mk, where the vague, imprecise sources from other media are almost evenly distributed, and there are least accurate sources, as well as Republika, where in addition to the most numerous precise sources, the occasional vague or imprecise source can also be noted. Sloboden Pechat stands out where out of 6 news items analysed with harmful narratives all 6 have a precise source. The graph depicting this can be found below:

Table 20. Type of sources by online media outlets



Regarding the **visualization of the analysed news items**, there was no news item that did not feature a photo (one or more), a video statement, or another type of a visual element. Archive (126) and current photos (74) were most commonly used, followed by current video statements, above all from press conferences (30), and occasionally charts, or even edited photographs. Such is the example with the text - Mickoski: *The investigation on Vanja started too late, I have serious information about what I am claiming,* with a photo 'collage' of several photos from the crime scene, and the murdered Vanja in the middle the photo, an event that the entire Macedonian public was informed about in detail (Republika, 6.12.2023). Here, the photo undoubtedly further reinforces the headline and the reader of the text will look for the additional information that Mickoski claims to have. But in the content there is none of that, 'so that (Mickoski and the party) would

not interfere and influence the process at all or risk being misunderstood', that is, the headline is also manipulative. But more importantly, and regardless of the technical tools that are available for it, the editing or technical manipulation of photos in the media sphere is serious business. Or, the news item *WHERE DOES DIMITAR KOVACHEVSKI LIVE, certainly not in Macedonia and Europe. He says: WE HAVE OBLIGATIONS TO BULGARIA* (the parts of the headline written in capital letters are taken as presented by the portal), where under the headline there is a photo of Prime Minister Kovachevski, technically manipulated by adding a moustache to his face. At the same time, in neither of these two photos, nor in the largest number of analysed news items, were the photos credited, with the exception of Sloboden Pechat, **where each photo is credited, and Nezavisen, where most of the photos are credited, but there are also uncredited photos.**

Dominant harmful political narratives

The number of **207 news items with harmful narratives identi(ed in the analysis, and articulated in 339 posts (words, sentences, paragraphs, formulations)** both in the headline and in the body of these news items and compared to the previous monitored months, it unequivocally tells us that **this political narrative is well-established and persistently exists in the online-media outlets, and above all, in Republika, Kurir and Vecher.mk.** Like previously, it is mainly concentrated on unverified findings (or findings that can hardly be verified) as a basis for accusing political opponents (110 cases); claims of corruption, impartiality/dishonesty, unprofessionalism, abuse of office, without attempting to substantiate those claims (72 cases); labelling, mocking and grossly disrespecting other people, use of demeaning words (51 cases), as well as words and formulations that denigrate a certain group of people in order to cause division and discord between 'us' and 'them' (40 cases). That is, we are talking about news items/posts that undermine the trust, are based on biased attitudes, attack and defame a certain person, spread populism, incite division and spread insecurity.

At the same time, the **practice of amplifying one news item from one event (most often an interview or debate show) and 'repackaging' it into two or more texts** on separate issues on which the politician, the MP, the president of the party expressed an opinion, continues. This is most frequently observed in **Republika, Kurir, Vecer.mk,** but sometimes also in portals with a lower number of news items with harmful narratives. This type of approach, in itself, as a form of information, leaves open space for the harmful narratives to be multiplied, and the media itself directly participates in that process, in addition to the political actor, A few typical examples:

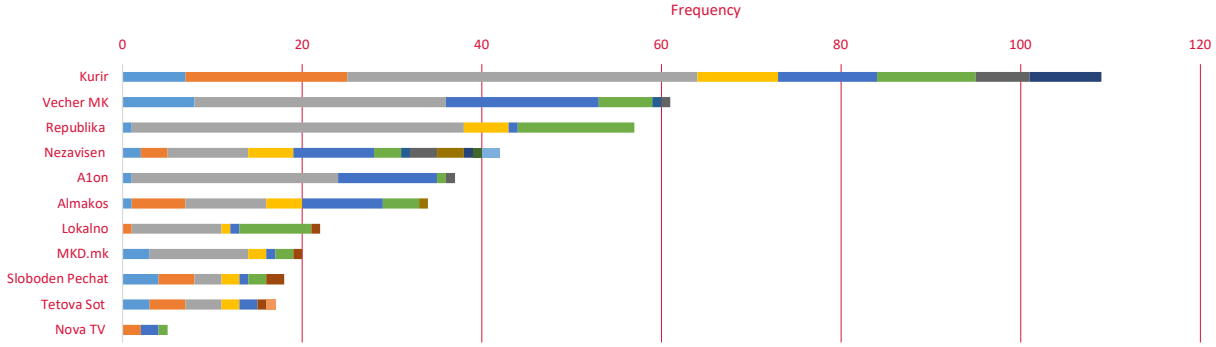
The portal **Kurir** in two news items published on 2 December, 2023, broadcasts parts of the interview with a member of VMRO-DPMNE, Vlatko Gjorchev, about 'Topic of the day' in the central news edition on Sitel TV. In one news item titled, *Gjorchev: We want to join the EU, but the EU should say that it is ready for enlargement – enough concessions, good neighbourliness should be mutual,* says that VMRO-DPMNE wants Macedonia to join the EU, *but the policy of the misunderstood brokers SDS and DUI is what put us a situation where Macedonia constantly gives concessions at the expense of the Macedonian people.* In the second text with the headline, *Gjorchev: SDS were worried out of their mind when the budget was 3 billion, and then VMRO-DPMNE built and invested with that money, now that the budget is almost 6 billion euros, nothing has been done, we're only piling up debt,* with the subheading *The state is getting empty now, we are running out of youth, we have no economy, the Government is corrupt and we have to turn the tide in order to preserve Macedonia.*

The portal **Vecher.mk, using the guest appearance of the vice-president of VMRO-DPMNE, Vlado Misajlovski in the show** 'In Favour or Against' on Alfa television, made two texts published on 18.12.2023. One with the headline Misajlovski: *The only party that can have a huge victory and get 61 MPs in the upcoming parliamentary elections is VMRO-DPMNE,* and the second Misajlovski: *There is no start of the negotiations with the EU because of the crime and corruption of the government.* The choice of these two headlines, as well as the contents, indicate a one-sided, provocative and biased selection of information, which are subserviently broadcasted.

The portal **Lokalno**, in two news items, published on 6/12/2023, 'places' Hristijan Mickoski's statements given in the show 'Shenja's Interview' on TV Shenja about the investigation into the murder of Vanja Gjorchevska and Panche Zhezhovski. The first one is under the headline Mickoski: *Because of impunity, we end up with characters like Palcho,* where he talks about the insults and hate speech directed at him and the impunity of the institutions, and the second Mickoski: *The investigation of Vanja started too late,* with an emphasis on the flaws in the investigation itself. Both news items are very short. At the same time, in the first news item, it is clear that those are Mickoski's views broadcasted from a television show, and the second is actually a press release by VMRO-DPMNE from the same television show. And that's what the 'trick' is: although the headlines of the news items refer to the main actor in the story, his views on a certain issue/problem were taken from another media outlet or communicated by his party.

In all online media outlets, regardless of the number of news items with harmful narratives, the undermining of trust in institutions is more prevalent, followed by – just like in the previously monitored months - **biased attitudes, as well as attacks on a certain person and their defamation.** The graph with the findings is given below:

Table 21: Presence of harmful narratives in news items in online media outlets



	Nova TV	Tetova Sot	Sloboden Pechat	MKD.mk	Lokalno	Almakos	A1on	Nezavisen	Republika	Vecher MK	Kurir
Disinformation	0	3	4	3	0	1	1	2	1	8	7
Fomenting divisions	2	4	4	0	1	6	0	3	0	0	18
Undermining of trust	0	4	3	11	10	9	23	9	37	28	39
Populism	0	2	2	2	1	4	0	5	5	0	9
Biased selection	2	2	1	1	1	9	11	9	1	17	11
Character attacks, demonization	1	0	2	2	8	4	1	3	13	6	11
Manipulative Audio-visual media content	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	1	0
Foreign influence	0	1	2	1	1	0	0	0	0	0	0
Spreading panic, fear and insecurity	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	3	0	1	6
Extreme patriotism, nationalism	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	3	0	0	0
Hate speech	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	8
Sexism	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0
Conspiracy theories	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	2	0	0	0
Ethnocentrism	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0

The Republika portal is at the top of the list of news items with harmful narratives (41 news items) and most often, with 37 posts (sentences, paragraphs, parts of texts), they attempt to undermine the trust in the institutions, followed by attacks on certain political figures (13 posts). For example, in the news item *Misajlovski: We are constantly talking with the citizens, what they need most will be in VMRO-DPMNE's programme,* with excerpts from VMRO-DPMNE's vice-president, Vlado Misajlovski's appearance on MRT 1, where he, in contrast to the praise for his party, which had always been 'project-oriented' and delivered what they promised, attacked SDSM for promising, but then not delivering *seven years later we realised that they were incompetent and it was time for them to go* (Republika, 26.12.2023). **The same news item, with the same headline and text, and on the same day, was published by Kurir and numerous other portals.** Hristijan Mickoski speaks about the Government as 'a flatterer of the international community that steals and does evil to its own country in the name of Europe', in the news item *Mickoski: The sycophants from the government while courting the international community.* In fact, only one short paragraph from the entire interview from Mickoski's appearance in the '360 Degrees' show on MTV 1 was taken, with the same words from the headline (Republika, 18.12.2023).

The Kurir portal ranks second on the list (with 33 news items with harmful narratives) and has the highest number of posts undermining the trust in the institutions (39 posts), but they have the highest number of news items (compared to all the analysed portals) that foment divisions in society (18 posts), and they often have biased selection (11 posts) and attacks on a certain political figures (11 posts). In the text *It is not because of VMRO-DPMNE that Macedonia did not start the negotiations, but because of the crime and corruption in the Government,* in VMRO-DPMNE's statement-reaction to Prime Minister Kovachevski for not staring the EU membership negotiations, with a few short paragraphs, he shifts the blame to the Government, to *the epidemic of corruption, the unpunished crime, the expansion of Kovachevski's and his best man's businesses and the developments in the judiciary and the Prosecutor's Office, for which SDSM and DUI are to blame* (source, Kurir, 14.12.2023). Or, the news item Lefkov: *In Macedonia, the basic problem is crime, and it spreads like cancer with the help of this Government,* by broadcasting the statements of Mile Lefkov, MP from the ranks of VMRO-DPMNE, from the podcast on Radio 'Leader', where he pointed out that we have a Government and administration that not only fails (is incapable) to save itself from crime but also causes it to spread like cancer (Kurir, 6.12.2023).

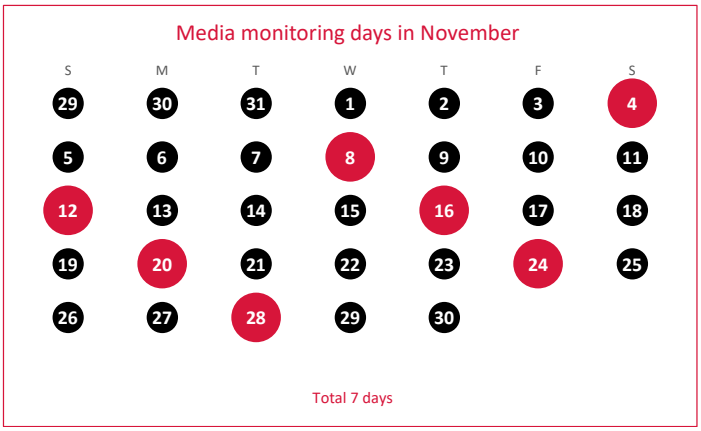
The harmful narratives that dominate in **Vecher.mk** are undermining the trust in the institutions (28 posts) and biased selection (18 posts). In the news item *The image of this Government is tenders behind closed doors, crime, corruption,* VMRO-DPMNE's press release, the government is characterized as *incompetent and arrogant DUI's Government, with SDS as a subcontractor, which has been pushing the country into an abyss for 8 years* (source, Vecer MK, 6.12.2023). Or, the news item *There are no negotiations because of the crime and corruption of these bandits in power,* in which parts of the statement of the vice-president of VMRO-DPMNE, Aleksandar Nikolovski, are quoted in the show 'Click Plus' on TV 21, where he expresses pride that *he brought to light the bandits in power* and that the reason why the negotiations have not started is not Bulgaria, nor the constitutional amendments, but the problem with the rule of law (source, Vecer.mk, 14.12.2023). The news item: *The servant Kovachevski will stand up so that the OWNER OF DUI, TALAT can sit down.* (where the second part of the title is in capital letters), is even more striking, coming from VMRO-DPMNE's party press release where in the attributes from the headline are distributed to the two main actors in the news item as a master and servant respectively. Further on in the text, both of them are 'deserters', and finally their parties are qualified 'crime lair', which have turned the prime minister's seat into an embezzlement lair, and made the country hostage to party bargaining. (Vecer.mk, 10.12.2023).

In the other portals, for example, **A1on**, in the news item – VMRO-DPMNE's press release: *The corruption epidemic took away 500 million dollars, pointed out that Macedonia is drowning in crime, and this is done at the top government levels, while the Ministry of the Interior, the Financial Police Administration, the Customs Administration, the Public Revenues Office, the Financial Intelligence Administration were directly singled out as bodies that have under the structures of SDS and DUI for 7 years and where impunity had rained for 7 years.* On the other hand, the portal also reports SDSM's press release, *SDSM: DPMNE is a nest and shelter of drug dealers, they are a danger to children,* with serious accusations (in two short passages) against the party and Mickoski, calling them a 'shelter of drug dealers' (A1on, 14.12.2023). Or, the news item in MKD.mk, *VMRO-DPMNE: This government will be decisively defeated, because of crime, corruption, defeats,* quotes the party's press-release in full, with a few sentences mentioning the merging of the parliamentary and presidential elections. It reads that what is typical of this *Government are tenders behind closed door, crime, blacklists, corruption from the lowest to the top tiers, a collapsed economy, poverty and rampant inflation* (MKD.mk, 6.12.2023).

The **Lokalno** portal in the news item *Kovachevski: Today and yesterday in Brussels we experienced the same scenario like in Bucharest 2008* (no author specified), where Prime Minister Kovachevski is quoted and paraphrased in a few sparse paragraphs from the summit of the European Union - Western Balkans in Brussels, dedicated to the EU enlargement, telling the journalists attending the event that the country's only obstacle in that area is the *anti-EU and anti-NATO, pro-Russian coalition of VMRO-DPMNE and Levica* (Lokalno,14.12.2023). These accusations, labelling and attacks on these two parties, although they have

never publicly stated that they are against EU membership, can be found in numerous other media outlets and portals. Thus, the **Sloboden Pechat** portal, from the very headline of the news item: *Kovachevski: Our place is in the EU and we shall not take a detour from that process, VMRO-DPMNE and Levica are the biggest obstacles on the country's road* (with the author's initials) refers to the obstacles on the road to Europe, and in the text Kovachevski explains that there are two blocks, one that advocates for integration of the state in the EU, and a second one, that now works against EU integration, and previously worked against the country's integration into NATO. There is no mention of an anti-EU and anti-NATO and pro-Russian coalition between VMRO-DPMNE and Levica (Sloboden Pechat, 14.12.2023). In the **Nezavisen** news item on the same event, the headline is *Enough with the deceptions: Kovachevski on the possible change in the negotiation framework* (the source is MIA) with a subheading T*he Prime Minister said from Brussels that if it had not been for the blockade of VMRO-DPMNE and Levica, Macedonia would have already been on the fast track to the EU,* hinting, and later at the press conference, openly stating that the only hurdle on the country's road to EU is the anti-EU and anti-NATO and pro-Russian coalition of VMRO-DPMNE and Levica (Nezavisen, 14.12.2023).

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



In November, the central news blocks of 9 national TV stations were analysed on the following days: 4, 8, 12, 16, 20, 24 and 28 November (7 days in total).

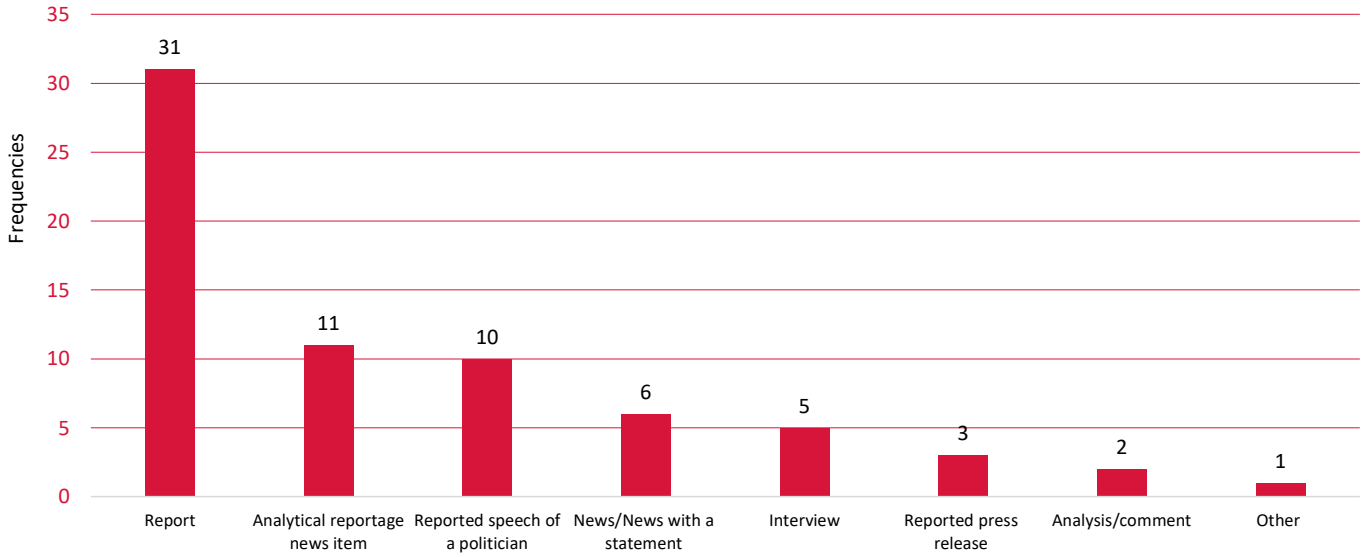
Report for November 2023

In November, a total of 69 news items were recorded that contained one or more harmful narratives. This figure does not terribly stand out compared to the October analysis when 66 such news items were identified. In contrast to October, when more than half of the news items containing harmful narratives (34 or 51.5%) were registered as being aired by TV Alfa, the distribution of news items in November was much more balanced. Indeed, 16 news items with harmful narratives were identified in TV Alfa (23.2 %), a total of 12 (17.4 %) in MTV 1, there were 11 at MTV 2 (15.9 %), a total of 10 (14.5 %) aired by TV 2, at Kanal 5 TV there were 8 (11.6%), while TV Sitel, TV Telma and TV Alsat M each had 4 news items with harmful narratives (each of them accounting for 5.8%).

There is also an even distribution by days, i.e. not a single day stands out too much by the number of news items with harmful narratives. The highest number of news items of this kind were registered on 8 November (14 news items or 20.3 %), followed by 28 November with 12 news items (or 17.4 %) i.e. the Day of the Albanian Flag, while on 4 and 20 November, 10 news items were registered each (or 20.3 %) etc.

Out of the registered news items with harmful narratives, the largest number or 31 news items (44.9 %) belong to the genre of TV report, while 11 (15.9 %) to the analytical-report genre.

Table 22. Presence of news items containing harmful narratives on TV stations by genre



What is remarkable is the very high number **of news items where only a politician's speech, or a party press release is reported (a total of 13 such news items or 18.8%)**. This media anomaly, which is more typical of other media (above all online media) has little in common with the professional standards in journalism. Reporting speeches or press releases of political actors, the content of which abounds with allegations of corruption, unprofessional work and discreditation of political opponents, without analysing their content, to verify the claims, or to present the other side, is a typical of tendentious and unprofessional journalism. In addition, through this practice, the media space is open to political parties for unhindered promotion of their own agenda and spreading of their ideology.

More than half, or 41 of the total 69 news items were announced at the beginning of the news, which is an indicator that those news items were often singled out as the most important of the day. In a total of 14 news items, the harmful narrative also occurs in the promo announcement of the news item itself.

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

Domestic politics, just like the previous months (September and October) once again proved to be fertile ground for spreading harmful narratives: almost 2/3 (44 or 63.8 %) came from domestic developments. Second in order comes the economy (7 news items or 10.1 %), followed by healthcare, justice and foreign policy with 4 news items each, etc. The most common topics are those related to the EU-integrations and the report of the European Commission, the developments in the case with the Radiotherapy and Oncology Clinic and the work of the Inquiry Commission in the Assembly on this case, as well as the elections and the establishing of caretaker government.

The actors which dominate these features, but also generally receive the most space in the first minutes of primetime TV news-stations, **belong to the three largest political parties: SDSM, VMRO-DPMNE and DUI.** They are either the party presidents, spokespersons, ministers and MPs from their ranks. The monitoring showed that they are mostly addressed with their official functions, so this month no frequent occurrences of offensive or derogatory names for the actors were identified.

What is susceptible to analysis is the way in which TV Alfa, the television station with the highest number of news items with harmful narratives (16), presents the actors in the news. Very often, **Hristijan Mickoski**, the president of VMRO-DPMNE, **is mentioned as the (rst actor in TV Alfa news block**, (in 5 out of 16 news

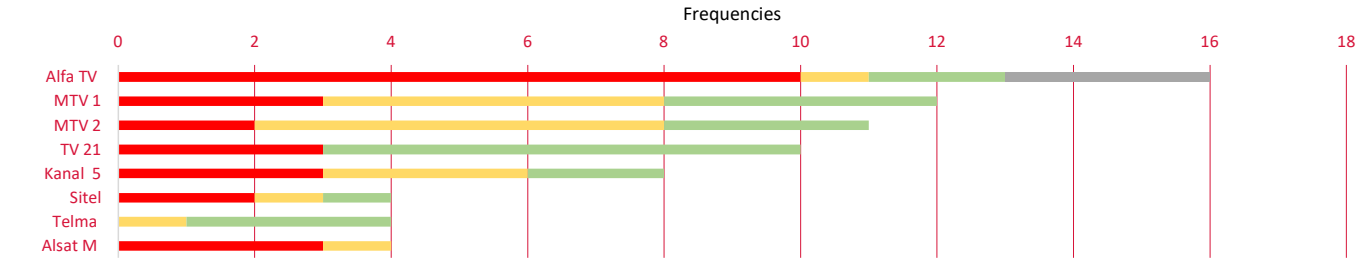
items). He is usually named here as 'leader', 'leader of the opposition' or 'leader of the party': *Party Leader Hristijan Mickoski accused both political parties in the government that they are against a higher standard for pensioners because only those few from their political elite are important to them.* (TV news headline, TV Alfa, 28 November, 2023). **Prime Minister Kovachevski appears much more often as a second actor in the analysed TV Alfa news items** and is often in relation to the SDSM party, less often as Prime Minister of the Government, but most frequently personified as a representative of the government. The case of **DUI** is interesting, which is often referred to **as 'Ahmeti's party'** in TV Alfa news items, which is not the case, for example, with SDSM and VMRO-DPMNE. By 'granting ownership' over the party to the party president autocracy is subtly being implied, i.e. lack of democracy in the party, whose decisions, according to the media, depend exclusively on its leader. *Although Ahmeti's party is the one that alarmed about the case, the Prime Minister pointed to Kasami, he had nothing to brag about in Tetovo, that's why he was now provoking.* (TV headline, TV Alfa, November 20, 2023).

Most often, the journalist's attitude towards the actors is neutral (TV Telma, TV Kanal 5, TV Sitel), but we also have cases when the journalist has a positive attitude towards the first actor, and a negative attitude towards the second or third one (TV Alsat M). Again, the case of TV Alfa is specific, as there is a lack of neutrality, i.e. a negative attitude of the journalist is expressed if the actor belongs to the government, the structures of the government, or the public institutions. So, in 9 occasions on Alfa TV the journalist or news anchor has a negative attitude towards the actors who in some way symbolize the Government or ruling structure (the authorities, the Government, Prime Minister Kovachevski, SDSM, DUI, etc.). In TV news headline from 20 November, the journalist says: *And the Prime Minister, who should be the helmsman among the equal respecters of the legal regulations, does not see a problem that the government's EU campaign will overlap with the period when the presidential elections will be announced, which represents abuse of public money.* (TV news headline, TV Alfa, 20 November, 2023). We have already noticed this relationship of favouritism, picking sides and non-objectivity in the reports for October and September. This practice is contrary to Article 14 of Code of Journalists which states that *reporting on political processes, especially elections, should be impartial and balanced. The journalist must establish professional distance from political entities.*[24]

When speaking about balanced and unbiased reporting, it is also very important what sources journalists use when providing information. The analysis for November shows us that **in 29 (42 %) out of a total of 69 news items in which a harmful narrative is identi(ed, there is either a single source or no source (the journalist appears as a source),** 18 news items (26.1 %) have 2 sources, while only 22 (31.9%) have 3 or more sources. Only TV Telma and TV 21 news items stand out in terms of sources, because in most cases they rely on 3 or more. On the other hand, the news items of Alsat M, Sitel, Kanal 5, and especially TV Alfa are mostly from one source. The analysed news items of TV Alfa show that in a total of 13 out of 16 cases, there was either one source or no sources were consulted at all. These news items are in fact comments by the journalist or editor, who analyse political developments without consulting any sources.

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

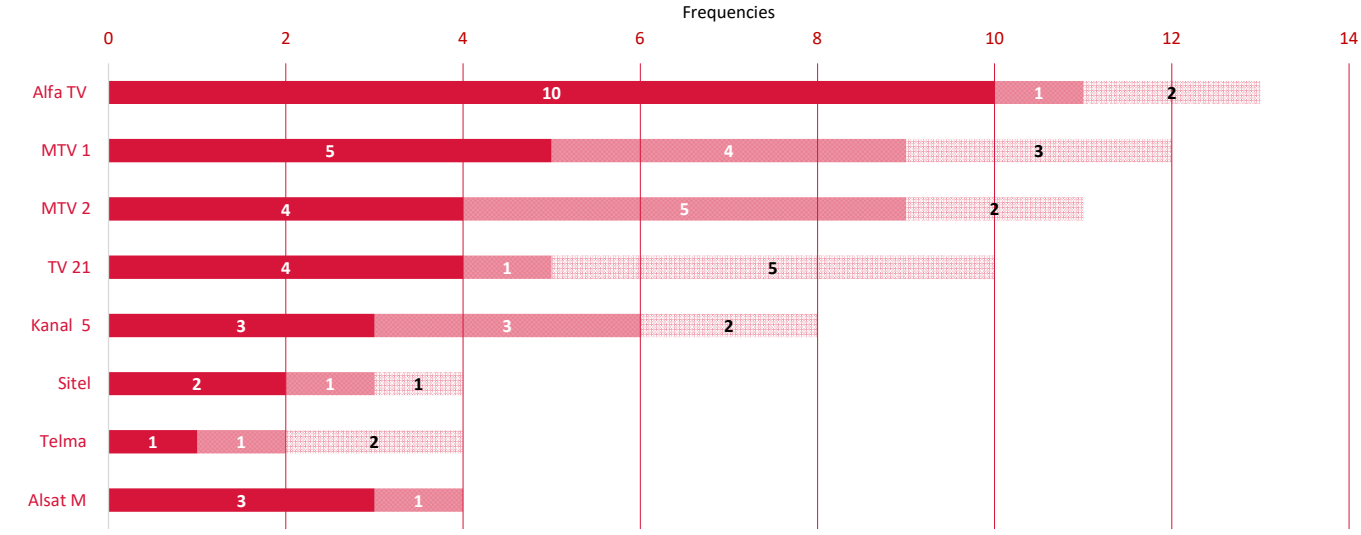
Table 23: Presentation of number of sources in TV news items which contain harmful narrative



	Alsat M	Telma	Sitel	Kanal 5	TV 21	MTV 2	MTV 1	Alfa TV
1	3	0	2	3	3	2	3	10
2	1	1	1	3	0	6	5	1
3 and more	0	3	1	2	7	3	4	2
No sources	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	3

The **presentation of the different sides in the news item** in is in a similar manner, that is, how the different stakeholders get the opportunity to be represented and show their side of the story. As with the use of sources, it is quite obvious here that at least these news items that have been registered as having harmful narratives are predominantly one-sided (32 news items or 46.4 %), while in 17 cases (24.6 %) show two sides and an equal number (17 news items or 24.6 %) show more (than two) sides to the story. One-sidedness seems to not be an issue only for TV Telma and TV 21, where most of the news items feature multiple sides, while in all the others there is either only one or two sides at most. At MTV 1, out of a total of 12 news items, as many as 5 included only one side, while 7 included two or more sides. The same goes for MTV 2, where 4 of the news items are one-sided, and 5 are two-sided. Again, the case of TV Alfa stands out, because as many as 10 news items are with only one side, while in only 2 cases the journalist consulted more than two sides their new item.

Table 24: Presented sides of the sources in news items which contain harmful narratives



	Alsat M	Telma	Sitel	Kanal 5	TV 21	MTV 2	MTV 1	Alfa TV
Only one side	3	1	2	3	4	4	5	10
Two sides	1	1	1	3	1	5	4	1
Several sides	0	2	1	2	5	2	3	2

This type of biased reporting, where not all sides are given the opportunity to present their version of the events, can be misleading for the viewer and lead to incomplete, wrong and one-sided views and conclusions. When we talk about news items where one of the actors produces harmful narratives, insults or slanders some of their political opponents, it is the obligation of the journalist and the media to consult the other side, i.e. to offer all points of view.

> *Journalists have an obligation to offer a broad range of viewpoints and perspectives within an appropriate time frame in a TV or radio programme, or series of texts in print or online media, in such a way that no significant viewpoint or perspective is deliberately left out or inadequately represented*[25]

Reason for the news items containing harmful narratives

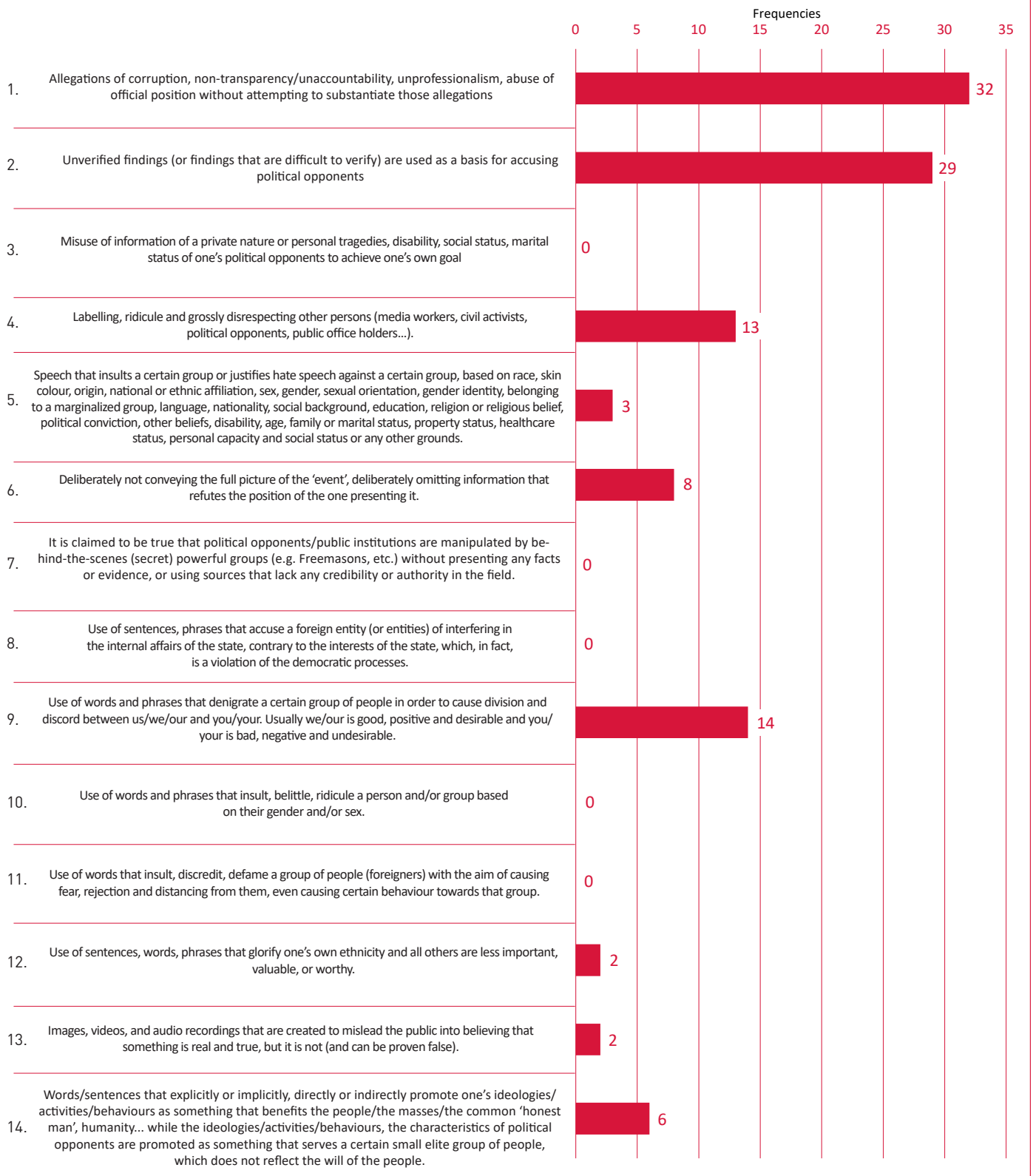
Social developments (28 news items or 40.6 %) and current affairs (20 news items or 29 %) are the triggers that most often lead to a total of 69 news items in which harmful narratives were registered in November. Pseudo-events come third (14 news items or 20.3 %), as events created for no other reason than to generate media attention and publicity. It was mainly TV Alfa (6 news items), followed by MTV 2 (3 news items) and TV 21 (2 news items) that enabled political actors, through such pseudo-events, to get the media space to promote their views unhindered, and in cases like this, to also to attack their political rivals.

The most common harmful narratives

In November, the most commonly identified news items were the ones that containing claims of corruption, non-accountability, unprofessionalism, abuse of office without any attempt to substantiate those claims (32 cases), while the second place was for news items related to unverified findings (or findings that are difficult to verify) that are used as a basis for accusing political opponents (29 cases in total).

25 Excerpt from the Handbook on Public Interest in Journalism, Skopje, 2016.

Table 25. Presence of indicators of harmful narratives in TV news items



This is followed by cases using **words and phrases that denigrate a certain group of people in order to cause division and discord between 'us and them' (14) and news items related to labelling, mocking and grossly disrespecting other persons and the use of demeaning words** (13). We also need to mention the news items related to intentionally withholding information in order to avoid painting the full picture of the 'event' and intentionally leaving out information refuting the position of the person presenting it (8), while the

rest of the categories are found in smaller numbers.[26] *DPMNE and Mizrahi showed that their goal with the Commission was not the truth at all, it was not patient care at all. They had no intention of doing anything, except politically abusing the Commission for spreading lies and untruths and manipulation of citizens. The public and we as MPs doubt that DPMNE's intention is to obstruct the investigation of the competent institutions which is under way, and hinder it - declared the SDSM MP.* (TV Telma, November 28, 2023)

This type of news item creates and promotes various types of harmful narratives. Undermining the trust in the system, the institutions or political actors comes first among them (58 cases), followed by biased selection (22), disinformation (15), character attacks and demonization (14), fomenting divisions (14); populism (6); spreading panic and fear (3), hate speech (3), manipulative audio-visual content (deep fakes) (2), etc.

Table 26. Presentation of the connection of the indicators with the harmful narratives in all announcements for all televisions

Indicator	Total number of posts where the indicator is present	Disinformation	Undermining trust	Biased selection	Character attacks, Demonization	Hate speech	Manipulative Audio-visual media content	Fomenting divisions	Spreading panic, fear and insecurity	Ethnocentrism	Extreme patriotism	Populism
1	32	7	31	6								
2	29	8	25	9								
4	13				13							
5	3					3						
6	8		2	7			1					
9	14							14	2			
12	2									2	1	
13	2				1		1		1			
14	6											6
Ranking		**III**	**I**	**II**	**IV**	**VI**	**VII**	**IV**	**VI**	**VII**	**VIII**	**V**

In the analysis for November, once again, various actors were identified in the media when **it comes to who is responsible for creating the harmful narratives**. In the majority of media, with the exception of Alfa TV, **it is the politicians who are responsible for creating the harmful narrative**, while journalists either broadcasting it without any intervention or (quite rarely) point it out, but do not take any position. In the case of TV Alfa, we found that out of 16 reports, in which a total of 23 harmful narratives occur, the journalist was responsible for creating as many as 9 of them, while the political actor was responsible for 14. We also see similar cases at MTV 2, where the journalist was responsible for creating harmful narratives in two cases.

26 It should be noted that a single news item may contain more than a single indicator of creating harmful narratives, so the number of indicators for harmful narratives is greater than the total of 69 registered news items.

Lack of professional detachment, favouring certain political entities at the expense of political opponents goes against the ethical standards of the profession and contradicts professional journalism. One such example is the news item published on November 28, in which the journalist comments on the economic measures of the Government calling them 'a way to bribe the citizens':

Measures for pre-electoral bribery of citizens. Six months before they are due to face the citizens (at the elections), the Government announces aid for young people, pensioners, farmers, socially vulnerable categories, companies. This follows after almost all of Macedonia has been on its feet for months, and there are protests almost every day. The government packaged the aid in a set of 26 anti-crisis measures, but what is more than symptomatically here is that they are doing all this just a few months before the elections and at a time when their ratings are plunging. (**Alfa TV, 28 November, 2023**)

MTV 1

In the total of 12 'harmful' news items that were registered in the news bloc on MTV 1, the most common harmful narratives were: undermining the trust (8) and biased attitudes (4). In these reports, the journalist was not the one who created the harmful narratives, but only aired them. In these news items, we usually find either unverified findings (or findings that can hardly be verified) (6) or claims of corruption, non-transparency/non-accountability, unprofessionalism and abuse of office without attempting to substantiate those claims (5). One example in which we can see how a political opponent is vilified is SDSM's statement, which accuses the opposition that the country is stagnating in the EU-integrations precisely because of them, and that this was confirmed by the report of the European Commission: 'The report of the European Commission confirmed the facts, DPMNE, Mickoski and Levica are hindering the progress towards the EU. The key problem for the European Commission's country report and the remarks in it are that the Assembly is blocked by the opposition. (**MTV 1, 8 November, 2023**)

This type of statement, where political actors blame each other for the various problems in society (*hindering the progress towards EU*), produce serious divisions and increase the polarization along political lines and ideologies. In such cases the media outlets need to be extremely careful as to how they convey the statements, and be mindful of the vocabulary and terminology used and of the way they will present them to the viewers, as well as to avoid sensationalism and falsely exclusive information.

MTV 2

Similar to MTV 1, in the total of 11 news items on MTV 2 we can mainly notice unverified findings (or findings that can hardly be verified) (5) or claims of corruption, non-transparency/non-accountability, unprofessionalism and abuse of office without any attempts to substantiate those claims (4), as well as defaming a certain group of people in order to cause division and discord (2). The most common types of harmful narratives that are launched in this type of news items are undermining the trust (in 8 cases), but also disinformation (7), which is one of the specificities when it comes to the analysis of this media outlet.

One such example is the reported statement of the political party BESA, which uses populism, accusations without evidence, but also disinformation in the mutual accusations with the political opponents:

We tell Kovachevski that the Municipality of Tetovo implemented 10 times more projects than all of SDSM municipalities together[...] There is evidence that SDSM have the building plot to the church, whereas DUI issued the building permit. The latest proof of this is that Kovachevski celebrated the mounting of the cross with Vucikj in Belgrade by drinking wine and singing Serbian songs. (**MTV 2, 20 November, 2023**)

TV Alfa

During the days that were subject of analysis in November, the news edition on TV Alfa contained news items containing claims of corruption, unaccountability, unprofessionalism, abuse of office without attempting to substantiate those claims (8 cases) followed by news items related to unverified findings (or findings that are difficult to verify) used as grounds to accuse political opponents (6 cases in total), while the labelling, mocking and grossly disrespecting other persons and the use of negative words came third (3 cases). Those news items were responsible for creation of harmful narratives such as undermining trust (15), biased attitudes (6), character attacks and demonization (4), etc.

In the news item from 28 November, the journalist conveys the entire statement of the president of VMRO-DPMNE, Hristijan Mickoski, while not taking a stand, but the harmful narrative is reinforced by repeating the key words 'criminalize', 'incompetent' 'bozos' in the press-release of the news: I*t is a process that once again raises doubts about crime and corruption, but in any case, something that was supposed to be a good, beautiful event attended by world statesmen, they, unfortunately, due to their inability and desire to* ***incriminate*** *themselves and they have been incriminated for some time already, they really turned this into a circus show and I really regret that we still have some time to work with this type of* ***incapable*** *people who are part of the Macedonian Government.* (Alfa TV, November 28, 2023). This typical example of 'demonization of the political opponent' through labelling and use of offensive words (criminals, incompetent), but also complete disregard for political opponents, creates a toxic political atmosphere, which is intensifying with the upcoming elections.

We see a similar example in another news item from the same day, November 28, where the president of VMRO-DPMNE, H. Mickoski, says words and phrases that denigrate a certain group of people in order to cause division and discord between 'us and them'. Usually 'us' are the good ones, positive and desirable ones, while 'them' are the bad ones, the negative and undesirable ones. *SDSM and DUI are political parties that have grown into a political elite and are only interested in the interests of the few who are part of that political elite, that is, to be more precise, only the top echelon of their political elite.* (Alfa TV, November 28, 2023) The media outlet/journalist did not make an effort to prepare a reporting account from the statement of the political actor, to offer the other side or to find other sources on the topic, but broadcasted the speech as if in a paid political programme, giving this political option a free platform to convey the politician's views and agendas, without any screens. In addition, the harmful narrative is reinforced in the press release of the news item, where the main words that are part of this narrative are repeated and emphasized: *Leader Hristijan Mickoski accused both political parties from the Government that they are against a higher standard for pensioners because only a few members of their political elite are important to them.* (Alfa TV, 28 November, 2023)

For TV Alfa, what stands out in the November report, **is that it was the journalist who created the harmful narrative.** The analysis showed that out of 16 news items, in which a total of 23 harmful narratives occur, the journalist was responsible for creating as many as 9 of them. Such an example is the news item from 20 November, in which the journalist is the one who comments on the government's measures, accusing the Prime Minister of pre-election bribery: *What does 350 thousand euros mean to you if you are Dimitar Kovachevski? It looks like a completely normal amount of people's money that will be spent on the campaign for the advantages of EU membership, which will coincide with the already announced presidential elections. It is all according to the law, claims the Prime Minister – who sees no problem, with the fact that the Government will spend more than 354 thousand euros in the six months before the elections'.* (Alfa TV, 20 November, 2023)

It goes without saying that journalists also have the right to an opinion and the freedom to comment on political and social events, but they should do so in special forms stimulated by the standards in journalism, such as an op-ed, an opinion or an editorial comment and thus separate the opinion from professional

reporting. Including this types of comments in news items, without emphasizing that that is only the journalist's opinion or position, leads viewers astray, leads to amplification of harmful narratives and goes against the professional standards in journalism.

TV Kanal 5

There were eight news items aired on Kanal 5 where harmful narratives were identified propagated by political actors who often use words and formulations that denigrate a certain group of people in order to cause divisions and discords (4 cases) or unverified findings (or findings that are difficult to verify) used as a basis to accuse the political opponents (also 4 cases). The most common types of harmful narratives that we observed in these news items were undermining the trust (7), biased selection (4), division (4), and character attacks (3). In these reports, the harmful narrative was mostly produced by the political actor (in 18 cases), while the role of the journalist was mostly passive, and they merely conveyed the words that created such a narrative without intervening in any way.

One such example is the incident in the Assembly that was caused on 20 November by the MP from Levica and which, apart from Kanal 5, was also broadcast by all media outlets. The incident was full of insults and harsh words uttered on the Assembly stand. However, although this kind of news is impossible to avoid, it is very important how the journalist will present it to the public and whether they will allow all the insults and labelling to find their place in the public discourse. *Apasiev: like the one to George Bush, I will put a stamp to the amendments, put them in official records, with or without a stapler, archive them, and then when we come in power we will do the same to you, verify them in a green recycling bin, because you yourselves are green* (**TV Kanal 5, November 20, 2023**). The use of the metaphor ***green recycling bin because you are green*** in this specific case, it is used to emphasize the 'immaturity' of the political opponent, who does not have the ability to perform his work in a high quality (mature) manner. Such insults, especially when they are aired in prime time evening news slots, regardless of whether they were said in a public space (from an Assembly stand), encourage political actors to further radicalize their own narrative.

TV 21

During the monitoring of TV 21 in November, a total of 10 news items were registered, in which there are indicators (17) of harmful narratives. In all these news items, the political actor was the one who created the narratives, and the journalist's role was mostly to transmit the statements without intervention. The undermining of trust (in 9 cases) and disinformation (in 6 cases) were the most frequent harmful narratives that we found in the analysis of this media outlet. An example of unverified findings being used for mutual accusations can be seen in the report broadcast on November 8, in which the vice-president of the Democratic Movement, Izet Medjiti, accuses DUI: *DUI is not interested in the EU and the constitutional amendments. Together with Gruevski, they are trying to strike a deal with VMRO-DPMNE in order to enter a broad government by bargaining for the future MPs by SDSM.* (TV 21, 8 November, 2023). Unfounded claims of this kind, which have not been verified and are difficult to verify, are another way in which the polarization in society is intensified. Political actors often use such manipulative tactics, but the role of the media is not to unquestioningly convey such statements and thereby spread harmful narratives, but to analyse, investigate and emphasize when there are indications of speculation, assumption or unverified claims.

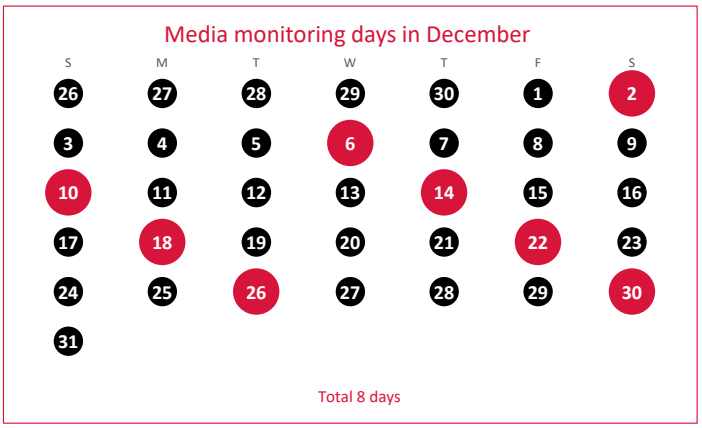
TV Sitel, TV Telma and Alsat M

In November, there was a lesser number of news items in which harmful narratives were identified in these three television stations (4 news items per TV station). The political actor is usually the one who is responsible for producing the harmful narrative, except in two cases with Alsat M and one case each with Telma and Sitel, where the harmful narrative was supported (but not created) by the journalist.

Undermining the trust (a total of 11 cases) and biased selection (7) were the most common harmful narratives that appear in the news items of these three televisions. Also, in Alsat M's news items we see an example of hate speech, as well as an example of ethnocentrism and nationalism. In the interview with Elvis Hodja from Self-Determination, broadcast on Alsat M on November 20, the guest addresses the Macedonians as Slavo-Macedonians, and the Albanians, he says, **should be opposed to Macedonia**, because it has not proved to be their country: *Albanians should be opposition-minded, be opposed to this country. Macedonia is not a country for the Albanians, it has never proved itself to be one. DUI is the regime party in Macedonia, in which the Albanians do not exist and in which they are not the creators of the Government in Macedonia.*

This is an example of openly inflammatory speech, quite dangerous in multi-ethnic societies, because it produces or encourages intolerance and stigmatization of a certain group. Such examples of ethnocentrism, with which one's own ethnic community is glorified, as opposed to another (deemed to be less valuable), has the potential to ignite violent actions and must therefore be properly flagged and condemned. Although the media outlets and the journalist in this particular case were not the ones who created this kind of narrative, their role is to make sure to condemn them and distance themselves, which is not what they did.

Report for December 2023



In the last month of 2023, when analysing the central news of the 9 **TV stations, a total of 87 news items were registered** featuring harmful narratives. In December, 8 days were analysed - 2nd, 6th, 10th, 14th, 18th, 22th, 26th and 30th December.

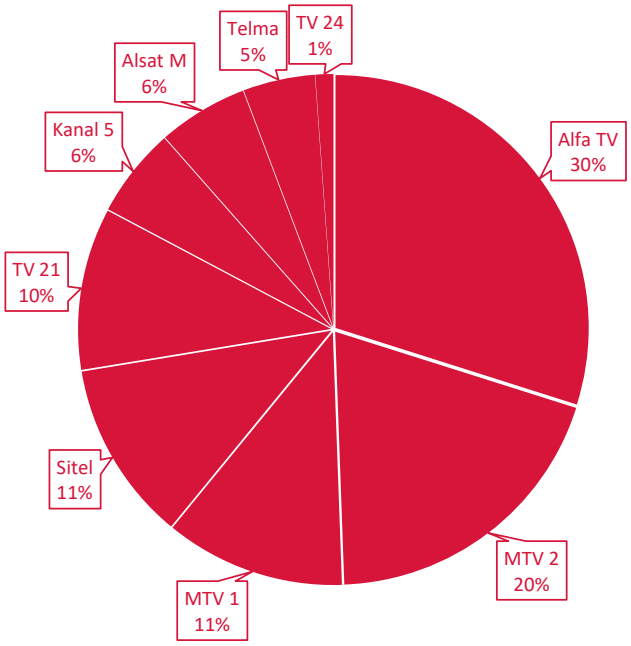
Compared to October (66 news items) and November (69), there is an increase, which is due to the number of days covered by the analysis (8), but also due to the notable growth of harmful narratives by political actors with the elections approaching.

Frequency of harmful narratives on TV stations

In December, the number of news items in which harmful narratives were identified (87 in total) was higher by 26 % compared to November. However, it is important to note that in December, due to the methodology that has been set (monitoring every fourth day), the number of days covered is 8, and not 7 as was the case in November. On the other hand, in October, when the number of days covered by the monitoring was the same as in December (8), only 66 news items with a harmful narrative were identified, or 32 % less. This is the result of the slight increase in this kind of narrative among all TV stations, but especially among the two public service channels MTV 1 and MTV 2, which together are responsible for 31 % of the total number of news items with a harmful narrative.

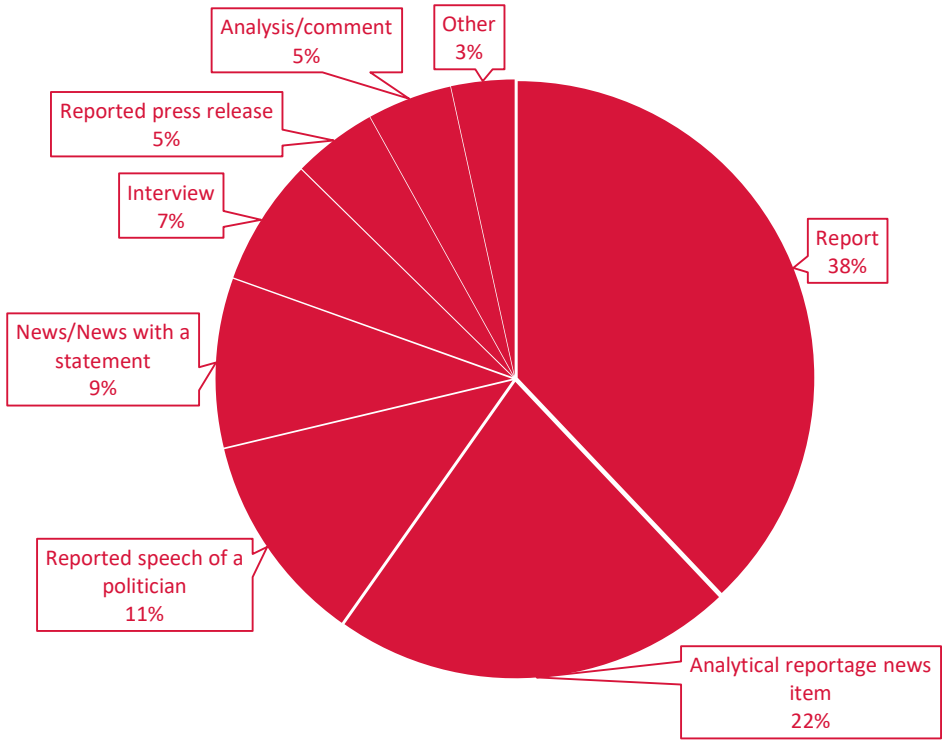
This month too, the highest number of this type of news items were in identified on TV Alfa, (26 or 29.9 %), followed by MTV 2 (17 or 19.5). %), MTV 1 and TV Sitel (10 or 11.5 each %), TV 21 (9 news item or 10.3 %), TV Kanal 5 and TV Alsat M (5 or 5.7 each %), Telma TV (4 or 4.6 %) and finally, TV 24 (1 news item or 1.1 %).

Table 27. TV news items which contain harmful narrative



No big differences are observed by days, i.e. no particular day stands out too much in terms of the number of news items with harmful narratives, except for 30th December, when at least 5 such news items were recorded. The highest number news items with harmful narratives were registered on 2dn and 10th December (after the 14th), on the 26th December there were 13, on 14th December there were 12, etc. Out of the registered news items with harmful narratives, similarly as in October and November, the largest number or 33 news items (37, 9%) belong to the TV genre-report, while 19 (21.8 %) of the analytical-report genre.

Table 28. Published news items which contain harmful narrative by genre



We see that again **the number of news items in which only the speech of a politician is broadcast is quite high (10 or 11.5 %) or a press-release of a political party is aired (4 or 4.6 %)**. This practice signals that it quite often certain media forget their basic role, and instead of critically analysing the developments, they simply leave the media space open to the political actors who find a platform to spread their own ideology.

The topics which occur in the news items aired on TV-stations are mostly from the area of **domestic politics (47 news items or 54%)**, which is again a common practice and coincides with previous reports. Of the other topics, only topics from the field of foreign policy (15 or 17.2 %) and economy (11 or 12.6 %) occur more often, while topics such as crime, education, judiciary, etc. appear quite rarely.

In December, the most common news items were the ones related to the **elections**, including the preparations **for the establishing of the caretaker government, as well as the election of the vacant position as a member of the State Election Commission (26 news items in total)**, followed by the EU-the integrations (in 12 news items) and the debate on the budget (6). Two special topics that stand out in this period are the double murder in Skopje and the raising of a cross in the yard of the church in Tetovo, an act that the parties took advantage of in different ways to accuse each other, and for spreading narratives that contain populism, undermine the trust and incite divisions.

One such example is the news item broadcast on December 26 on TV Kanal 5, where political actors irresponsibly abuse this very sensitive topic to score daily political points, and instead of calming the tensions, they inflame them further. Among the statements in which the political parties were accusing each other of who is trying to disrupt the coexistence in Tetovo, we single out the statement of the president of the Dostoinstvo (Dignity) Party and the director of the Crisis Management Centre, Stojanche Angelov, who believes that those Albanian citizens who will protest against the placement of the cross do not respect fellow Macedonians: *The protest, among other things, will show how many of our fellow Albanians have disrespect for us as Orthodox Macedonians, because I interpret their gathering for the demolition of Popova Shapka's cross as disrespect for all the Orthodox citizens, the overwhelming majority of whom are Macedonians.* (Kanal 5, 26 December 2023)

Such generalization, simplification of complex developments and reduction of entire groups to good and bad or those who respect as opposed to those who do not respect the other, may only serve to deepen the divisions, and the ethnic and religious intolerance, and not lead to building coexistence. On top of this, the statement comes from a state official, the Director of the Crisis Management Centre.

According to **Article 10 of the Code of Journalists of Macedonia** *A journalist shall not knowingly create or process information that threatens human rights or freedoms, shall not speak with the language of hatred and shall not incite violence and discrimination on any grounds (national, religious, racial, gender, social, linguistic, sexual orientation, political...).* Although the role of the journalist in this case was only in conveying the political statement, nevertheless in such particular situations, when a single statement or word can spark inter-ethnic tensions, the media and journalists must be very careful in how they convey the political statements, but also in how they frame the topic. In this specific case, the journalist secured statements from several different parties, including the municipal inspectorate in Tetovo and several political parties. However, the public did not have a chance to hear the explanation of those who were getting ready to protest, what their reasons and motives were, especially after such a generalizing statement that all those who protest do not respect the Orthodox Macedonians.

The most common reason for news items with harmful narratives in December were social topics or social events (31 or 35.6%), followed by current events (29 or 33.3%). Again, as in the previous months, the third place is held by so-called pseudo-events[27] (19 news items or 21.8 %). What can be observed from the analysis is that the largest number of news items in which the occasion was a certain pseudo-event were registered at the MTV 2 (9 or 52.9%) channel. This indicates that certain political actors with their public press-releases, press conferences and statements, managed to find space to air their views and agendas, as well as harmful political narratives on MTV 2 without there being a specific occasion, a current affair, or something like that. Media outlets must serve not as a free mouthpiece of political parties that would broadcast all their press-releases and statements, but a place where political developments will be analysed in an objective and balanced way.

The political actors in the analysed news items

The general conclusion, and not only for December, but also for the previous months of the monitoring, is that the largest political parties in the country (SDSM, VMRO-DPMNE and DUI) dominate the news items in the news blocs on TV stations. Therefore, it is not surprising that even in the news items that contain harmful narratives, we often find actors who belong to one of these parties. VMRO-DPMNE (27 times), Dimitar Kovachevski (20 times), the Government of SDSM and DUI (17 times), SDSM (12 times) are the most frequently mentioned actors. Although the actors are usually addressed by their official names and positions (President of the Government, president of a political party, etc.), a growing tendency can be noticed before the elections or when entering the pre-election campaigns. During that period, SDSM is usually called 'SDS' (without the M) by its political opponent, which alludes to a lack of patriotism, to a party that does not deserve to include 'Macedonia' in its name. VMRO-DPMNE has been using this narrative for years, whenever they want to emphasize the 'false patriotism', at the expense of their political opponent, and it is clearly seen in

27 Pseudo-events, according to Daniel Bornstein, are not spontaneous events, they do not happen chance, but someone planned them, encouraged them and inserted them in order to get the media space that they would later use to promote their own ideas and attitudes. Monitoring shows that these are events that are mostly organized by political parties/actors and design to attract media attention. Daniel J. Boorstin, 'The Image: A Guide to Pseudo-events in America' (New York: Vintage Books, 1992).

the statements that were analysed in the December report. *SDS is a party that has been in power for 7 years and has not lifted a finger. They should not build their happiness on other people's misfortunes.* (Statement of VMRO-DPMNE, TV Telma, December 22, 2023)

SDSM has a similar strategy, and calls the largest opposition party VMRO-DPMNE only 'DPMNE', implying that it does not deserve to use the historical name of the revolutionary party. This way of naming each other is not new, and has been analysed in the Monitoring of Democracy in Macedonia (MODEM).[28]

On the other hand, VMRO-DPMNE and Levica, have been described as 'pro-Russian', 'anti-EU' and 'anti-NATO' by the representatives of the government, in several statements (3 registered news items). For SDSM, this is a way to mark the opposition as backward, against the EU-the perspectives of the country, and therefore against the real interests and perspectives of Macedonia.

The president of SDSM and current Prime Minister, Dimitar Kovachevski, is the most frequently mentioned individual actor (20 news items) and he is presented mainly negatively presented (by the journalist or other political actors - 8 times), with only two positive, **and 10 neutral mentions**. Kovachevski is most often referred to by his full name and position (Prime Minister or President of the Government), but there are also cases where political actors from the opposition call him by the nickname - 'Tache' in their statements: *The car that Tache talks about has failed him, because the fuel expressed in millions of euros in tenders, instead of in the people's tank, went into the pockets of the government. The corruption of the government is noted in all the reports of the international institutions.* (VMRO-DPMNE's press-release of MTV 1, December 2, 2023). Regardless of the fact that this nickname does not contain a specific insult in itself, using a nickname for people in the highest positions of state governance in official political communication can serve to demean and belittle their position, to portray them as small and unworthy of leadership. Moreover, this nickname contains a dose of diminutiveness and coincides with the intention of discrediting the political actor.

The role of the journalists in the news items with harmful narratives that we analysed was mostly neutral, meaning that they had not taken a positive or negative stance, and the negative attributes mainly came from the political actors themselves. An exception to this is TV Alfa, where in 9 news items, the journalist had a negative attitude towards SDSM, the Government, or Dimitar Kovachevski, and two news items broadcast on Kanal 5, where the journalist had a negative attitude towards Prime Minister Kovachevski.

Such an example is the press-release of the news broadcast on 2 December on TV Alfa, where the journalist provides an introductory comment, which includes several attributes and offering an explanation of political developments: *Kovachevski's optimism that he will remain in power until 2030 is not inexplicable: he is planning to have a party with all the displaced Macedonians who will have a European passport by then, because Macedonia would be part of the European Union. Catastrophic criticisms constantly arrive from the member states of the European Union. The last one is from Netherlands, which constantly criticizes the government policy in Macedonia.* (news item, TV Alfa, December 2, 2023).

According to the Code of Journalists, 'reporting on political processes, especially elections, should be impartial and balanced. The journalist must make sure to have a professional distance from political subjects'. It is understood that journalism should be a critic of the executive power, but creating prominent attacks outside the needs of the context and the public interest, without providing arguments for them is not the way professional journalism should work.

28 The monitoring of democracy in Macedonia (MODEM) was carried out by a team from the Institute for Communication Studies (ICS) in the period from November 2015 to April 2016 and analysed the news programmes and debate shows of the Public Broadcasting Service and commercial television stations with a national concession.

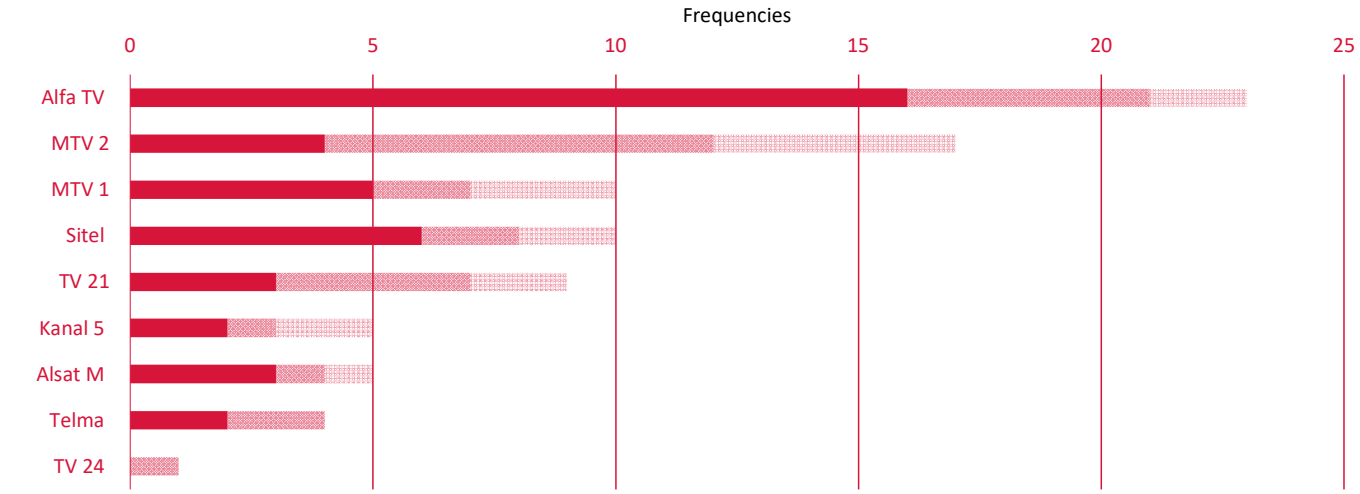
One-sided reporting

One trend that continues to ring the alarm is the one-sided reporting, especially visible in the news items that are the subject of our analysis. **Out of a total of 87 news items that contained a harmful narrative, exactly half (44 or 50.5 %), had either only one source (41 or 47.1 %) or did not contain sources at all, i.e. the journalist occurred as a source (3 or 3.4%**).

In the rest of the cases, in 21 news items (24.1 %) 2 sources were consulted, while in 22 news items (25.3 %) three or more sources.

This is followed by the inclusion of only one side in the news item and here we see almost the same results, i.e. only in 17 news items (19.5 %) the journalist included multiple pages in the report (41 only one page and 26 two pages).

Table 29. Presented sides of the sources in news items which contain harmful narratives



	TV 24	Telma	Alsat M	Kanal 5	TV 21	Sitel	MTV 1	MTV 2	Alfa TV
Only one side	0	2	3	2	3	6	5	4	16
Two sides	1	2	1	1	4	2	2	8	5
Several sides	0	0	1	2	2	2	3	5	2

Once again, with TV Alfa we see the higher number of news items with one-sidedness, i.e. 16 out of a total of 23 news items (69.6 %) included only one side, 5 (21.7 %) two sides, while only in 2 news items (8.7 %) featured multiple sides. However, the analysis in December shows that the rest of the media are not lagging too far behind from the one-sided approach when informing, when it comes to the news items with a harmful narrative. At TV Sitel and TV Alsat M we see that exactly 60 % of these (harmful narratives) news items presented only one side, while for TV Telma and MTV 1 this is the case for 50 % of news items.

Impartiality and balance, together with truthfulness, are the basic elements of journalism as a profession. The presentation of only one side in the news item, especially when that side is responsible for creating certain harmful narratives, it must not be the case. At the very least, the journalist must also consult the other side, who should be given a chance to present their point of view and their side of the story.

LAW ON AUDIO AND AUDIOVISUAL MEDIA SERVICES, ARTICLE 61

Broadcasters should observe the following principles when performing their activity:

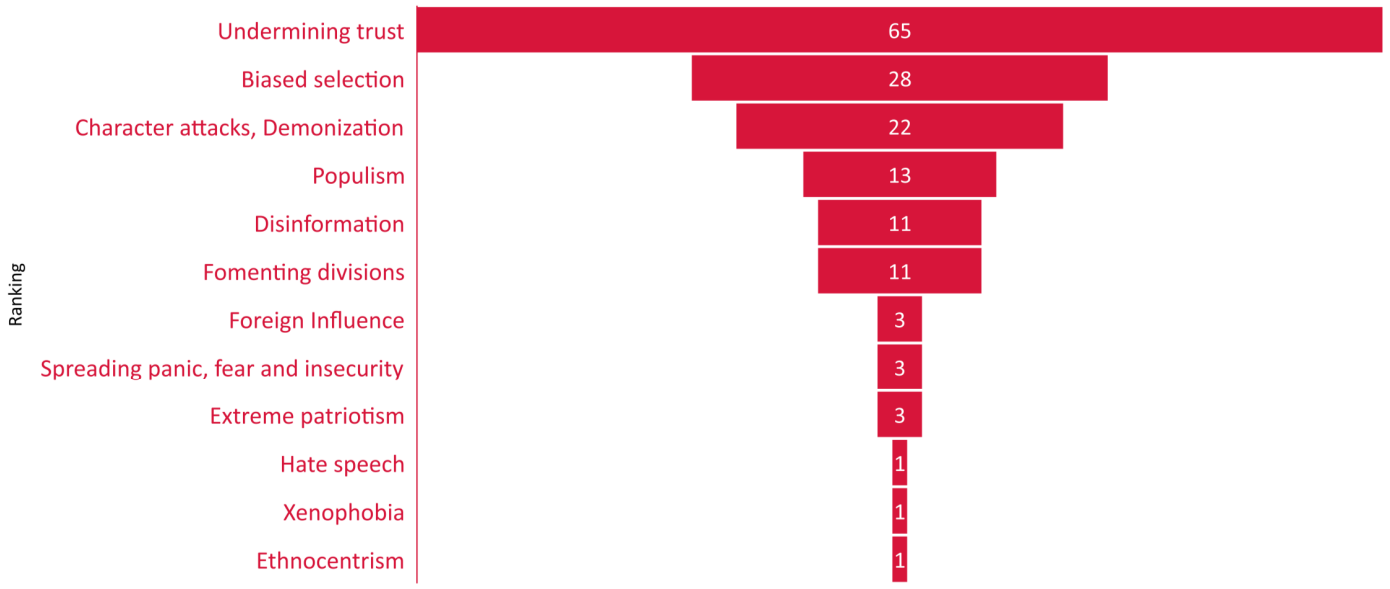
- nurturing and developing the humane and moral values of humanity and protecting the privacy and dignity of the person,
- equality of freedoms and rights regardless of gender, race, national, ethnic and social origin, political and religious conviction, property and social position of man and citizen,
- encouraging the spirit of tolerance, mutual respect and understanding between individuals of different ethnic and cultural origins,
- protection of the identity of the victims of violence,
- respecting the presumption of innocence,
- encouraging international understanding and cooperation, the public's sense of fairness and the defence of democratic freedoms,
- openness of programmes for the expression of different cultures that are an integral part of society,
- preserving and nurturing the national identity, language, culture and local creativity,
- **objective and impartial presentation of events with equal treatment of different points of view and opinions and enabling the audience to freely shape its own opinion on individual events and issues,**
- respect for copyrights and related rights,
- respecting the confidentiality of the source of the information,
- guaranteeing the right of response and correction and
- autonomy, independence and responsibility of the editors, journalists and other authors in the creation of the programmes and the creation of the editorial policy.

The most common harmful narratives

A total of 87 news items were identified in December, which featured a total of 162 indicators triggering the harmful narratives that are the subject of the research process, i.e. each news item on average contains two such indicators of 'harm'. There are no major differences when it comes to the types of narratives that dominate the news block on TV stations during this period as well. Once again, the most notable are the indicators associated with claims of corruption, unaccountability, unprofessionalism, abuse of office without any attempt to substantiate those claims (35 cases) and news items related to unverified findings (or findings that are difficult to verify) used as ground to accuse the political opponents (33 cases in total). They are followed by news items related to labelling, mocking and grossly disrespecting other people and the use of negative words (22).

News items that contain this type of indicators, were most often the reason for creating the following narratives: undermining the trust (65), biased attitudes (28), personality attacks or demonization (22), populism (13), divisiveness (12), etc.

Table 30. Frequency of harmful narratives



No major differences were noticed when analysing who is responsible for creating the harmful narrative, because most of the time, as was the case in previous months, political actors are the main producers of harmful narratives, while the journalist's role is mostly passive and consists in conveying political statements without intervention. The exception is TV Alfa, where in 14 cases (out of a total of 51 indicators) the journalist is the one who is directly responsible for creating the harmful narrative, and in 15 cases it was both, the journalist in parallel with the political actor. This is not a practice the news items aired on other televisions, and only in rare cases do we see that the journalist, alone or with the political actor, participated in the creation of this type of narrative (there is one such case aired on MTV 1, MTV 2 and Alsat M each).

MTV 1

In December at MTV 1 a total of 10 news items were identified as containing one or more types of harmful narrative. Most often it was undermining trust (8), populism (4) or fomenting divisions (3). These news items mostly dealt with topics related to domestic politics (5) or crime (3), followed by the upcoming elections and the outcome of the EU-summit. A harmful narrative was noted only in one press-release, while in the other cases, the harmful narrative was usually connected with the statements of political actors, and the journalist was not the one to create the harmful narratives, but only to transmit them.

In the news on December 22 and 26, MTV had guests in the central news, current politicians, with whom the journalist spoke on a variety of political topics. By organizing thematic conversations with different sources and experts in the field, the media enables the audience to get more detailed information on the topic, to hear different opinions and views, which can and should be critical. But it is important that the host in the medium treats the guest with due respect and at the same time, keep in mind that the interlocutors also have their own agenda and interest in using the media space, and some may use it to accuse their political opponents. One such example is the interview with Vlado Misajlovski, MP from VMRO-DPMNE: *This government spent billions and billions of euros in projects, and 0 km of highways have been built in Macedonia, 0 hospitals have been built, there are no sports halls, no new theatres, no new museums. So many billions from the budget have been squandered, and there are no projects, Misajloski says about the SDSM government.* (**MTV 1, December 26, 2023**) Such a narrative, which emphasizes successful governance can be boiled down to successful projects (building roads, theatres, hospitals) and measuring what has been built in meters and kilometres is very common, especially in the pre-election period. In this particular case, the party in power, without concrete arguments, is accused of spending billions and building 0 km of highway, which insinuates

that it is either incompetent or corrupt. Of course, this is allowed in the political dialogue, but the journalist should try to steer the discussion at the level of arguments, ask for explanations, evidence and examples in support of such a narrative so that it can be justified and well-founded, while as thigs are, it remains only at the level of generalizations.

MTV 2

In December, an increasing number of news items with a harmful narrative was recorded on the second channel of the public service. With a total of 17 broadcasts, MTV 2 is just behind TV Alfa in terms of the number of registered broadcasts that contain a harmful narrative. The most common ones are undermining the trust (9), personality attacks or demonization (5), biased attitudes (4) and populism (3).

The largest number of these news items are on the topics of domestic politics (10) and economy (4). What is typical of MTV 2 is that the reason for the news item in more than half of the cases (9 news items or 52.9 %) was a pseudo-event, that is, an event created by political parties for no other reason than to generate media attention and publicity.

In an interview broadcast on December 30, the Minister for Foreign Affairs, Bujar Osmani, directly accused the opposition of being against the European integration of the country, labelling them as 'anti-European' and 'pro-Russian': *You know that VMRO-DPMNE, that is, the opposition, obstructed the constitutional changes. There are several explanations for that. First of all, they are anti-European. Historically, they did not support anything related to the European integration [..]. Preventing the constitutional changes is in the direction of advancing the Russian influence in North Macedonia [...] This is manifested in North Macedonia through a battle between the pro-European and anti-European fronts [. ..] The constitutional changes were prevented, so to speak, not by nationalist, but by pro-Russian forces...* (**MTV 2, December 30, 2023**)

This narrative, which paints anyone who criticizes some moves of the government (in this specific case the constitutional amendments and introduction of the Bulgarian minority in the Constitution) as hindering the EU integrations, or supporter of Russian policies, becomes increasingly visible in political statements, and unfortunately has taken ground in media reporting. In this particular case, the journalist is not the one producing the harmful narrative, but still as a host has the responsibility to have full control over the dialogue and to prompt, point out, or if necessary condemn unsubstantiated attacks, labelling and insults on the air. Live interviews are a very difficult and challenging genre form, especially since the journalist can never know in advance what might happen or what to expect from the guest. But the role of the professional journalist is not to sit still and remain silent while the guest politicians say whatever comes to their mind, and the interview must not turn into a propaganda event. The journalist should be prepared for the interview and the topic to be discussed, to break such narratives and with additional questions and to deconstruct the attempts at populism, attacks without arguments, emphasized stereotyping, divisions and disinformation.

TV Alfa

In December, in the analysis of the central news bloc on TV Alfa, 26 news items with harmful narratives were registered, which is almost a third (29.9 %) of the total number. The most common harmful narratives that we identified were undermining the trust (20), biased attitudes (13) and personality attack/demonization of a political opponent (6).

The most frequent topics in these news items, again, are the topics of domestic politics (16 or 61.5 %). The most prevalent actor that is featured, or that the **journalist or some other political actor is talking about is the Government/the authorities/SDSM (9 news items) or Prime Minister Kovachevski (6).** In all of the cases, this actor was **negatively evaluated** (never neutrally or positively) either by the journalist himself (in 7 cases) or by the political opponent (8 cases).

Similarly to before, the main feature is that in a large number of cases the journalist (14 cases) or the journalist together with the political actor (15 cases) are directly responsible for creating the harmful narrative.

A special case study is the TV-headline, in which the journalist/news editor, instead of an anchor, takes on the role of an interpreter; they narrate, explain, summarize, but most importantly, take upon themselevs the responsibility on behalf of the public to judge who is right and who is wrong, who is a patriot and who is a criminal, or who is the good guy and who is the bad guy in the story.

Here are some of the TV-headline in the central news broadcast on December 2.

> *Macedonia servile at the OSCE summit. We did not take the chance to make the world hear about the problems the country is facing on its way to the EU. The fight for the national interest has been abandoned [...] The package of anti-crisis measures announced by the Government is more of a pre-election bribe than real assistance to the citizens and companies. At least economists and businessmen agree with this. Only Bitichi does not see anything controversial [...] Will the director of the Film Agency, who came to the position without any experience in the film industry, but from the banking sector, finally be dismissed? The MPs of VMRO DPMNE asked Kovachevski for answers about the series of scandals that are shaking this Agency. They did get an answer, but not a concrete one, a vague one. The Prime Minister is obviously buying time in resolving this scandal. (**Segments from TV headline, Alfa TV, 2nd December 2023**)*

The way a news editor explains events and evaluates political actors is explicitly tendentious - attacking members of the current Government, supported by one-sided sources that are consistent with one political centre (the opposition party VMRO-DPMNE).

The media can and should be critical. The principle of impartiality must not jeopardize the editorial freedom of the media. On the contrary, the media and journalists have an obligation, in the name of protecting the public interest, to critically observe the government or those who have political or any other power and responsibility, but also including their opponents, the opposition, non-governmental organizations, business- companies, religious communities, etc. Journalists have editorial freedom to cover any topic that there are reasons to write about in accordance with the media's editorial policy, to report on a specific aspect of an issue, to allow a distinct point of view to be presented, to even publish views, opinions and facts that may negatively affect a certain part of the audience. The only criterion is whether such violation of the principle of impartiality is in the role of protecting the public interest. Due to the fact that journalists also have the right to an attitude and an opinion, a very significant element of protecting the principle of impartiality is that opinions and attitudes in reporting or informative programmes should be separated from the facts.

> *Journalists, like any other person, have their own beliefs, attitudes and opinions. But the public deserves reporting based on facts and analysis supported by relevant information. Therefore, the attitudes and opinions of journalists must not influence the information delivered to the audience, especially when it comes to topics, events and phenomena of a conflicting nature. To offer a full and authoritative coverage of news and events, journalists must suppress their personal views and perspectives.*[29]

TV Kanal 5

In only five of the news items with harmful narratives that have been registered with TV Kanal 5, we note the most common narratives of undermining trust and disinformation. However, in these 5 news items we see as many as 15 indicators that refer to different harmful narratives, which signal that they contain a large number of harmful narratives in themselves. In most cases, the narrative is produced by the political actor (11), while the journalist only amplifies it.

Such is the statement by Prime Minister Kovachevski in which he labels the opposition as an obstacle in the country's EU integration, just as it had been obstacle in the NATO-the integration. While he calls his own party 'European', the opposition, 'which is now strengthened' with Levica, is 'an anti-EU, anti-NATO, pro-Russian coalition that offers no other alternative and keeps the state in isolation and status what.':

> *The same people who were against joining NATO, are now also against the country joining the EU. What we saw in 2008 in Bucharest, we saw now in Brussels, the same politicians, the same political parties, now reinforced by the Levica political party, an anti-EU, anti-NATO, pro-Russian coalition that offers no other alternative and keeps the state in isolation and status quo. Our coalition is European and will not give up on this process of European integration.* ***(TV Kanal 5, December 14, 2023)***

The journalist in this simply broadcasts the statement in his account, along with the statements of other political actors, with no sense of the harmful narrative he is sharing. This kind of simple reporting, without going more deeply into the topics important for the public interest and critical observation of the developments, especially when dealing with important topics, is a feature of other informational programmes as well. In such cases, the media should be critical towards populist and offensive media statements by political actors, by asking additional questions and requesting explanations and arguments in favour of some of the claims and giving the audience a clear picture of the entire context, as well as a critical attitude towards the harmful narrative.

TV 21

During the monitoring of TV 21 in December, a total of 9 news items containing one or more harmful narratives were registered. Most often, these harmful narratives involved personality attacks/demonization (4 cases) or undermining of trust (4). Domestic political themes dominate these news items (7 or 77.8 %), while the only other topic that occurs is foreign policy (2 news items or 22.2 %). In almost all of them, it is the political actor who creates the harmful narrative, while the role of the journalist is only to take over these statements without reacting.

29 Excerpt from the Handbook for Public Interest in Journalism, Skopje, 2016.

If the Albanian political parties come up with their own candidate, then it is at the service of VMRO-DPMNE. Why? Because they are taking away the opportunity of the Albanian electorate to vote for a pro-European option...(Statement of the Vice President of DUI, Arber Ademi, TV 21, December 14, 2023)

Again, according to the ruling coalition, everything that goes against their policies is anti-European, even the intention of the smaller political parties to present their own presidential candidate. According to DUI, such a move would be a favour to VMRO-DPMNE or the message being sent is: 'if you do that, you are anti-European, together with VMRO-DPMNE'.

Sitel TV

At Sttel TV, in December we registered a number of news items with harmful narratives (10), which is an increased to the usual number (4 were recorded in November). The most common harmful narratives were identified were undermining the trust (10) and biased attitudes (3). The one things that stood out during the analysis of TV Sitel is the one-sidedness observed in these news items, i.e. in 6 news items (60 %) only one side was represented. In these 10 news items, there is a total of 18 indicators of a harmful narratives, mainly created by the political actor (12), but there were also cases when the political actor did it together with the journalist (5) or the journalist himself created the harmful narrative (1). At the same time, the role of the journalist was usually to broadcast kind of narrative without intervention, but we also see cases where the journalist clearly highlights the narrative, although without taking a stand (3) or shares it with condemnation/criticism (1).

Such is the example of December 18, when part of the statement of a representative of VMRO-DPMNE was broadcast in a separate short news item, only to emphasize and to highlight the narrative: *The crimes of Kovachevski and Ahmeti cost Macedonia a new blockade. No one sees Macedonia as an orderly and legal state; unfortunately, due SDS's and DUI's Government, according to the European politicians Macedonia is not ready to start the negotiations in such an unsettled state.* (TV Sitel, December 18, 2023)

The journalist, by singling out this part, emphasizes and reinforces the harmful narrative, offering it a privileged status in the news block.

Alsat M

When it comes to Alsat M, in December 5 reports were registered in which the presence of 12 harmful narratives was identified, most of which were related to undermining the trust (7), attack on the person/ demonization (2) and disinformation.

In the interview with the former Minister of Defence, Lazar Elenovski, the journalist used attributes for certain political actors that were not supported by evidence or arguments, such as the protests in the school in the village of Chashka, thus creating a damaging narrative herself during the interview: *Will VMRO-DPMNE will be transformed from a nationalist party with a nationalist rhetoric, that it impossible to make a coalition with in order to rule? VMRO is also accused of inciting the protests in Chaska.* (TV Alsat M, December 18, 2023)

Serious accusations, such as this one, that a political party is the organizer of the protests in a school, must be supported by evidence, especially when presented by a journalist. Even more so when no one from the party is present to respond to those accusations. Impartial journalism should always rely on arguments. According to the sociologist Michael Schudson, an objective journalist is one who relies on facts, and not on attributes, but also one who is committed to constantly emphasizing the difference between them.[30]

30 Excerpt from the Handbook for Public Interest in Journalism, Skopje, 2016.

In the same question to the interlocutor, the journalist labels the opposition party as nationalist and as a party using nationalist rhetoric, which is a very serious accusation, especially when it comes to the largest opposition party in the country. Although politicians often use such accusations, journalists must be extremely careful when giving attributes to the actors, and any claims must be supported by arguments.

TV Telma

In December, a total of 4 news items containing one or more harmful narratives were registered in the central news of TV Telma. They were mostly related to divisiveness (2), undermining trust (1) and personality attacks/demonization (1). In all cases, it was the political actor that created the narrative, while the journalist broadcasted it without interfering.

An interesting case is when a member of VMRO-DPMNE from Ohrid was arrested by the police for possession of narcotics. In the SDSM statement, based on one individual case, the entire opposition party was generalized and given the epithet of being criminal, related to cocaine trade, etc. *This is the real face of DPMNE and it tells what kind of people they are. Apparently there is a lot of coke going around DPMNE and Mickoski, and not just in the white palace.* (Telma TV, December 10) In this case, the journalist, even though he only took on these accusations, with which a group of people is being defamed without evidence, he gave space for breeding those harmful narratives. But it should also be emphasized that this is a rare case in which a journalist from the reporting team of TV Telma allowed or broadcasted such harmful narratives. In many cases the journalist either paraphrases or does not broadcast at all the offensive and populist statement of the political actors, this not offering a platform for such narratives.

TV 21

At TV 21, only one report with a harmful narrative was registered, insufficient for analysis.

2.3 SUMMARY

Key features of online media reporting in November and December 2023

Online media reporting in the last two months of 2023 was characterized by an increase in the number of harmful narratives compared to the previously analysed months (September – 209, October – 154). In November, a record-breaking number of 215 news items with harmful narratives were identified, which, apart from the headlines, were often repeated several times in the texts themselves (in the sentences, paragraphs, wording). Accusations that undermine the trust in the state institutions, biased attitudes, attacking and degrading/demonizing a certain person and populism dominate. Online media breathe fuel into these toxic narratives, mostly through the established practice of passively broadcasting the political party press-releases and political actors' speeches. Of the analysed media outlets, the portals Kurir and Republika were leading (with more than 1/3 of all the identified 'informative' texts), and the rest of the portals were lagging far behind them.

By default, as in the previously monitored months, these are online publications dominated by one-sided information (in 187 news items), from the genre of press-releases for the public (mostly by political parties) and politicians' speeches (or a total of 122 news items), relying on one source of the information (178 news items), which is most often precise, a pseudo-and/or a current event. Most of the news items were not signed (181 news items), and were mostly visually supported by archival and current footage and photos, but without specifying the copyrights. An inevitable topic is domestic politics, that is, the EU-integration of the country, the crime and corruption, the upcoming parliamentary and presidential elections (with 153 news items), and the economy, healthcare and education are lagging far behind.

We get to the full picture by including the representation of the political actors, both individual and collective, and how they are represented in the news items with harmful narratives. Moreover, despite the high number of these news items, cumulatively, no political subject stands out. However, VMRO-DPMNE as a party, together with its members, spokespersons, MPs, and mayors active on the political scene, is the most frequently prevalent in online-media (especially when it comes to Kurir and Republika), which is undoubtedly due to the fact that the dominant genres in the news items are press-releases and politicians' speeches. When it comes to the 'main' dominant actors in the news items, they are usually either quoted or paraphrased, while the other 'secondary' actors are mostly discussed in the context of the topic. In terms of treatment and attitudes towards the political actors, the portals are mostly neutral or positive towards the main actors, and negative towards the supporting actors, but it all depends on who the main actor, and who is the secondary actor is, that is, which political option the actor belongs to –'the right wing' or 'left wing'. This can be easily observed when it comes to the portals with the highest number of news items with harmful narratives, Kurir and Republika, while those with a low number of such news items are dominated by neutral ones, and sporadically negative or positive approaches and attitudes.

December was characterised by an unabated momentum in the number of damaging narratives in online media. The monitoring identified 207 news items with **harmful and very frequent narratives**. As many as 339 posts were noted in the texts (sentences, paragraphs, formulas) which are often expanded in the headlines of the news items. The focus is on undermining the trust, biased attitudes, attacks and demonization of a certain person, spreading populism, fomenting divisions. They were mostly published by the portals Republika, Kurir and Vecher.mk, with the largest number of news items with harmful narratives (half of all the identified ones), and especially with numerous claims of corruption, unprofessionalism, abuse of official duties and unverified findings as a basis to accuse the political opponents.

Similarly to November, this month was dominated by the broadcasting of party press-releases (mainly of political parties) and politicians' speeches (or a total of 158 news items). Hence the majority of posts have

only one source of information (185 posts), although mostly accurate (175 posts), posts dominated by one-sided information (188 news items), and cover pseudo-and/or current events (135 news items), nearly always without an author (no first and last name or initials of the journalist–187 news items) and visually supported by archival and current footage. Domestic politics definitely remains the topic most susceptible to harmful narratives (111 news items) with a focus on the upcoming parliamentary and presidential elections, the country's integration into the EU, the establishing of the caretaker government, and the local self-government.

The narrative/story of harmful narratives is shaped by political actors, both individual as well as the collective ones, dominated by VMRO-DPMNE and President Hristijan Mickoski, SDSM, DUI, the Government, Prime Minister Dimitar Kovachevski, mostly present in the online media through party press-releases or the speeches, statements, views expressed in the press-conferences, interviews, debate shows (taken from other media). The portals download sometimes take them over integrally, but most often they edit them and extract the 'punchlines', without contextualization, and after packing them up, they launch them to the public, thus practically 'directly/indirectly' participating in the creation of harmful narratives themselves.

Key features of the reporting of TV stations in November and December 2023

With the monitoring of the news items aired by the nine TV-stations, **a total of 69 news items with harmful narratives were registered in November 2023**, which does dramatically stand out compared to the monitoring from the previous months (September – 76, October – 66). Unlike the previous months, 16 news items with harmful narratives were registered as aired on TV Alfa, which is significantly less than usual (34 in October). Unfortunately, biased and unbalanced reporting (in favour of the opposition VMRO-DPMNE), as well as the numerous examples in which the journalist is responsible for the creation of harmful narratives, remain among of the characteristics of the information presented on this TV-station.

On the other hand, **in November we noticed a higher number of news items with harmful narratives compared to September and October on MTV 1, MTV 2, Kanal 5 and TV 21**. In most of the cases, those narratives were 'produced' by political actors, not journalists. However, as we emphasized in the previous report, the lack of critical and verified broadcasting of all political statements that abound with unsubstantiated accusations of corruption, unprofessional work, abuse of office, the multiplication of the strong rhetoric and negative descriptions of political opponents in the media ether contribute to undermining the trust in institutions, deepening of the polarization and lowering of the level of political communication and the culture of speech.

As in previous months, the **largest political parties SDSM, VMRO-DPMNE and DUI remain the most frequent actors in primetime TV-slots (especially the Presidents of SDSM and VMRO-DPMNE)**, but also those who are most frequently in charge of creating the harmful narratives that are the subject of our analysis. The way they address each other, as well as the way the media addresses them, can be part of a more extensive analysis. For TV Alfa, the president of VMRO-DPMNE, Hristijan Mickoski is always the leader (leader of the opposition or leader of the party), while Prime Minister Kovachevski is personified with the government (often '*incompetent*' and '*criminal*' – TV Alfa).

The one-sided information launched the media, i.e. the inclusion of only one side in the news items is conspiring, since it applies to 42 % of the analysed news items, while only 24.6 included more than two sides. An exception to this are TV Telma and TV 21, which regularly offered the other side or sides of the issue or problem in their reports.

This month, a typical example of ethnocentrism and nationalist incendiary narrative was noted on the television station Alsat M in the interview with the representative of the Kosovo Self-Determination party (November 20, 2023). The guest called Macedonians Slavo-Macedonians (as many as three times), and Albanians, he said, *needed to be opposed to this country*. This type of speech is very dangerous for multi-ethnic societies and fosters a behaviour of intolerance in an ethnically sensitive environment, especially when it is propagated in the pre-election period. The role of the journalist, who as the host of the interview is bound to intervene in occasions like this, to counter and to condemn this type of harmful narrative, also calls for additional analysis. The journalist failed to respond in this case.

In the of December, a total of 87 news items with harmful narratives were registered, which is the highest number until now. This increase can be attributed to the pre-election, when the political actors were very active about taking a position in the temporary so-called 'caretaker' government, but also to several other important developments, such as the investigation into the double murder of minor Vanja Gjorchevska and Panche Zhezhovski, the expenses for the OSCE Summit in Skopje, etc.

The highest number of harmful news items was once again found in Alfa TV (26). What stands out is the high number of news items with harmful narratives on MTV 2 (17), which is the record for this television station so far. Unlike TV Alfa, where a large part of the harmful narratives is produced by the journalist (14 news items) or the journalist together with the political actor (15 cases), at MTV 2 there was only one case in which the journalist was directly responsible for creating the harmful narrative.

Another specificity about the cases that we analysed in this report is related to the unprofessional way of announcing the news items, typical of TV Alfa, where the news editor takes on the role of an interpreter of political events, and clearly takes sides, but also participates in the creation of different narratives. Apart from the editor/presenter, there is increasingly more cheer-leading style of reporting by the journalist himself in news item, which further reinforces the harmful narrative.

With the rest of the televisions, we rarely see cases when a journalist is the one creating the harmful narrative and their role was mainly passive, consisting of broadcasting this type of narrative without intervention.

The most frequent actors in these news items, just like in previous months, were the largest political parties in the country, SDSM, VMRO-DPMNE and DUI. The smaller parties can rarely be found in the mainstream news, not even when they use tools, such as creating harmful narratives for others.

The insults between political opponents are on the rise, and it will not be surprising if this trend continues in the upcoming period. The pre-election rhetoric is being shaped, key political messages and labels that the parties will use to attack each other are being formed. VMRO-DPMNE increasingly calls the ruling party SDS (avoiding the letter M), implying that they are not worthy to represent Macedonia. On the other hand, SDSM calls the opposition pro-Russian, anti-EU and anti-West, directly accusing them of being the ones to blame for the failure in the EU-integrations.

Undermining the trust in the institutions is once again most common harmful narrative observed, whereby political actors or journalists, without attempting to substantiate their claims, accuse of corruption, lack of accountability, unprofessionalism or abuse of office. This report also notes a fairly high number of personal insults and attacks or demonization (22), whereby political opponents are called by derogatory names or insulted. This further impoverishes the dialogue, which instead of proceeding with arguments and proposed solutions, is reduced to insults.

One-sidedness can often be observed in news items with a harmful narrative, and in almost half of them (41 or 48.8 %) only one side is represented which attacks, accuses without arguments or insults, and the other side is not given a chance to respond to this kind of narrative at all. Such news items are additionally problematic and contribute to entrenching a harmful narrative when there is no one to contest it.

In the upcoming period, the media will have a very important and serious task to report on political election campaigns in a professional and impartial manner and to broadcast their messages, promises and promotional activities in a balanced and objective manner. But it will also be important for them not to be complicit in the creation or broadcasting of harmful narratives, thus becoming a tool for political bipolarization in society. It will also be their task to successfully recognize those narratives when they come from political actors and to find a way to avoid them, and not give them space to dominate the public discourse.

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ШТЕТ-НА

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