DETERMINING HARMFUL POLITICAL NARRATIVES

Institute of Communication Studies

ШТЕТ-НА

DOI: 10.64370/IWPI1871

Title of the publication:
Determining Political Harmful Narratives (HARM-TIVE)

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

About the Publisher:
Associate Professor Zaneta Trajkoska, PhD

Edition:
ResPublica

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

Editor:
Associate Professor Zaneta Trajkoska, PhD

Language editorial:
Prof. Simona Gruevska-Madjoska, PhD

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

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

Graphic design:
Tatjana Koceva Spirova

Technical editing:
Dejan Joveski

Place and date:
Skopje, 2024

Content

Introduction 4

1. Monitoring of communication practices and narratives of the political actors through their websites and Facebook pages 5

1.1. Communication practices of the political parties and their leaders in january 2024 6

Most common harmful narratives 8

Monitoring of the communication of the members of the Government of RNM through the official Facebook pages 23

1.2. Communication practices of political parties and their leaders in february 2024 24

The most common harmful narratives 27

Monitoring of the communication of the members of the RNM Government through the official Facebook pages 43

1.3. SUMMARY 45

2. Monitoring of the media coverage of political actors 50

2.1. Monitoring report on online media coverage of political actors 51

Report for January 2024 51

Report for February 2024 60

2.2. Report on the monitoring of TV stations' coverage of political actors 69

Report for January 2024 70

Report for February 2024 81

2.3. SUMMARY 95

Key features of online media reporting in January and February 2024 95

Key features of tv stations reporting in January and February 2024 97

Introduction

The third 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 January and February 2024 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 20 online media outlets. Similar to the first report for September and October 2023 and the second report for November and December 2023, here also the content and volume of the harmful narratives propagated by the political actors are empirically captured, the intensity, the topics and entities towards which the negative messages are directed. Thus, 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.

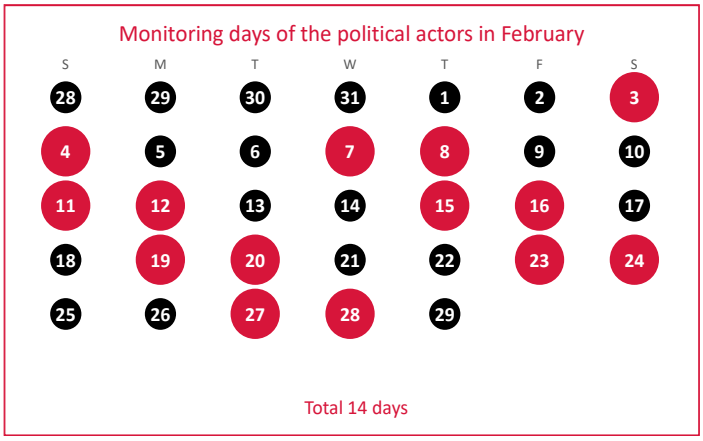
The data contained in this report were obtained by a combination of several methods and techniques: quantitative-qualitative analysis through monitoring - observation, following up and determining the presence of pre-defined indicators (14 in total), which in turn are connected to some of the 16 harmful 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 Harmful Narratives (HARM-TIVE) was conducted by the Institute of Communication Studies (ICS) within the project Use Facts: Fact-Based Journalism for Raising Awareness and Countering Disinformation in the Media Space in North Macedonia supported by the British Embassy Skopje. The research is longitudinal and 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 communication practices and narratives of the political actors through their websites and Facebook pages

The monitoring of the harmful narratives in the public discourse of the political actors is the second part of the research Determining Political Harmful Narratives. The research determines how the political actors communicate publicly when they use harmful narratives, the topics that are the most often the subject of harmful narratives, the types of harmful narratives, in what form they are produced and distributed, who do they target and which principles of ethical and professional communication they violate. The subject of the monitoring are the websites and Facebook pages of ten 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 Prime Minister of the Government of RNM, the deputy prime ministers and the ministers in the government are also monitored on Facebook.[1]

The communication of the political actors should be considered in a broader social context, i.e., the presidential and parliamentary elections that will be held on 24 April, i.e., 8 May. With the establishment of the caretaker government in January 2024, a change in the political discourse is also noticeable. The communications are more frequent, sharper and more frequently directed towards the political opponents, using almost any topic of public interest to promote one's own political ideology and attack the opponent. Polarizing narratives of pro- and anti-European stances dominate, which in these two months have become more obvious in the election rhetoric.



Monitoring days of political actors in January 2024:
2, 3, 6, 7, 10, 11, 14, 15, 18, 19, 22, 23, 26, 27, 30, 31 January (16 days in total).[2]

Monitoring days of political actors in February 2024:
3, 4, 7, 8, 11, 12, 15, 16, 19, 20, 23, 24, 27, 28 February (total 14 days).[3]

1 At the end of the month, a caretaker government was formed to conduct elections and a corresponding change was made in the monitoring of the profiles of the new prime minister and ministers from the caretaker government. The new Prime Minister is Talat Djaferi, the Minister of Interior is Panche Toshkovski, the Minister of Labour and Social Policy is Gjoko Velkovski.

2 The dynamics for monitoring content of political actors is each consecutive third and fourth day in the month.

3 The dynamics for monitoring content of political actors is each consecutive third and fourth day in the month.

1.1 Communication practices of the political parties and their leaders in january 2024

The monitoring of the political parties for January 2024 shows that the low political culture of public communication of the political actors, noted in previous reports, continues in the first two months of 2024. The opposition political actors mostly criticize the ruling parties for corrupt behaviour, for dishonest, unprofessional and non-transparent performance of their functions. The political actors from the ruling parties, on the other hand, criticize and label the opposition actors as non-European, obstacle for the country's European integration, as well as political options that, even if they come to power, will not work for the good of the people, while no concrete evidence or facts are presented for the allegations made.

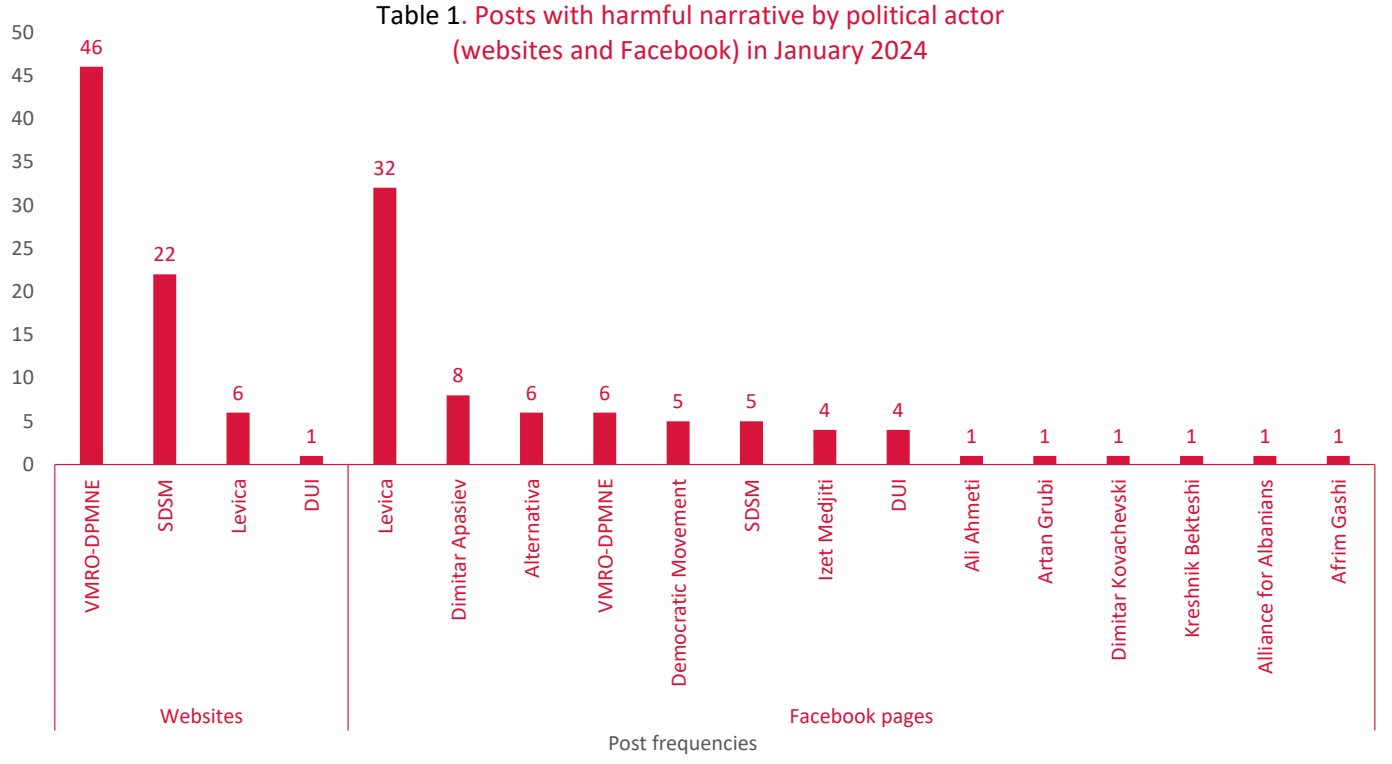
Criticism of opponents is expected in political communication, but the political criticism turns into communication with harmful narratives when allegations are presented that are not supported by facts and evidence, when unverified data is given, insulting language and labelling of the political opponents are used. Using such discourse violates the principles of ethical and professional communication, whereas transparent, accountable and accurate communication is expected from public office holders and candidates for public office, which should be in line with their commitment to work for the benefit of citizens.

Monitoring for January did not note any posts with harmful narratives on the websites and Facebook pages of the LDP, the New Social Democratic Party and the Socialist Party, as well as on the pages of their leaders.

This analysis refers only to the communication of political actors where harmful narratives were identified, with reference to the indicators that designate different harmful narratives.

In the period from 1 to 31 January, monitoring of the websites and Facebook pages of the 10 political parties and their leaders identified 75 posts on the parties' websites and 73 Facebook posts containing harmful narrative.

Table 1. Posts with harmful narrative by political actor (websites and Facebook) in January 2024



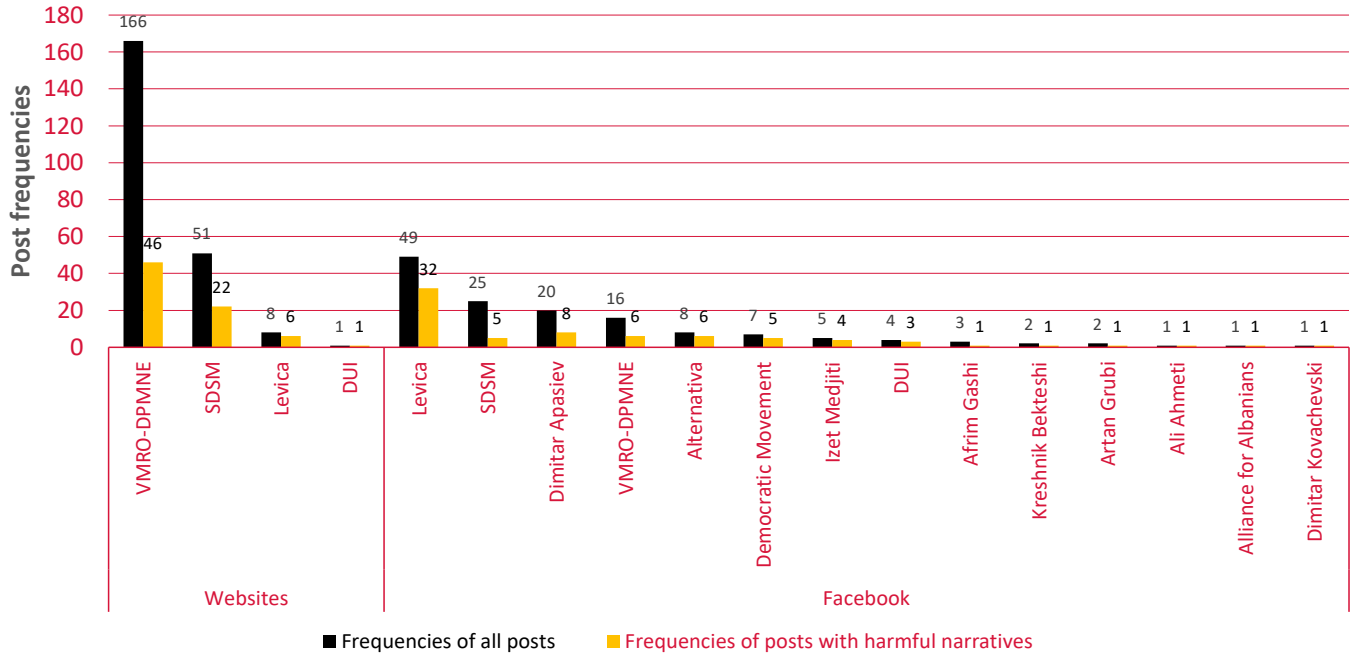
The monitoring determined that more than half, i.e. 61.3 percent of the identified harmful narratives on the parties' websites for January were from VMRO-DPMNE, 29.3 percent from SDSM, and 8 percent from Levica.[4]

On the Facebook pages, as in the past months, the most harmful narratives were noted from Levica (42.1%) and its leader Dimitar Apasiev (10.5%), while in January, for the first time, the monitoring noted a harmful narrative on the profile of the leader of DUI, Ali Ahmeti. From the monitored pages of the government representatives, this month one harmful narrative can be noted, from the Deputy Prime Minister Artan Grubi and the Minister of Economy Kreshnik Bekteshi. It is interesting to note that a similar number of posts with harmful narratives were identified on the Facebook pages of VMRO-DPMNE and SDSM, but no harmful narratives were noted on the profiles of the leaders of both parties, which indicates a more careful and politically correct communication on the personal pages, unlike the Facebook pages of the parties.[5]

If the total number of monitored communications is taken into consideration and compared to the number of harmful narratives, it can be noted that the trend from the past month continues. On the websites, the monitoring noted the most harmful narratives in Levica's posts, in 75 percent of the websites posts, while in SDSM in 43.1 percent, in VMRO-DPMNE in 27.7 percent, and in DUI 25 percent of the total number of websites posts.

Equally to the Facebook pages, the monitoring noted the most posts with harmful narratives by Levica and its leader Dimitar Apasiev, where harmful narratives are noted in 65.3 percent of the Facebook posts by Levica and in 40 percent of Apasiev's posts. The Facebook monitoring shows that harmful narratives are present in 71.4 percent of the communication of the Democratic Movement and in 80 percent of the communication of the leader Izet Medjiti. Regarding Alternativa, 75 percent of the posts contain a harmful narrative and 33.3 percent of leader Afrim Gashi's posts.

Table 2. Percentage of posts with a harmful narrative from the total number of posts in January 2024



4 On the website of the Alliance for Albanians, Alternativa, Democratic Movement, LDP, New Social Democratic Party and Socialist Party, no harmful narratives were noted.

5 No harmful narratives were noted on the Facebook pages of the Alliance for Albanians, Arben Taravari, Hristijan Mickoski, Monika Zajkova, Goran Misovski, Ljupco Dimovski, DUI, LDP, NSDP and the Socialist Party of Macedonia.

Days with the most harmful narratives are 10 (13) January, 18 (16) January and 22 (14) January, when the most common topics in the domestic media were about domestic politics. On 10 January, the case of the violent intrusion in the government-owned Joint Stock Company for Provision of Air Navigation Services M-NAV, the establishment of a caretaker government for conducting the elections, the criticisms between the ruling Albanian party DUI and the Albanian opposition is popular in the media concerning the alleged involvement of the Prime Minister of Kosovo, Albin Kurti and the Prime Minister of Albania, Edi Rama in the domestic politics of the country. On 18 January, the most popular topic is the case of breaking the deadlines for changing the identification and travel documents of the citizens with the new constitutional name of the country, and more intense communication from SDSM with criticism of local authorities from the ranks of VMRO-DPMNE was noted. In addition, the topic of the M-NAV case is still trending.

On 22 January, the most trending topic regarding domestic politics is the strike of the Public Transport Company JSP due to non-payment of salaries to employees.

Other trending topics among the public in January are the presidential candidates for the upcoming elections, the visit of the Head of the Department for Coordination of Sanctions at the US State Department and appointed Assistant Secretary of State for European and Eurasian Affairs James O'Brien in Skopje, and from world affairs, the news from the World Economic Forum in Davos and the military aggressions in Ukraine and Gaza were present. The rarest topics for which harmful narratives have been identified are social policy and culture.

Again, the same trend is noted in terms of the most prevalent form of posts with harmful narratives. On the websites, the harmful narratives are mostly published in the form of press releases, while statements, speeches and interviews are the rarest. On the Facebook pages, there is a greater diversity in the form of posts with harmful narratives, but again, they are mostly represented as press releases, press conferences and interviews, and statements are the least frequently noted as a form of post in which harmful narratives are present.

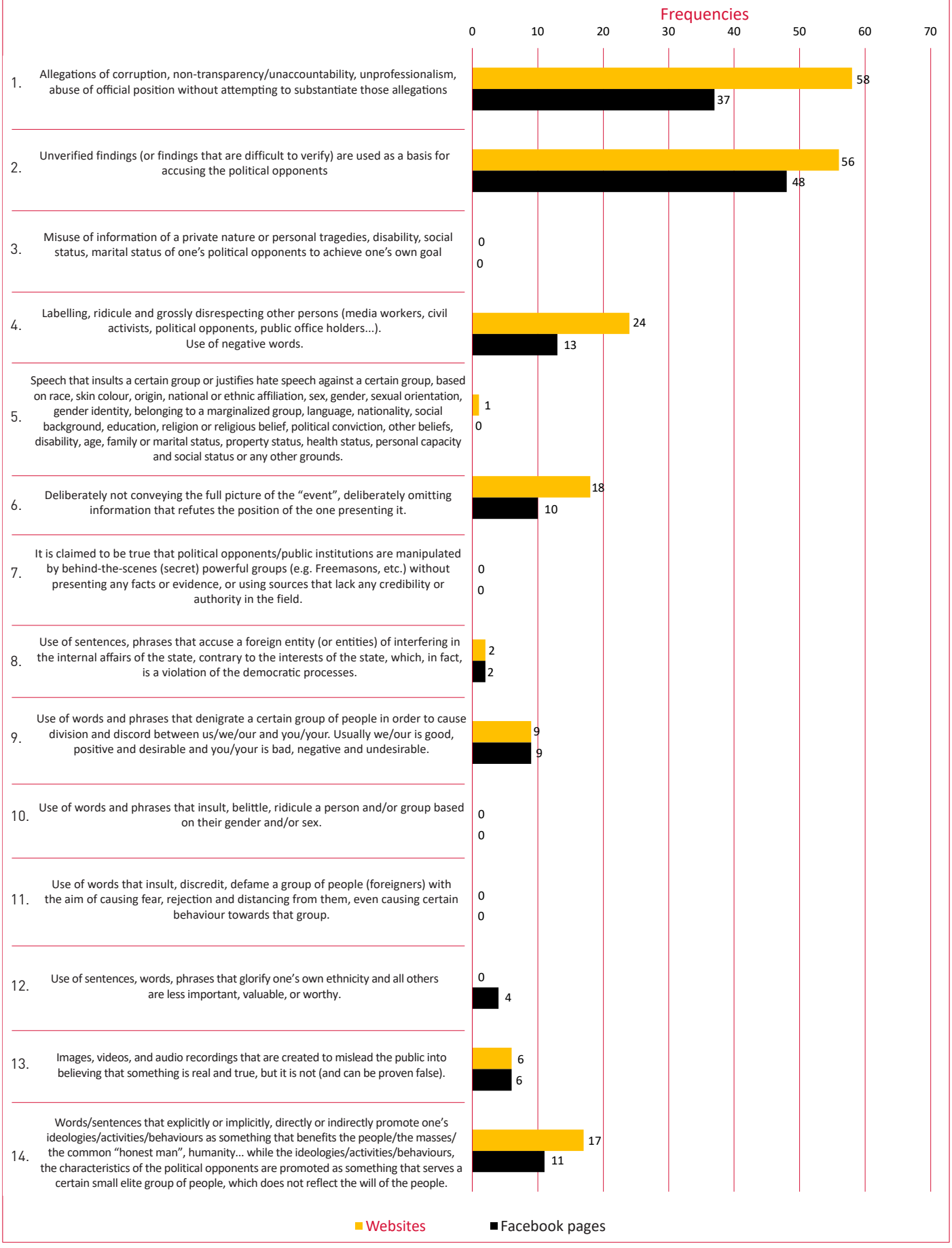
The practice of posting the press releases published to the media on the websites of the political actors, as well as on their Facebook pages to reach a wider audience, continues.

Most common harmful narratives

The monitoring showed that the harmful narratives used by the political actors are similar as in the previous months. Unverified findings are often used as a basis for accusing political opponents as well as unsubstantiated claims of corruption, unprofessionalism and abuse of office. The next most frequently used indicators of harmful narratives on both communication channels are the labelling, ridicule and gross disrespect of the political opponents, as well as the deliberate non-reporting of information which results in failing to present the full picture of the event. Attempts to denigrate a certain group of people in order to cause divisions and discords and accusations of interference of foreign entities in domestic political processes contrary to the country's interests are less often noticed on the websites. Furthermore, the promotion of one's own ideologies as something that is humane and 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, is also often noted on the Facebook pages.

It is interesting to note that this month on the websites and Facebook pages there are the same number (6) of identified posts with harmful narrative that contain images, videos and audio recordings that are created in order to mislead the public.

Table 3. Prevalence of harmful narratives indicators (Websites and Facebook) in January 2024



In SDSM's discourse, it was noted that the trend of using unverified findings as a basis for accusing the political opponents and unsubstantiated claims of corruption, unprofessionalism and abuse of office continues. There is also, on the websites, promotion of one's own ideologies as something that is in favour of the people, in contrast to the political opponents, defamation of the political opponents in order to cause divisions and discord, as well as negative labelling.

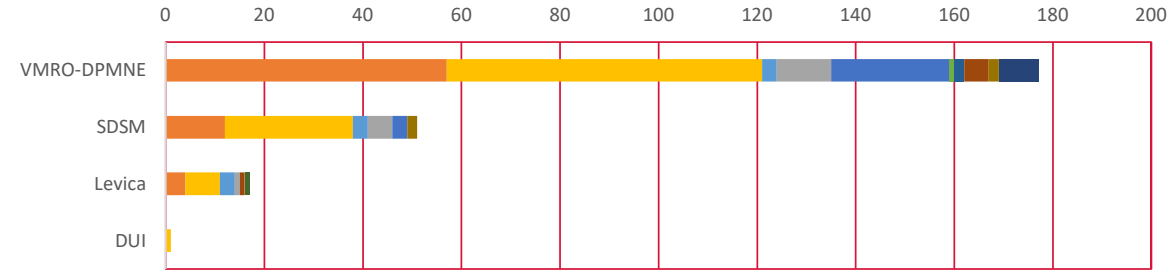
Similar to SDSM, VMRO-DPMNE also continues to use unverified findings and allegations of corruption. Labelling political opponents and incomplete reporting of information, as well as populist promotion of one's own versus opponents' views, are often noted. Along with this trend, it is interesting to note that on their Facebook page this month, images, videos and audio recordings that are created in order to mislead the public are often noticed, and the monitoring also showed a small amount of disinformation that was published as press releases.

In the one identified post with a harmful narrative on the DUI's website, the deliberate non-reporting of information is noted, while on the leader Ahmeti's Facebook page, an ethnocentric post glorifying one's own ethnicity is noted, in contrast to others that are considered less important.

Regarding Levica, in addition to the commonly used harmful narratives with unverified findings and claims of corruption, this month, the labelling and denigration of the political opponents in order to cause divisions and discords in society is often seen. Many of the identified indicators of harmful narratives with the exception of manipulative audio-visual content can be noted on leader Apasiev's Facebook page.

On the Facebook page of the Alliance for Albanians, unverified findings and glorification of one's own ethnicity are identified, while on the pages of the European Union for Change, unverified findings and unfounded claims of corruption, as well as populist rhetoric are often noted.

Table 4. Prevalence of harmful narratives in the posts of political parties' websites in January 2024



	DUI	Levica	SDSM	VMRO-DPMNE
Undermining trust		4	12	57
Biased selection	1	7	26	64
Fomenting divisions		3	3	3
Populism		1	5	11
Character attacks, Demonization			3	24
Conspiracy theories				1
Foreign Influence				2
Spreading panic, fear and uncertainty		1		5
Hate speech				
Disinformation			2	2
Manipulative audio-visual content				8
Extreme patriotism		1		

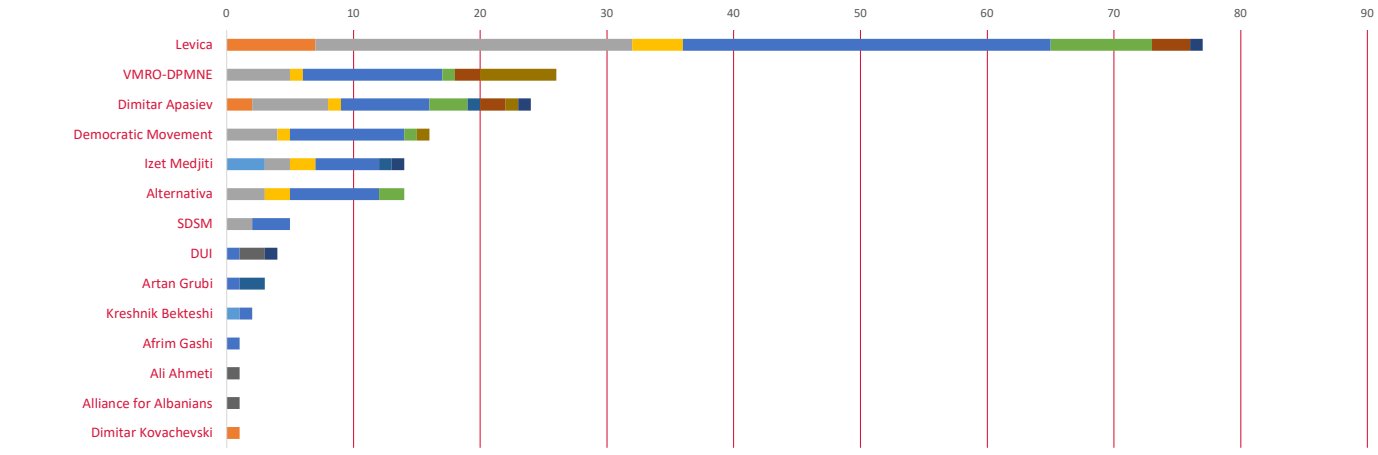
By using the above-mentioned indicators, the parties on their websites often developed harmful narratives of biased selection of information that mislead the public to wrong conclusions and tried to undermine the trust in the institutions.

In a total of 46 website posts of VMRO-DPMNE in which there are identified 177 pieces of the communication assessed as harmful, most often, i.e. 64 times they biasedly selected information and 57 times they tried to undermine trust in the institutions. The next most frequently present harmful narratives on VMRO-DPMNE's website are attacks and demonization of the political opponents (24 times), populism (11 times). The monitoring less often found disinformation, attempts to spread panic, fear and insecurity and inciting social divisions, alleged harmful foreign influences, manipulative audio-visual content.

In 22 identified websites posts with harmful narratives from SDSM, a total of 51 attempts to develop harmful narratives were noted, biased selection of information and undermining trust in the institutions were mostly present, whereas populism, attacks and demonization of political opponents, fomenting divisions were less often noted and two disinformation pieces were noted.

On Levica's website, with a similar trend, harmful narratives of biased selection of information were mostly developed, less often a narrative was used to incite social divisions and undermine trust in the institutions, and once they also used populism, spreading panic, fear and uncertainty and encouraging extreme nationalism and patriotism.

Table 5. Prevalence of harmful narratives in political parties Facebook posts in January 2024



	Dimitar Kovachevski	Alliance for Albanians	Ali Ahmeti	Afrim Gashi	Kreshnik Bekteshi	Artan Grubi	DUI	SDSM	Alternativa	Izet Medjiti	Democratic Movement	Dimitar Apasiev	VMRO-DPMNE	Levica
Disinformation					1					3				
Fomenting divisions	1											2		7
Undermining trust								2	3	2	4	6	5	25
Populism									2	2	1	1	1	4
Biased selection				1	1	1	1	3	7	5	9	7	11	29
Character attacks, Demonization									2		1	3	1	8
Foreign Influence						2				1		1		
Spreading panic, fear and uncertainty												2	2	3
Ethnocentrism		1	1				2							
Manipulative audio-visual content											1	1	6	
Extreme patriotism, and/or nationalism							1			1		1		1

The Facebook pages show the same trend of the most frequent harmful narratives of biased selection of information leading to wrong conclusions in the public (75 times) and undermining trust in the institutions (47 times), while in third place are attacks and demonization of political opponents (15 times).

Facebook monitoring for January noted four disinformation pieces, three of which are on the profile of the leader of the Democratic Movement, Izet Medjiti, and one post with disinformation from the profile of the Minister of Economy from the ranks of DUI, Kreshnik Bekteshi.

In January, harmful narratives were noted on two Facebook pages of Deputy Prime Minister Grubi and Minister Bekteshi who come from the DUI party.

Social Democratic Union of Macedonia - SDSM

In January, the same trend continues in SDSM's communication focusing on the domestic politics topics. The party continues to present itself as a key driver of the country's European path, often stressing the narrative of the benefits of the country's EU integration. In addition to the presentation of their EU orientation, it can be noted that they present themselves as a transparent party that defends justice.

This month, the trend of repeating the same public communications and posts on different channels and in different formats is noticed again, and it can also be noticed that when there are no photos and videos of people and events, the red banner of the SDSM party is often used as an illustration in addition to the text.

In 22 identified posts with a harmful narrative out of a total of 106 on the party's website, and five out of a total of 546 on the Facebook page, the focus is on criticism of VMRO-DPMNE, which they call 'DPMNE', the leader Hristijan Mickoski, who they call 'faltering', and the local government from VMRO-DPMNE, and often (in 6 out of 22 harmful posts on the websites) the Public Transport Company - JSP is also mentioned.

On the websites, out of a total of 22 posts with a harmful narrative, 13 are criticism of the local government, including the City of Skopje, five refer to the upcoming elections, three refer to the election of the caretaker government, three to the relations between the government and the opposition, and one refers to the change of the identification documents, while in the five Facebook posts with a harmful narrative, which are videos of statements and one press conference, the caretaker government, criticism of the local government and the situation in public transport in Skopje are mostly discussed. The day with the most harmful narratives on the websites is 22 January, when SDSM produced harmful communication concerning the situation with JSP, i.e. the strike of employees due to unpaid salaries, where they accused VMRO-DPMNE of blocking decisions in the Council of the City of Skopje that would have paid subsidies to JSP in order to continue to operate.

One of the numerous examples of attempts to undermine trust in the local municipalities led by mayors from VMRO-DPMNE is the 18 January press release 'DPMNE only knows about hands in the cookie jar, three times more expensive machine bought in Veles than the same one in Centre' in which via unsubstantiated claims of corruption, unprofessionalism and abuse of office, as well as unverified findings - *The Municipality of Veles, managed by DPMNE, procures one machine for recording horizontal signalling for 42,000 euros. However, the Municipality of Centre buys the same machine, for three times less price, i.e., about 13,000 euros... The question is in whose pockets did the rest of the money end up?* develops a harmful narrative with a biased selection of information that leads to wrong conclusions and undermines trust in the Municipality of

6 54 Facebook posts in the designated monitoring days. A total of 105 contents were published in the month.

Veles (in the previous months, criticisms of the opposition VMRO-DPMNE about the work of local authorities led by SDSM were ignored). Furthermore, this press release is an example of SDSM's communication strategy of repeating the same messages and topics on different days and on different communication channels, as this is the sixth of a series of posts regarding the same case, which they have previously published on the 14, 15 and 18 January.

This month, two posts with disinformation were noticed on SDSM's website. Similar to the topic and narrative as the previous example, on 18 January with a press release titled 'Scandals are lining up in the municipalities under DPMNE, Pecakov gave money to a club he is the founder of' SDSM, in an attempt to undermine trust in the institution of the Municipality of Ohrid, presents unsubstantiated findings of corruption: *After the questionable purchases of machines at astronomical prices, several times higher than the real ones, the Mayor of Ohrid, Kiril Pecakov, allocated money to a handball club of he himself he is the founder. Over 250 thousand euros, as published in the Official Gazette of the Municipality of Ohrid No. 14 dated 28.12.2023, were paid to City Handball Club Ohrid by the Municipality of Ohrid as direct support. The owner of CHC Ohrid AD Ohrid is CHC Ohrid 2013, where the founder of the handball club is precisely the Mayor Kiril Pecakov. So is Pecakov indirectly transferring money to himself through the Municipality!? and unverified findings - All aspects should be determined because there is a well-founded suspicion that in this manner money can be pumped out from citizens and then misused...,* thus forming a disinformation conclusion that *'there is no Municipality in the country that is led by DPMNE, which does not have scandal related to finances, public procurement and citizens' money. Nothing changes in DPMNE, it is the same party that does not care about the citizens, but only the personal enrichment of a certain group of people.'* Furthermore, on 23 January, with a press release under title '(Photo) While the employees of JSP were freezing in the streets, the councillors of DPMNE were making agreements how to play them' SDSM posted information with allegedly 'scandalous photos from the session of the City Council of Skopje', by means of which they claim that the councillors of DPMNE conspired, under the instruction of Ilija Dimovski (similarly as during the regime of DPMNE, how to 'trick' the employees in JSP by opposing the decision to grant them subsidies.

Regarding the establishment of the caretaker government, the communication is most intense at the end of the month, when on 30 January, a press release was posted on the party's website 'DPMNE joined the Government with DUI, the faltering Mickoski got lost' and press conference of spokeswoman Bogdanka Kuzeska 'DPMNE joined the Government with DUI, Mickoski cannot be trusted' which repeats and strengthens the accusation against the leader of VMRO-DPMNE, Mickoski, that he lied, with negative labels and a harmful narrative of demonization of the person - *Let the faltering Mickoski come out now and explain to the citizens, but also to his members: Why did he problematize the caretaker government when he finally joined the government with DUI?... Mickoski does not have any stance, nor the political capacity to make any decision, he definitely does not know what to do with himself, nor with the party.*

The next day, on 31 January, the same messages were repeated in the press release 'DPMNE joined the Government with DUI, everything Mickoski said was a lie'. On the same day, the press conference by the MP Kostovski on the Facebook page of the party was posted with the same unverified findings that develop a harmful narrative of biased selection of information and arguments: *It was seen, it was shown, Hristijan Mickoski, everything he said was a lie. Wasn't the only requirement for him DUI not to be part of the Government? Didn't he say that he would accept anything, but he cannot accept Government with a DUI? Well, that's it, that is not true anymore. DPMNE sat in the Government next to DUI. DPMNE ministers bowed to Talat Djaferi.*

Moreover, this month there is a harmful narrative in SDSM's critical posts towards VMRO-DPMNE which associates VMRO-DPMNE with 'horror', such as the press release on the website of 26 January under title 'We will defeat the horror of Mickoski and DPMNE on 8 May', the 27 January press release titled 'The choice is horror with Mickoski and DPMNE or a European future and higher salaries with SDSM' and the press release of 30 January '98 more days until 8 May and the victory of SDSM and the pro-European coalition!'. Unverified findings are used in these press releases *Mickoski announced that the work of the Caretaker*

Government would be a horror, where they would be fighting during meetings. This is the approach which DPMNE operates on and it shows that nothing has changed in this party. Mickoski's and DPMNE's attempt at horror will be defeated on 8 May (press release, 26 January), via which a harmful narrative of selectively presenting data is developed regarding an event that seems to confirm one position, while ignoring other data which refute that position, i.e., taking out of context the use of the word 'horror' by Mickoski and leading to the conclusion that the ruling of VMRO-DPMNE led by Mickoski would be equal to 'horror'. It is also noticeable that VMRO-DPMNE is defamed in order to cause social divisions and discord between 'ours which is good' and 'yours which is bad' - *There is no future with Mickoski and DPMNE, no membership in the EU, but going back to isolation, uncertainty, crime, corruption, divisions among the citizens, low wages and pensions. On the other hand, there are SDSM and Kovachevski who guarantee security, stability, democracy, freedom and a European future for all citizens with higher salaries and pensions, with a higher standard of living.* (Press release, 27 January).

Similarly, on the first day after leaving the Prime Minister's Office a video promoting the SDSM headquarters in the centre in Skopje was published on Kovachevski's Facebook page, and he said: *In the elections on 8 May, the citizens have two concepts. The choice is higher salaries, pensions, investments and more money for the citizens with SDSM and the European front. Or lower salaries, workers as cheap labour and throwing money for monuments, weeping willows and criminal projects with DPMNE. The choice is a secure European future with SDSM and the European front, security, stability, freedom and democracy. Or isolation, regression, going back to the dark past with threatened freedom of speech and stifled democracy with DPMNE.* (Video post on Dimitar Kovachevski's Facebook page, 30 January)

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

In January, there are several key characteristics in the communication of DUI. The first is that the party is intensifying its bipolar pro-European/anti-Russian rhetoric, this time with the promotion of the slogan 'NO to Russia, YES to Europe' (posted on the profile of Deputy Prime Minister Artan Grubi on 22 and 23 January), which is a hallmark of DUI's pre-election campaign for the upcoming presidential and parliamentary elections.

A second specific example is the biased selection of information when the party informs about the meeting with the Dutch ambassador Dirk Jan Kop. In the 10 January press release on the DUI's website there are apparently no harmful narratives: *...Rule of law and vetting for all judges and prosecutors was part of Ahmeti's conversation with the Ambassador Dirk Jan Kop. The vetting legislation for judges, prosecutors and politicians has been in the Assembly for some time, but the EU initially had reservations in this process, referring to the example of the Republic of Albania. In the matter of the Supreme Court, Ahmeti underlined that it is within the jurisdiction of the Judicial Council to act according to the laws. According to reports, there have been multiple disciplinary proceedings to this date and it is their responsibility to act in accordance with the law and without pressure from inside or outside.* Nevertheless, numerous media reports informed that Ambassador Kop expressed different views after the meeting and criticized Ahmeti for influencing the judiciary, and hence it can be concluded that DUI's press release is deliberately not conveying the complete picture of the event and thereby developing a harmful narrative of biased selection of information leading the public to wrong conclusions. The dissonant tones of the Ahmeti-Kop meeting provoked party reactions that spilled over into the media (11 January is the day with the most harmful posts in TV monitoring).

Apart from these two cases, the monitoring also showed one post with ethnocentrism. On the leader Ali Ahmeti's Facebook page, a video of an interview of the president of DUI, Ali Ahmeti on RTK dated 30 January, was posted regarding the upcoming elections, and the appointment of a new prime minister in the Caretaker Government, in which Ahmeti says: *'...An agreement can be reached with the coalition partner for at least one year depending on the election results, but the Albanian parties should not go to the door of the winner of the Macedonian parties after the elections on 9 May, but to respect the decision of the Albanian citizens. The Albanian party, which has one MP more than the others, has legitimacy, and they should not wait for bread from the Macedonian parties. The Albanians will be represented by the Albanian party, which receives its legitimacy from the Albanians.'* The same interview was posted on DUI's Facebook page and on the profile of the Minister of Economy Kreshnik Bekteshi.

Just like the previous months, in January, the party presented itself as a transparent and accountable party, oriented towards the EU and a defender of the interests of the ethnic Albanians.

VMRO-DPMNE

The monitoring of VMRO-DPMNE's discourse in the month of January notes intense communication with the public, with frequent and sharp criticisms of the political opponents, i.e., of the ruling parties SDSM and DUI, as well as officials in government. Most often there are targeted posts in which the ruling 'SDS' and DUI are labelled as 'incompetent', 'unprofessional and corrupt'. SDSM is criticized and labelled as a political party, which, although it is the major partner in the government, is still dependent on DUI. Thereto, VMRO-DPMNE presents itself as a party that is defender of justice, saviour, defender of identity and the people.

There are noted 46 posts from VMRO-DPMNE containing a harmful narrative. Of them, 16 are from the area of domestic politics, 14 on crime, five fall under the category of corruption, four concerning health, two concerning economy, two fall in the category of justice.

In terms of domestic politics topics, VMRO-DPMNE mostly focused on the establishment of the Caretaker Government and the appointment of Talat Djaferi as prime minister, while the communication targets Djaferi himself, as well as SDSM and its leader Kovachevski, who are labelled as incompetent and criminal, who hand over the Prime Minister's Office to the smaller coalition partner.

The posts are mostly press releases from the party, which, in addition to being sent to the media, are also posted on their website. Very often the press releases are also statements of high officials of the party, given in the party headquarters in the capacity of spokespersons. According to the frequency of posts, the trend continues that the most harmful posts are in the form of press releases (58) and press conferences (9), and less often reactions (4), interviews (2), speeches (1) or statements (1).

VMRO-DPMNE mostly used the following harmful narratives: biased selection - 64 times, undermining trust - 57 times, character attacks, demonization - 24, and less often fomenting divisions – 3, populism – 11, conspiracy theories – 1, foreign influence – 2.

In January, there was a total of 18 posts on the Facebook profile of VMRO-DPMNE, six of which have a harmful narrative. The six posts are propaganda edited video clips on various topics, three of which refer to the economic situation in the country, two refer to criticism of the Government on the political situation, and one refers to the situation in the judiciary. In two out of six posts, the party and its leader are presented as 'saviours', and in four out of six posts, 'there is no particular intention, but only conveying information.'

On VMRO-DPMNE's Facebook page, the most frequently mentioned actors are: VMRO-DPMNE – in six of the six noted posts, SDSM in five of the six posts, Dimitar Kovachevski in three of the six posts, DUI in three of the six posts. The practice of naming SDSM as 'SDS' continues, deliberately removing the letter 'M' from the name Social Democratic Union of Macedonia, to emphasize that according to VMRO-DPMNE they are not a political option that fights for the Macedonian interests.

An additional feature of the communication practice is the use of the closing message 'it has never been worse. It is important to defeat them!' This reinforces the qualification of 'black' in the black and white constellation, and calls for mobilization of the citizens for the next elections. Short video clips criticizing some aspect of the government's work are posted, using statistics, public data and facts combined with manipulated audio and audio-visual material to achieve different effects. This practice is more common in press releases, and less common in the Facebook communication of the party. Considering that all the videos are associated with the phrase 'it has never been worse!' it is important to defeat them!' and these are published in the pre-election period, they can be monitored as part of campaign activities connected in a whole and a narrative that could be used in the election campaign in 2024.

The topics of the videos are concerning the economic situation in the country and the rule of law 'for 365 days it has never been worse, 600,000 citizens live on the edge of poverty, and 1 billion denars flow into the pockets of Kovachevski and the ministers of SDS and DUI for higher salaries, it is important to defeat them', (published on 2 January),'the persons who are synonymous with judiciary in Macedonia are known only for exercising the wishes of SDS and DUI, it has never been worse, it is important to defeat them', (published on 10 January), 'Macedonia is a captured state, ruled by corrupt politicians, it has never been worse, it is important to defeat them', (published on 11 January), 'SDS in 7 years indebted the country for new 3.3 billion euros, it has never been worse, it is important to defeat them', (published on 15 January) 'every third citizen lives in poverty, every year 24,000 people become poor because of SDS, it has never been worse, it is important to defeat them', (published on 18 January).

In these posts, the use of biased selection, allegations of corrupt, unprofessional and irresponsible work of the governing structures with the aim of undermining trust in the institutions are noted. Accurate data is taken regarding a certain topic, which is combined with unsubstantiated or incorrect allegations, offensive language is used, labelling is used, public office holders are presented as corrupt, incompetent in order to undermine the public's trust in them.

For example information from the video 'for 365 days it has never been worse, 600,000 citizens live on the edge of poverty, and 1 billion denars flow into the pockets of Kovachevski and the ministers of SDS and DUI for higher salaries, it is important to defeat them' also appear in party's press release of 2 January, 2024 in which unsubstantiated allegations such as '365 days have never been worse', '365 days of defeats, humiliations, misery and poverty brought by the government of SDS and DUI for the citizens of Macedonia'. There is data on the increase in the salaries of the officials from the executive power - *80 million denars per month or almost 1 billion denars per year from the state budget will go into the pockets of government officials for higher salaries.* however, no data was reported that there was also increase of the salaries of the mayors and MPs from VMRO-DPMNE in the assembly, i.e. The salaries of all elected and appointed persons have been increased. It is claimed that *the SDS and DUI government increased their salaries by as much as 78 percent,* but the increase was not made by the Government, but followed after the Constitutional Court made a decision to abolish articles in the law on salaries and compensation of salaries of elected and appointed persons. The Government has neither the authority, nor the competence to determine the salaries and compensation of salaries for persons it does not appoint or elect (prime minister, ministers, MPs in the Assembly and persons appointed by it, members of the judiciary, the president of the country and persons appointed by them, mayors, etc.).

Ridiculing, labelling and undermining trust in the institution Prime Minister is also evident in several of the posts that refer to the developments in the Government-owned Joint Stock Company for Provision of Air Navigation Services M-NAV GOJSC Skopje. In a press release of 6 January, 2024, SDSM and DUI are ridiculed as parties that constantly claim to stand for European values, and the political opponent is labelled and ridiculed with the comment that 'the 'European' fights in M-NAV are proof of the non-European criminal gangs of DUI and SDS.' The SDSM is named as 'SDS', 'The Government of SDS and DUI decided to keep silent', and the Prime Minister is ridiculed and criticized for unprofessional work, the trust in the institution is being undermined by the narrative that the Prime Minister is *waiting for an amen from DUI for further actions, and maybe he, as well as the director of M-NAV, Fahrudin Hamidi, believes that it was not an attack, but a 'bickering among employees.* The incident is again put in the context of the upcoming elections, emphasizing that *it has never been worse, it is important to defeat them!*

Similarly, in a press release of 18 January, related to the responsibility regarding the events at M-NAV, the Prime Minister is being ridiculed for not taking action, i.e. the political opponent through the narrative *'Ali Ahmeti prompted him not to talk too much, because otherwise he will not put him on the joint lists or will not give him support for a joint candidate for president'*, while mocking the Prime Minister and using insulting language, as for a person who is subordinate to the smaller coalition partner, which undermines trust in the institution Prime Minister and in the Government itself.

Also, a topic addressed during the month of January in VMRO-DPMNE's posts is the criticism of 'SDS' due to the election of Talat Djaferi as the Prime Minister of the Caretaker Government, who comes from the smaller coalition partner in the Government, DUI and not from SDSM as the major party in power. The reason why DUI proposes the prime minister for the caretaker government stems from the coalition agreement made after the 2020 elections, when SDSM and DUI formed a government and one of the agreed issues was that in the caretaker government before the next elections (i.e. 2024) the prime minister should be Albanian, at the suggestion of DUI.

In a press release of 28 January the main actors are the Prime Minister and president of SDSM, Dimitar Kovachevski and the president of the Assembly, Talat Djaferi. Allegations of unprofessionalism, incompetence in work, misinformation, biased selection are presented and trust in the institutions is undermined through the allegations that *SDS, in order to rule, gave away the country to DUI. Talat Djaferi from DUI became prime minister because of the weak SDS. There are also allegations of foreign influence, that on the contrary, their hopes are that DUI will gather the Albanian parties in a coalition with SDS, and this process will be dictated by Kosovo for SDS to mitigate its debacle. It doesn't work that way. It is clear what you are doing.* There are also unconfirmed allegations of unprofessional work against Talat Djaferi, who is said to be 'known for violating the constitution, the laws, the rules of procedure of the Assembly' and that he 'continuously violated the legal norms of the country' and comes from a party where leaders are mouthful about European values, but whose actions only show how they violate them.

Levica

In the political discourse of Levica and its leader Dimitar Apasiev for the monitored period, the harsh rhetoric continues in public appearances, statements and posts in January. Critical communication is mostly directed at the major political parties, the ruling SDSM and DUI, as well as the main opposition party VMRO-DPMNE. Occasionally there are also posts in which SDSM, VMRO-DPMNE and DUI are accused to work against the national interests of the country, wanting to present Levica as the only party that is on the side of the citizens. With the discourse used against the big political parties, the intention is to undermine the trust in them - in SDSM and DUI - as ruling parties, and in VMRO-DPMNE as the main opposition party that aims to form the future government. In the posts, the parties are named as 'SDS' for SDSM, 'DPMNE' for VMRO-DPMNE, and the country as 'Republic.' It presents itself as a defender of the people's interests, on the side of the citizens, against the big political parties that act corruptly and contrary to the country's interests.

In terms of the topics addressed by Levica in January, it is noticeable that the trend of having a wide range of topics they post about continues. Levica is quite active on Facebook, with regular posts of the party's local branches in different municipalities. Unlike the big parliamentary parties, Levica often communicates concerning topics related to local issues regarding the work of the municipalities, the environment, education, to topics that are of broad public interest, such as corruption, crime, and national interests, such as the establishment of the Caretaker government or the M-NAV scandal.

Topics related to the Albanian ethnic community are often mentioned, articulating a discourse that the Macedonian ethnic community is subordinated to the Albanian one. Thus, the subject of the introduction of an Albanian class in Chashka was addressed while the party itself participated in the protests, as well as the topic of job advertisements for employment of ethnic Albanians.

There are 17 posts on Levica's website in January, of which four are speeches in the Assembly, three are posts regarding events, five are interviews/podcasts, four are press releases, i.e. reactions, and one is an interview. On the designated days for monitoring, there are ten posts, six of which have a harmful narrative.

Besides the aspect of irresponsibility, the topic of the M-NAV scandal is addressed by Levica from the perspective of the ethnic dimension, and is also used as an occasion for criticism of the incompetence of the main Macedonian ruling party and for the confirmation of the allegations that often appear in the posts by Levica that the major Macedonian parties are working for DUI's interests.

In a press release dated 5 January 'Two decades of 'pro-European' DUI's terrorism and violence enabled by SDS and DPMNE' it is said that *the raid of DUI's gangs in M-NAV showed again all the destructiveness and recklessness of this criminal party which now and many times before has threatened the public safety.* It is claimed that *The complete* ***subordination of the spineless SDS under the boot of the secessionists from DUI and the silence of DPMNE as a previously known coalition partner*** *continues to be no match for these heinous humiliations and attacks on the common good.* In the post where harmful narratives that contain ridicule, humiliation of the political opponent, allegations of crime are used, it is also stated that since 2010, when the suspect for the current raid, even then committed illegal acts, and was not sanctioned and was again appointed to a high state position, as director of the Pensions Fund, then minister of economy in the governments led by VMRO-DPMNE. i.e., SDSM and VMRO-DPMNE are criticized as parties that did not protect the interests of the citizens. It is added that *now DPMNE are appalled by the savagery of the terrorists they have amnestied - and SDS has given them complete power, as well as that 'this is another in a series of examples of the cadres of the so-called the European front of SDS and DUI which aim to continue to rule in this manner.* The ridicule, the humiliation, the insulting language towards the political opponents and allegations of crime used in the post serve to undermine trust in the institutions and portray the major ruling parties as corrupt entities, as opposed to Levica, which stands for fairness and honest work.

Further, in a 15 January press release regarding employments in the Customs Administration of the Republic of North Macedonia, the 'criminogenic ruling duo of SDS-DUI' is accused of *partisation of all the pores of the state apparatus through the employment of party henchmen in institutions of all types* and that the political party DUI 'privatizes the Customs'. In the press release that critically refers to the Ohrid Framework Agreement, it is said that *a typical example of this framework tyranny is the situation in the Customs Administration, where there are 15 new job vacancies, of which 13 positions are 'reserved' for citizens from the Albanian minority, one position for the Turkish minority and one job position for the Roma minority, thus practically DUI privatizes the Customs Administration.* Thereto, the **Ohrid Framework Agreement is labelled as 'illegal'**, and *DUI as a par excellence example of a cartel party uses the position of blackmail to anchor its party cadres, according to that even 40% of advertisements are for citizens of Albanian ethnicity.*

In the press release, Levica also points out that it advocates for the annulment of the Ohrid Framework Agreement and *employment under an ethnic key as a source of inter-ethnic hatred in the Republic, where a person is not employed according to their qualifications, but according to an ethnic key, which is also an insult to the employees who are employed in this manner- not according to merit but according to ethnicity.*

This post notes the use of narratives to undermine trust in institutions and show that they work unprofessionally, illegally and corruptly, driven only by party interests, not country's interests. The rhetoric against the Ohrid Framework Agreement, which is considered one of the key documents for maintaining inter-ethnic stability, can be considered as rhetoric directed against the Albanian and other non-majority ethnic communities, can lead to the creation of an image of 'we the good ones', and they 'the bad ones', as well as fomenting divisions in the society.

The Levica party, as well as its president, have significantly more posts on Facebook. Those posts are often accompanied by hashtags, photos or reels. During January, Dimitar Apasiev's Facebook profile has a total of 90 posts. Of these, 45 were subject to analysis in the specified 16 days of monitoring, and eight of the posts contain a harmful narrative.

In Levica's posts, in addition to addressing mostly topics of the domestic politics, they are one of the few political entities that accuse of foreign influence in the country and state that some of the politicians in Macedonia work for the interests of other countries. Levica's leader Dimitar Apasiev often has critical posts against the USA and the American ambassador as well as against DUI. In one of the posts on Facebook which refers to the developments at M-NAV which directly locates the responsibility at DUI, he names the American Embassy as 'Kale' - a term often used in slang as a symbol for the embassy given its location near the Kale fortress in Skopje. In the post, he also directly addresses US Ambassador Aggeler as 'the governess':

The beaten controller (who was at work) - from DUI.
The brawler-director with the gang (who was not at work) - from DUI.
The security guard (who should not have let them in) - from DUI.
The gendarme (who was supposed to arrest) - from DUI.
The prosecutor (who was waiting for a report) - from DUI!?
The judge (who did not sentence them to detention) - from DUI!
You realize now what a CAPTURED STATE is and that the existence of DUI is inversely proportional to the existence of the rule of law in the Republic.
Hello Kale, do you hear me?
Governess - are these your 'dogs of war', which you keep on a leash, just in case, should Macedonians be afraid of war. 😷
#DeDUization
#FuckNATO
#MotherFuckingParty
#Severdjianistan

In the post, which is in the domain of the domestic politics, there are allegations of corrupt, criminal and unprofessional actions by DUI, undermining trust in the institutions that are claimed to be controlled by DUI. The American Embassy is portrayed as a protector of DUI, and by naming the ambassador with the insulting

term 'governess[7]', he also refers to foreign influence in Macedonia. The post ends with three hashtags with negative words and a 'vomit' emoticon.

In a post on Facebook from the field of the domestic politics, in support of the protest in Chashka against an Albanian class, it is stated that *Levica will continue with all its capacity to fight against the violence of the amnestied DUI gang, which as long as it exists on the political scene, it will be a factor in spreading inter-ethnic tensions and instability in the Republic!* The post is titled *THE PEOPLE IN CHASHKA EVERY DAY TEACH A LESSON ON RESISTANCE AGAINST DUI BANDITS!* by which Levica shows that it is on the side of the people and a defender of the Macedonian national identity. In the text, the principal of the school, Elena Nikolova, is labelled as **'mercenary of DUI', 'bribed principal'**, and DUI are labelled as 'bandits', 'amnestied bandits', **'ballists'**. It is stated that Minister Jeton Shaqiri, together with the 'bribed' director of OOU 'Todor Janev' - ELENA NIKOLOVA, have been trying to illegally introduce an Albanian class in Chashka for months. In this post, in addition to the harmful narratives of labelling, disparagement the trust in institutions is also being undermined, insulting expressions about the political opponents that ***'In these moments for the Republic, occupied by the quislings of the SDS and the ballists of the DUI'***. It is also added that the local population in Chashka *'teaches a lesson in courage, perseverance and resistance against the thugs in power!'.*

In one of the posts on the Facebook page of the leader of Levica Apasiev, he addresses the topic of the issuance of a permit for a 17-story building near the '8 Septemvri' hospital, regarding which the expert public believes should not be construction land due to the protection of cultural heritage. Levica's leader Apasiev shares a post from Levica's Facebook page that presents the party's position, which is well-argued and enhances it with a harmful narrative.

Insulting and disparaging language towards the director of the Conservation Centre as 'Uchka' is used, a term that is noted in some of Levica's narratives as a derogatory term about Albanian officials. It is reported that he did not give a positive opinion to build new surgical facilities in the City Hospital, but he gave a positive opinion about 'the DUI financier's horrible building near the Military Hospital!?'. Insulting language is also used about the Mayor of the Municipality of Karposh *'Hey STEVCHE JAKIMOVSKI - how many apartments have you stolen in your life, you corrupted scumbag!!!'* The post alludes to the corrupt work of the two officials, presenting unsubstantiated allegations in order to undermine trust in them. Using insulting and humiliating language towards the political opponents such as 'UCHKA' and 'scumbag' is a violation of the principles of ethics in the communication.

The monitoring also determined that regarding the leader of Levica, Dimitar Apasiev, Facebook intervened in his status for spreading incorrect findings. The footage was covered as 'fake news' with the social network explaining that it did not pass fact-checking. The reader is given the option if they want to see the content, which takes a few extra clicks, but there is the note from Facebook that it is fake.

Levica is one of the three political parties that voluntarily acceded to the Code of Conduct in the online space during election processes and referenda. It is an initiative of the Agency for Audio and Audio-visual Media Services in cooperation with the Association of Journalists of Macedonia, the Macedonian Institute for Media, the Council of Media Ethics of Macedonia, the Institute of Communication Studies and the Metamorphosis Foundation. In the Code, among other principles and standards, there is provision that the political actors undertake *to strive to use arguments and facts in the public debates and discussions, exemplary and polite language in communication with the public, and respect different views and opinions*.

7 Governor/ governess - governor of a gubernia, an administrative district, during Tsarist Russia. Such administrative units - governorates still exist in Russia.

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

In January, a total of 16 posts with harmful narratives were recorded on the Facebook pages of the European Union for Change - ESP (Lidhja Europjane për Ndryshim), on the parties' and their leaders' Facebook pages i.e., an opposition bloc composed of the political parties of the Albanians in the country, Alternativa, the Besa movement and the Democratic Movement. Their communication continues to focus on sharp criticism of the ruling DUI party and the Government in general, presenting themselves as saviours and defenders of the people, defenders of the identity and justice, that stand for fighting corruption and upholding the rule of law.

This month there is also a post from a new Facebook page of the European Union for Change with a new visual identity, 306 likes and 889 followers, from where the future joint public pre-election communication of the three parties united in the alliance will be published. Through this 3 January press release with charts titled 'European Union for Change: A 78 percent salary increase was not much for the officials, now 400 euros plus, and 2 thousand denars pittance for the citizens' harmful narratives of biased selection and undermining of trust in the institutions are being developed by making unsubstantiated accusations of corruption of the ruling DUI and SDSM - *For the officials, a 78 percent increase in wages was a bit much, now 400 euros plus, and 2 thousand denars pittance for the citizens alms. Extortion of the people in every possible form is a chronic disease of this Government. They shamelessly lie to the citizens and steal from them. Now that the elections are approaching, the Government has started a pre-election campaign, manipulating the people with supposedly anti-crisis measures, by which in just five months 1,200 denars (€20) will be distributed to students, 2,000 and 3,000 denars to pensioners, but the shamelessness soon came to sight, because since January, this current Government of SDSM, DUI and AA increased the salaries of their officials by 24,000 denars plus, i.e. 400 euros...*

In January, five posts were recorded on the Facebook page of the Democratic Movement party, while four posts with a harmful narrative were recorded on the Facebook page of leader Izet Medjiti. On the Facebook profile of the Democratic Movement, two posts are about domestic politics, i.e. corruption and the lack of a representative of the opposition in the SEC, one is regarding the economy about the electricity bills, one is regarding judiciary about the use of the EU flag and one regarding healthcare, the polyclinic in Saraj. In these posts, the party presents itself as a defender of justice, while the Government is called criminal and described as a criminalized government on the run (Facebook post - page of the Democratic Movement, 19 January).

On the Facebook profile of the leader of Democratic Movement, Izet Medjiti, there are two posts about domestic politics, i.e., regarding the upcoming elections and the interference of the Prime Minister of Kosovo Albin Kurti in the pre-election activities in the country, one regarding judiciary, specifically about the request for the dismissal of the president of the Supreme Court, Besa Ademi and one is on the topic of healthcare, regarding an environmental disaster. Medjiti's profile posts are focused on harsh criticism of DUI and demonization of the leader Ahmeti, calling him 'Abaz', Ahmeti's nickname during his activities in the Kosovo Liberation Army and the National Liberation Army, but the accusations sometimes target SDSM-DUI: *Unfortunately, it must be said that some statements of the president of DUI made in the last few days seem peripheral, almost irrelevant, political and cynical... Mr. Ahmeti and his party recently have tried to attack not only the opposition parties, but also to attack the institution of the Prime Minister of Kosovo and the state of Kosovo itself by spreading insinuations, fabrications and inputs that damage the national reputation in general and that of Kosovo in particular.* Although the post refers to a reaction to the DUI's leader Ahmeti for his accusation to Prime Minister Kurti for harmful foreign influence in the country, Medjiti's narrative as a counter argument presents unverified findings of allegedly negative foreign influence by Ahmeti in Kosovo's domestic politics: *In politics, especially in pre-election periods, all tricks, all means are tolerated and methods for advancing party interests. But unlike Mr. Ahmeti and DUI, we do not consider that this includes malicious, insidious, contemptible sabotage, interference,*

provocative rhetoric towards Kosovo or attempts to inflame feelings between the Albanian capitals in the region. We consider this low, unworthy and especially destructive towards Kosovo in these critical processes for the new Albanian state. (Facebook post – Medjiti's page, 10 January). A few days later, a press conference of the Democratic Movement was posted, repeating the same theme and rhetoric of unverified allegations accusing DUI of corruption in the judiciary (Facebook post on the profile of the Democratic Movement, 15 January 2024).

Regarding the attempt to dismiss the President of the Supreme Court Mrs. Besa Ademi, as well, Izet Medjiti uses the moment to accuse DUI of corruption and intolerable governance, and with a populist narrative to present itself as an option for change that will bring the rule of law and the EU integration.

With flagrant political interference in the judiciary to dismiss the president of the Supreme Court, Mrs. Besa Ademi, as revenge for the 'disobedience' to return Nikola Gruevski to the country as a hero, the so-called European Front of DUI has been notified, by the EU through the Dutch ambassador in the country, Dirk Jan Kop, that DUI is the main obstacle to the functioning of the rule of law and the country's integration into the EU. This is an additional reason why the Albanian political scene needs CHANGE, and this CHANGE will happen on 8 May! (Facebook post on the profile of Izet Medjiti 10 January 2024)

On the Facebook page of Alternativa, six posts were recorded, while one post with a harmful narrative was recorded on the leader Afrim Gashi's Facebook page. The identified posts with harmful narratives on Alternativa's Facebook page are with reference to the electricity price increases and wage increases, blocked proposed laws, crime and the abuse of justice, regarding the polyclinic in Saraj, and an attack on air traffic controllers at M-NAV. Presenting themselves as saviours and defenders of justice, the harmful posts of this party are focused on the narrative that the SDSM-DUI pair are an anti-state team, and a two-faced government that extorts and lies and steals from the citizens, as well as demonizing the personality of DUI's leader Ahmeti, calling him 'Capo' as well as other DUI officials (Post from a press conference on Facebook – the Alternative page, 18 January).

For example, in a Facebook post of a 10 January press conference titled 'AlternAtivA: Fatmir Medjiti continues to brag about the works of Bekim Saliu, and on the other hand he harms the citizens of Saraj' unverified findings are used - *'The Minister of Health, Fatmir Medjiti, opened the polyclinic in Saraj today, boasting that he had made history... For the public's information, the polyclinic in Saraj has been ready for a year, even the medical equipment was provided for it since Bekim Sali was a minister, while Fatmir Medjiti is only responsible for the damage he did to 40 thousand citizens of Saraj, whom he harmed by delaying the opening of the polyclinic for a whole year to build a yard, just to coincide with the election campaign in 2024'*, as well as labelling and disrespecting the political opponent Medjiti - *'For the phenomenon of ministers as Fatmir Medjiti, the Albanian people created a very beautiful proverb, which best describes his laziness: Easy come, easy go ('Kros more kros, si t'u nis, t'u sos')*, thereby developing harmful narratives of biased selection and demonization of the political opponents.

Additionally, Facebook post from 31 January on the profile of leader Afrim Gashi is a video from his interview on Alsat television, with the text message *'Unfair and insulting comments that Albin Kurti interferes in the internal affairs of RNM'*. In this interview, Gashi presents himself as a defender of the national identity and criticizes the leader of DUI Ahmeti with unverified findings that develop a harmful narrative of biased selection of information: 'unfair, inaccurate statement, even offensive. When Mr. Ahmeti met with Albin Kurti, and they met more often than us, no one told him that this was interference...' The same post was shared on Alternativa's Facebook page.

Monitoring of the communication of the members of the Government of RNM through the official Facebook pages

The monitoring determined that during the month of January, the practice of posting content from party activities continued on the Facebook page of Prime Minister Dimitar Kovachevski, which can be considered as an abuse of an official government page for the party purposes, such as the post from 11 January, 'Opening of new party premises of the SDSM municipal organization in municipality of Aerodrom'.

In addition to the regular greetings for Christmas Eve and Christmas, as with the Minister of the Interior Oliver Spasovski, where a greeting was posted for the citizens in his personal name and 'on behalf of the Ministry of Interior', all the monitored ministers from the SDSM, this year posted on their Facebook pages for the celebration also on the religious holiday Epiphany in several cities across the country. According to the Facebook posts, the Minister Shukova ('with the best intention and respect for the Macedonian people and all who celebrated the holiday' - in Gevgelija), the Minister Petrovska ('consecration of the waters of the Radika river' - in Rostushe), Deputy Prime Minister Grkovska ('we witnessed the throwing of the holy cross and exchanged messages for good health, peace and well-being' - in Malo Konjari, Prilep), and Deputy Prime Minister Marichikj (in Kumanovo), while Minister Spasovski and the leader of the SDSM Kovachevski (along the Vardar river in Skopje) were present at the throwing of the crosses in the water. Furthermore, Spasovski and Kovachevski posted on their official Facebook pages on 31 January that they also marked the celebration of the Orthodox religious holiday of St. Athanasius the Great 'together with the believers from Rashtak and Viniche in Gazi Baba Municipality'.

The posting of content marking religious holidays from the profiles of elected officials in a secular state does not correspond to the expectation that government communication channels are used exclusively for communication related to the official's work, which should represent the interests of all citizens regardless of religious, political or other personal belief.

In addition, harmful narratives were also noticed on the Facebook pages of Deputy Prime Minister Artan Grubi and Minister of Economy Kreshnik Bekteshi in January.

On 23 January, photos from the annual government conference 'Year of European Opportunities' were posted on Facebook - Deputy Prime Minister Grubi's page, followed by a text where, as Deputy Prime Minister, Grubi makes claims about 'attempts to destabilize and disorientate our European path coming from a single centre - Russia', where it is noted for the first time that the Deputy Prime Minister from DUI has accused foreign factors of interfering in the internal political relations of the country.

On 27 January, on Deputy Prime Minister Grubi's Facebook page a short text with a photo of DUI's proposal to Talat Djaferi, the mandate holder of the Caretaker Government, was posted, in which as Deputy Prime Minister he steps forward with strong party narratives, where he presents his party as a defender of his own national identity and praises the leader Ahmeti *Proud that together with Fatmir, Bujar, Kreshnik and Jeton, as well as Nazim, Agim and Bekim we are put forward to be part of the historic government cabinet of the first Albanian Prime Minister, Talat Djaferi, under the missionary and visionary leadership of the last revivalist of the Albanian people, ALI AHMETI. When we encouraged ourselves, we succeeded, when we dreamt, we delivered, when we believed, we worked, when it was said, it came true.'* This post omits information and builds a narrative of selective information that is ethnically focused.

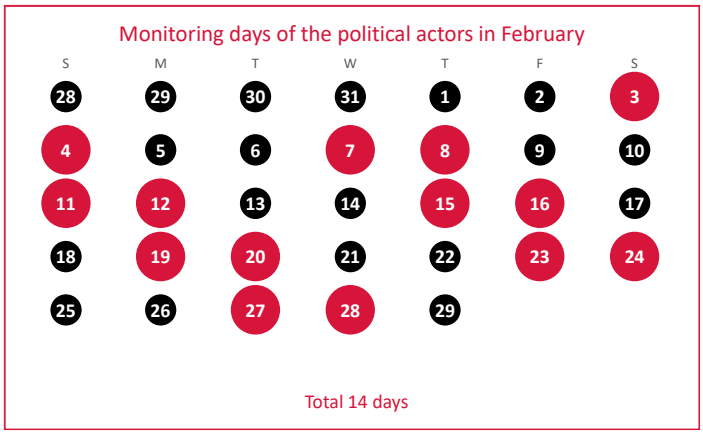
On 22 January, a TV interview for 24 Analiza was posted on the Facebook page of Minister Bekteshi where economic issues were addressed such as the freezing of prices on the domestic market, as well as caretaker government and the upcoming elections. In the interview, Bekteshi presents his party as saviour and European-oriented - '*...there is no playing games with DUI, VMRO cannot be with DUI, we are the European front against*

the eastern one...'. However, via the criticism of Prof. Trajko Slavevski, former minister and councillor in the city of Skopje from VMRO-DPMNE, concerning his statement that DUI is the most corrupt party in Europe, Bekteshi uses unverified findings when he says that VMRO-DPMNE is the most corrupt party according to all reports and with assets frozen by the court, by which he develops a harmful narrative of biased selection of information and creation of disinformation about the ranking of VMRO DPMNE as the most corrupt party.

On the Facebook page of the Alliance for Albanians, a video of an interview with the Minister of Justice from the ranks of the AA, Krenar Loga, was posted in the debate show 'OnTime' on KOHA Television, in which (Facebook post on Minister Loga's profile, 11 January) Loga accuses foreign entities of interfering in the internal affairs of the country, contrary to the interests of the country: *...There were events in Banjska and in BiH with Dodikj, Macedonia cannot be immune to Serbian and Russian influences because they have a common past in the common Yugoslav state, and also because they are Slavic fraternal nations.* In the interview, Loga presents his party as the defenders of his own national identity, and speaks negatively regarding VMRO-DPMNE and Levica, while speaking for SDSM in a neutral tone.

1.2 Communication practices of political parties and their leaders in february 2024

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



Month: February 2024. Monitoring days: 3, 4, 7, 8, 11, 12, 15, 16, 19, 20, 23, 24, 27, 28 (14 days in total).[8]

The enclosed report is an analysis of the data from the monitoring of the harmful narratives in the public discourse of political actors within the framework of the research Determining Political Harmful Narratives. The analysis covers how political actors communicate in public when they use harmful narratives, the topics that are most often the subject of harmful narratives, the types of harmful narratives, the form in which they are created and distributed, who do they target and which standards and principles of ethical and professional communication they violate.

The subject of the monitoring are the websites and Facebook pages of ten 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, the Socialist Party). The profiles of the leaders of the political parties, as well as the profiles of the president of the Caretaker Government of the RNM, the deputy prime ministers and the ministers in the government are also monitored on Facebook.

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

The following analysis only includes the communications by political actors where harmful narratives were detected, with reference to the indicators that point to the different harmful narratives.

Similarly to the previous months, the monitoring for February showed no posts with harmful narratives on the websites and Facebook pages of the parties LDP, New Social Democratic Party and the Socialist Party, as well as on the pages of their leaders.

Over the course of February, the Caretaker Government had already started working, while the elections were scheduled in the middle of the month. These developments had the effect of increasing the communication activity of political entities, so there was more frequent communication, and a greater number of posts, primarily in the context of the elections.

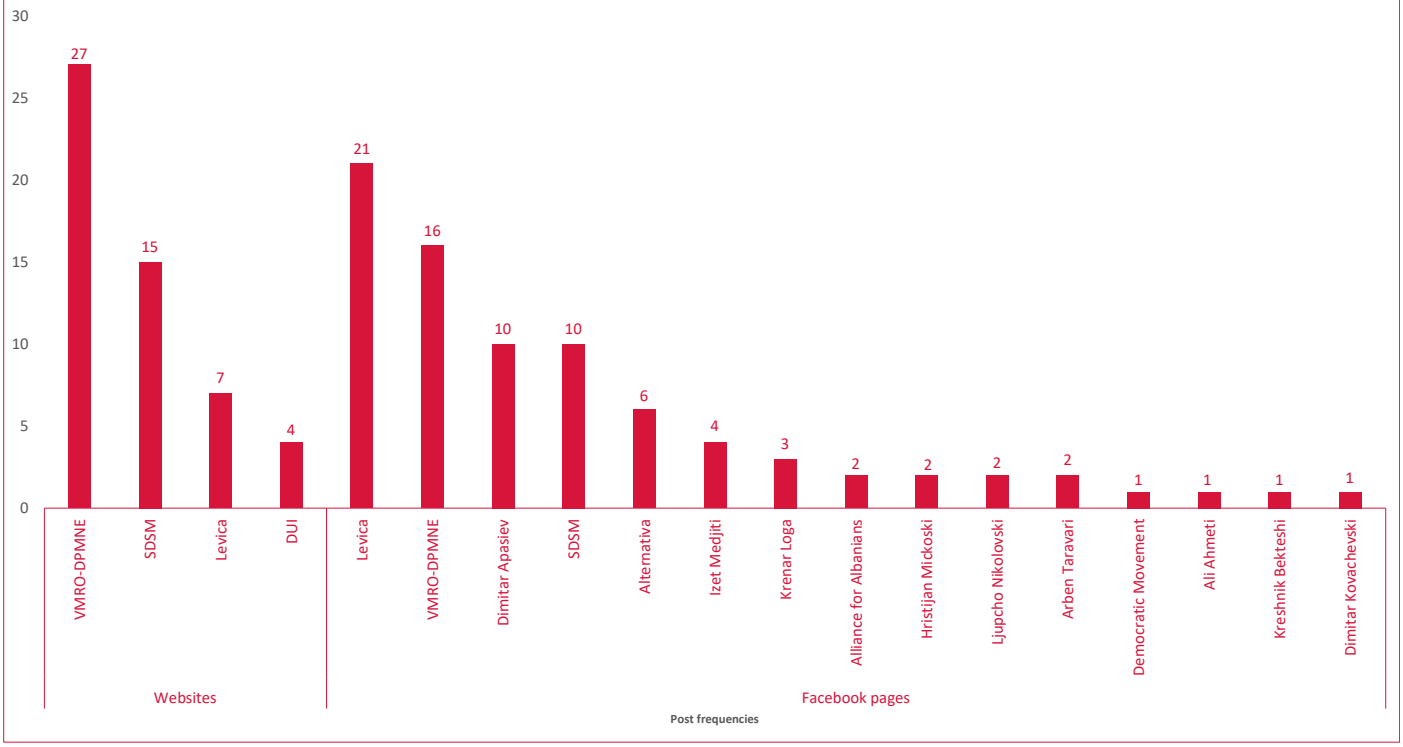
The monitoring of the websites and Facebook pages of the 10 political parties and their leaders identified **53 posts on the parties' websites** and **83 Facebook posts** containing a harmful narrative. Compared to January, the number of harmful narratives on websites has decreased, but there was an increase in the number of harmful narratives on Facebook. The day with the highest number of harmful narratives, i.e. a total of 15 posts on websites and on Facebook, was **19 February**, when the hottest topics were the problem of issuing personal documents and travel documents with the new constitutional name of the state, the upcoming presidential and parliamentary elections and the participation of President Stevo Pendarovski and Prime Minister of the Caretaker Government Talat Djaferi at the 60th Munich Security Conference.

As for the **use of communication tools**, harmful narratives were most frequently published on websites as press releases, while op-eds, speeches and interviews were the least common. On the Facebook profiles there is a greater variety of posts with harmful narratives, but the most frequent ones were press conferences, posts and reactions. This month it can be noted that harmful posts in the form of verbal communication in direct contact with the media, such as press conferences, interviews, statements and speeches were more prevalent on Facebook profiles, while the written indirect communication to the public through press releases was more prevalent on the political parties' websites. Like the previous month, in February the practice of publishing the same or similar content through multiple communication channels (directly to the media, a post on a website and a post on a Facebook page) continues in order to reach a wider audience.

The public communication of the political parties, which is characterised by a low democratic culture, continues. Political parties create and distribute harmful narratives that are mainly dominated by unverified allegations, biased selection, accusations of corruption and crime against their political opponents. The use of offensive language in the communication with the political opponents is becoming more prevalent, and there is an increased use of populist discourse. The allegations of foreign influence, character attacks, ethnocentrism, extreme patriotism and nationalism are less common as well as the spreading of panic, fear and uncertainty.

> *The expected communication in public is well-grounded and sharp criticism of political opponents, especially in the period before the elections. However, the spreading of harmful narratives in the public space can contribute to the normalization of ill communication practices and the violation of standards and principles of ethical and professional communication. Public office holders and candidates for public office are expected to communicate transparently and accountably to the public, with evidence-based communication, without insults, attacks and demonization of political opponents, in accordance with the democratic practices of ethics and professionalism.*

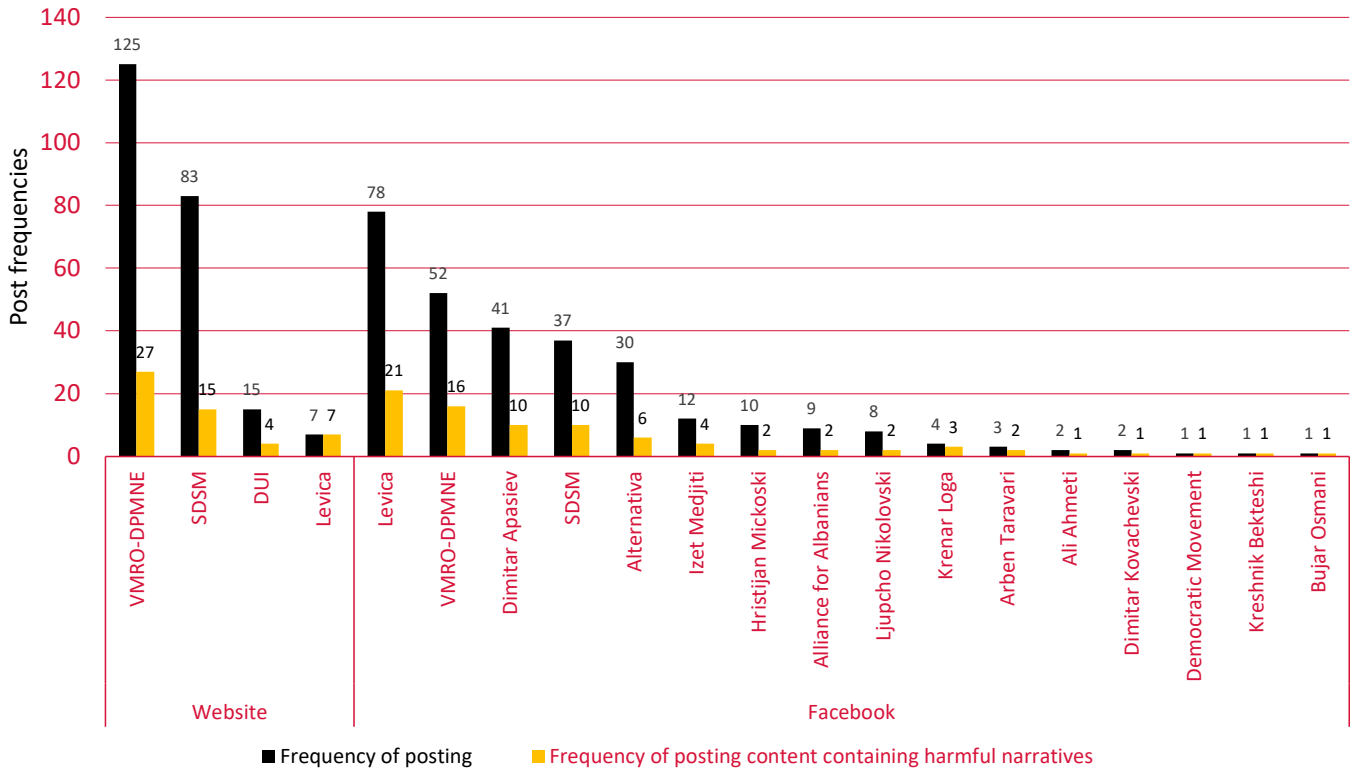
Table 6. Posts with harmful narrative by political actors (websites and Facebook) in February 2024



This month, the political parties seem to be lined up in the same order again in terms of the total number of posts with harmful narratives on **websites**. The highest number of harmful narratives were noted in **VMRO-DPMNE (27), SDSM (15), Levica (7)**, and the least harmful narratives were identified among **DUI (4)**.

Regarding **Facebook pages**, the highest number of harmful narratives were again noted **in Levica (21) and its party leader, Dimitar Apasiev (10)**, and for the first time, a harmful narrative was noted by the leader of the Alliance for Albanians, Arben Taravari. From the monitoring of the profiles of the members of the caretaker government this month, an increase in the total number (6) of detected harmful narratives can be noted, namely by Minister of Foreign Affairs Bujar Osmani (1), by the Minister of Justice Krenar Loga (3), by the Minister of Agriculture Ljupco Nikolovski (2) and on the profile of the Minister of Economy Kreshnik Bekteshi (1). In addition, one post with a harmful narrative was detected on the Facebook page of the Minister of Foreign Affairs, Bujar Osmani, which was later deleted, and was therefore not included in the quantitative analysis, but is described in the qualitative analysis bellow.

Table 7. Percentage of posts with a harmful narrative from the total number of posts in February 2024



If the total number of posts is taken into account compared to the number of harmful posts, it can be noted that in the covered monitored posts on the website of the Levica and on the Facebook pages of the Democratic Movement and of Minister Kreshnik Bekteshi, all i.e. 100% were published with a harmful narrative. On the Facebook pages of Arben Taravari, Ali Ahmeti, Dimitar Kovachevski and Minister Krenar Loga, a low number (between four and two) of total posts were recorded, half of which contained harmful narratives, while among the rest of the websites and Facebook pages about 25 percent prevalence of harmful narratives was noted.

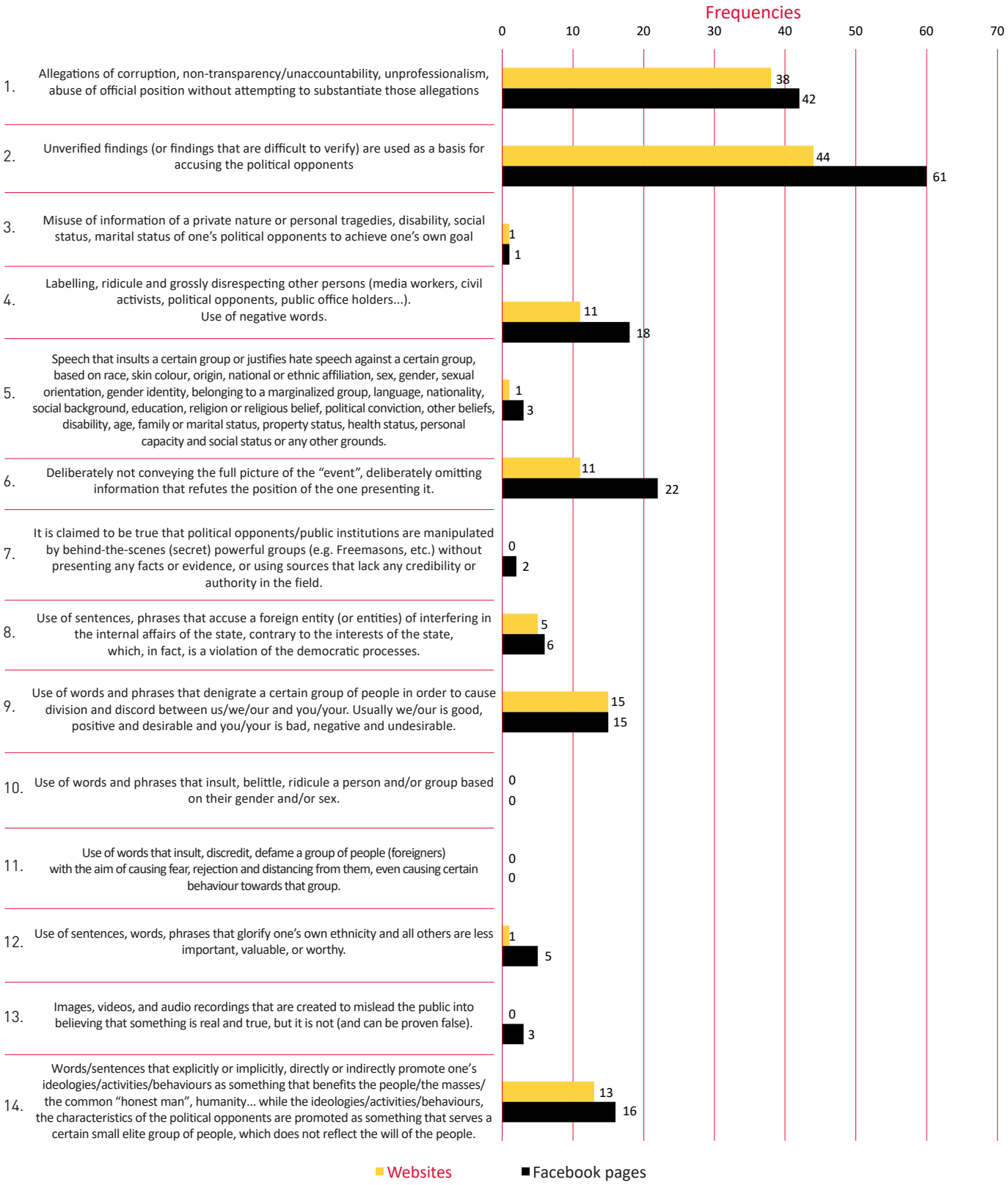
The most common harmful narratives

In February, political actors often resorted to two harmful narratives - unverified allegations accusing political opponents, as well as unverified claims of corruption, non-transparency/non-accountability, unprofessionalism, abuse of office. In addition, this month one can notice an increased use of wording that denigrates a certain group of people in order to cause divisions and discords between 'us' - the good ones and 'them' - the bad ones, as well as promoting one's own characteristics as something that is of benefit to people and humanity, while the characteristics of the political opponents are disparaged, as something that serves a certain small elite group of people. With a prevalence of about 20 percent, there is also labelling and gross disrespect of the political opponents and deliberate failure to present the full picture of the event.

In addition to these four most frequently used indicators of harmful narratives, this month compared to the previous one, there were more frequent accusations of foreign entity/s interfering in the internal affairs of the state, contrary to the state's interests, which leads to the disruption of the democratic processes, but also less frequent use of images, videos and audio recordings that were created to mislead the public. The presence of this harmful narrative is primarily due to the accusations by DUI, which started the pre-election campaign with 'Yes to Europe, No to Russia' at the end of January.

It is important to point out that this month, for the first time, there was misuse of information of a private nature or personal tragedies, disability, social status, marital status of political opponents on the website of VMRO-DPMNE in order for them to achieve their own goals, as well as claims that their political opponents/ public institutions were manipulated by background (secret) powerful groups, on the Facebook page of the Alliance for Albanians and Izet Medjiti.

Table 8: Indicators of harmful narratives (websites and Facebook) in February 2024



In SDSM's posts, on both communication channels, the most frequently produced materials were unsubstantiated claims in criticism, as well as claims of corruption, unaccountability and unprofessionalism of their political opponents. In addition, the vilification of the political opponents continues in order to cause divisions and discord. Offensive labelling and deliberate omission of information, as well as promotion of one's own ideologies and activities as something that benefits the people, as opposed to the ideologies of political opponents, was noted less often.

Similarly, in the harmful communication by VMRO-DPMNE, claims of corruption and unverified findings, used for attacks on political opponents, were the most frequently used tactic. The populist promotion of one's own ideologies against those of the opponents continues, as does the incomplete presentation of information, offensive labelling and defamation of political opponents in order to cause divisions and discords. Moreover, accusations of negative foreign influences in the country have also been noted twice. Populist narratives were noted by the leader Hristijan Mickoski, as well as attempts to present himself as a defender of the Macedonian interests and someone who is on the citizens' side.

When it comes to DUI, leader Ali Ahmeti and minister Kreshnik Bekteshi, continued with the ethnocentric narrative that glorifies one's own ethnicity, in contrast to the others that are deemed less important. In their communication, it can be noted that they only target the citizens of Albanian ethnicity in the country because the position of the ethnic Albanian in society in relation to the majority ethnic group of Macedonians is highlighted, with an emphasis on the lack of equality. However, the harmful DUI posts often feature unverified findings, negative speech, and labelling. This month, the party repeatedly accused foreign entities of interfering in domestic policies.

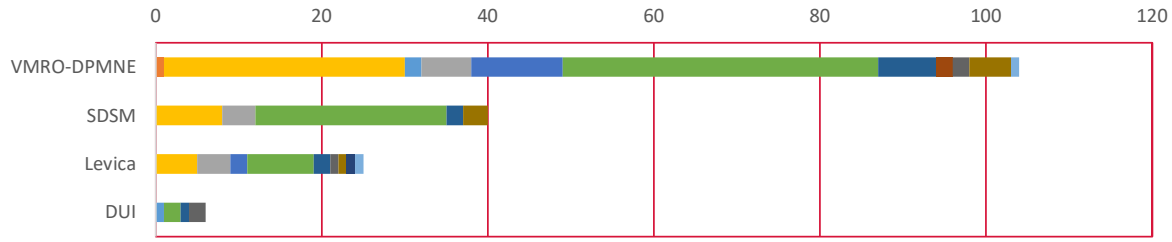
This month Levica, like in January, continues to use unverified allegations and claims of corruption, defamation of political opponents in order to cause divisions and discords in society. The use of offensive speech, labelling and deliberate omission of information was noted in their public communication. In February, a classic example of hate speech based on ethnicity was noted, which insults a specific group or justifies hate speech against a specific group, based on race, national or ethnic origin, sex, gender, sexual orientation – once on the Facebook pages of Levica and its leader Dimitar Apasiev (targeting the Minister of Justice Krenar Loga, calling him a 'ballist'). In addition, this month accusations of negative foreign influences in the country and populist narratives were noted. In the case of the leader Apasiev, the most typical indicators of harmful narratives were the offensive labels towards political opponents and the use of unverified allegations.

The Alliance for Albanians continues with the same trend in harmful posts in which they most frequently resort to unverified allegations and glorification of their own ethnicity. Harmful narratives were also used by the leader Arben Taravari, who, apart from ethnocentric views, was also observed using unsubstantiated findings of negative foreign influence in the country.

The Democratic Movement produce their harmful narratives mainly through Facebook, not through the party's website. The party propagated unverified findings and populism through Facebook, while the claims of corruption and abuse of office were most often noted to be coming from the leader Izet Medjiti, as well as the unverified findings aimed at discrediting political opponents and the accusations of negative foreign influences in the country.

In the posts with harmful narratives on the Facebook page of Alternativa, unverified findings that are used to accuse political opponents were the most frequently noted violations, but to a certain lower extent there were also occurrences of deliberately omitting information, labelling and denigration of certain groups in order to cause divisions and discords between 'us' and 'them'. In contrast to the Democratic Movement, where most of the harmful narratives that were noted came from the leader Medjiti, and not so many from the party communications, in the case of Alternativa this month no harmful narratives were identified as coming from the leader Afrim Gashi.

Table 9. Prevalence of harmful narratives in the website posts of political parties in February 2024



	DUI	Levica	SDSM	VMRO-DPMNE
Malinformation				1
Undermining trust		5	8	29
Disinformation	1			2
Fomenting divisions		4	4	6
Populism		2		11
Biased selection	2	8	23	38
Character attacks, Demonization	1	2	2	7
Conspiracy theories				2
Foreign Influence	2	1		2
Spreading panic, fear and insecurity		1	3	5
Hate speech		1		
Ethnocentrism				
Extreme patriotism, nationalism		1		1

Like the previous month, the political parties, on their websites, mainly posted harmful narratives based on biased selection of information misleading the public to come to the wrong conclusions (69) and tried to undermine trust in institutions (42).

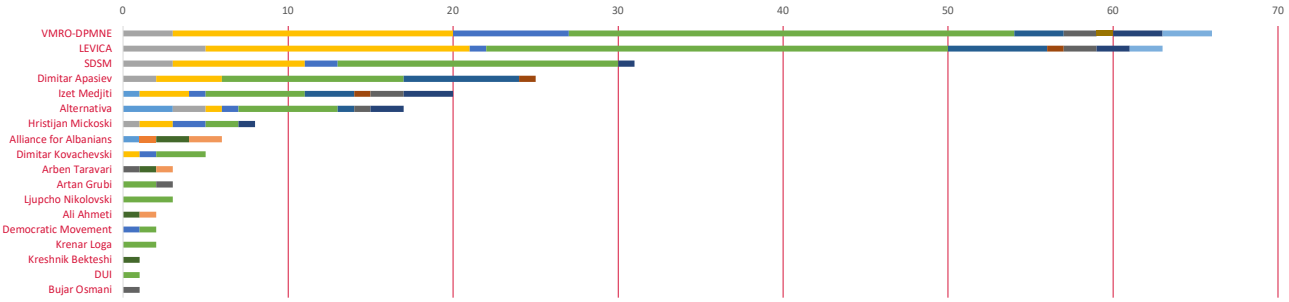
In a total of 27 website posts by VMRO-DPMNE in which 105 sections containing harmful narratives were identified, the most frequently used narratives were the ones of biased selection of information (38 times) and the undermining of trust in institutions (29 attempts). The next most frequently occurring harmful narratives on the website of VMRO-DPMNE is populism (11), followed by attacks and demonization of political opponents (7 times). Compared to other parties, VMRO-DPMNE more frequently resorted to harmful narratives of spreading panic, fear and insecurity, negative foreign influences and extreme patriotism/nationalism.

In the 15 identified website posts with harmful narratives by SDSM, 40 attempts to spread harmful narratives were noted, more than half of which (23) were biased selection of information. There were fewer attempts to undermine the trust in the institutions, incite divisions by defaming political opponents, spreading panic, fear and insecurity, and two attacks and demonization of a person.

In the seven identified harmful posts on Levica's website, with a total of 25 sections in which a harmful narrative was noted, the biased selection of information occurred most frequently (8), and just like last month, a narrative for inciting social divisions and undermining trust in institutions, hate speech and extreme nationalism/patriotism was used less often.

In the four harmful posts on the DUI website, a total of 7 harmful narratives were identified, whereby three consisted of disinformation, there were two narratives about negative foreign influences, one attempt to demonize a political opponent and one ethnocentric narrative.

Table 10. Prevalence of harmful narratives in political party posts on Facebook in February 2024



	Bujar Osmani	DUI	Kreshnik Bekteshi	Krenar Loga	Democratic Movement	Ali Ahmeti	Ljupcho Nikolovski	Artan Grubi	Arben Taravari	Dimitar Kovachevski	Alliance for Albanians	Hristijan Mickoski	Alternativa	Izet Medjiti	Dimitar Apasiev	SDSM	LEVICA	VMRO-DPMNE
Disinformation											1		3	1				
Malinformation											1							
Fomenting divisions												1	2		2	3	5	3
Undermining trust										1		2	1	3	4	8	16	17
Populism					1					1		2	1	1		2	1	7
Biased selection		1		2	1		3	2		3		2	6	6	11	17	28	27
Character attacks, Demonization													1	3	7		6	3
Hate speech														1	1		1	
Foreign Influence	1							1	1				1	2			2	2
Conspiracy theories																		1
Spreading panic, fear and insecurity												1	2	3		1	2	3
Ethnocentrism			1			1			1		2							
MAVMS																	2	3
Extreme patriotism, and/or nationalism						1			1		2							

Like the previous month, the same trend can be noted on the Facebook profiles as on websites, whereby the most frequent narrative is the biased selection of information that can lead to wrong conclusions in the public (108 times), followed by undermining the trust in institutions (52 times) and attacks and demonization of political opponents (20). There is also frequent incitement of discord and divisions in the political sphere and development of populist narratives that explicitly or implicitly claim to support the people against the elites/various groups that have some privileges.

Manipulative audio-visual contents were noted in VMRO-DPMNE and Levica's posts.

Social Democratic Union of Macedonia - SDSM

SDSM's communication by spreading harmful narratives is focused on internal politics. This month, the party communicated about the problem of issuing personal identification and travel documents, about the traffic chaos in Skopje, the financing of culture and about the blocked grant for the Rankovce-Kriva Palanka Road.

On the selected monitoring days in February, a total of 83 posts were recorded on the SDSM website, 15 of which contained a harmful narrative. All 15 posts referred to topics from internal political, eight of which were criticism of the opposition VMRO-DPMNE. Then, 10 harmful posts were noted on the party's Facebook profile. According to the communication strategy of repeating messages through communication channels, the 10 identified posts on SDSM's Facebook page refer to the same topics, and the same harmful narratives can be observed as repeated from the website. The recycling of content usually takes place on the same day or in several consecutive days on both pages, first through a press conference, usually by one of the party spokespersons. This is followed by a post repeating the text from the press conference, then a press-release to the media by an MP or MP from the party - on the website. Facebook content from the press conference is published in parallel, then a Facebook post in the form of a press release and at least one Facebook repetition of the same press release in abbreviated form – sometimes even as a series of short posts with the main points.

One feature of the visualization of public communication is the frequent use of a poster featuring the visual identity of the party in addition to the text in the posts. In terms of visualization, the party uses a black and white photo when publishing statements criticizing the leader of VMRO-DPMNE.

The first actor in SDSM's harmful messages is the opposition VMRO-DPMNE and its leader Hristijan Mickoski, and they are always painted in a negative light. Similarly to the past few months, SDSM names VMRO-DPMNE as 'DPMNE' and 'VMRO-MVRO'. The Ministry of the Interior and Panche Toshkovski are also frequently mentioned, and he is exclusively referred to as the 'Minister of Interior in Caretaker Government', or the 'caretaker minister from DPMNE', with his name deliberately omitted. On the other hand, it is noted that SDSM is often presented as a saviour and an EU-oriented party, and less often as a defender of the people and justice.

All of the 15 harmful posts on the SDSM website and the 10 harmful posts on the party's Facebook page feature a biased selection of information that can lead the public to wrong conclusions, mainly by presenting unverified findings, and half of them also contain unfounded claims of corruption, unprofessionalism and lack of accountability of the political opponents.

For example, the press release from 19 February titled 'Kovachevski: We can see no change in DPMNE, it is the same party from the past' the speech by leader Kovachevski at the opening of the party's promotional headquarters in Rasadnik, Kisela Voda Municipality, is reported. In the press release, there are unverified findings and claims of corruption and unprofessionalism against the local authorities from VMRO-DPMNE and Levica and a harmful narrative of biased selection of information and undermining of trust in these municipalities is being developed *- We see their mayors, they have not delivered a single project in two years. We see the chaos that is happening in Skopje. Not only that there are no capital projects, not only that there is no development, there is no basic city transport... You have perhaps the most active mayor in the public. He posts Facebook posts all day long, the only thing I saw is that he works on Saturdays too, but I didn't see anything done. The same potholes in the streets, the same uncut grass, the same littered streets... Yet, he claims to be working Saturdays too. But the job is not to sit in the office all day. The job requires you to go out and do you work...Look at Gjorche Petrov: 15 floors were not enough, they would build 20, not one, but 2-3 buildings, and to round all off - two chemical factories....* When the councillors from Levica are targeted, one also notices offensive labelling that develops into a harmful narrative of attacks and demonization of the person - *The councillors from Levica, the fighters for justice, do you know where they were at the council when the decision was made? They were at home. That's why I'm telling you that these are the basic populists, world-class liars who will put up 60-story buildings instead of 20-story buildings for money"* (in the recording, Kovachevski says: 200-story buildings). Furthermore, a harmful narrative of inciting socio-political divisions with vilification in order to cause divisions can be observed: *...We can see no change in DPMNE, it is the same party from the past, they have not moved even a single millimetre, they do not have program, they have no political offer, no idea, attitude... That's why the choice is simple. Either a state with European standards or a state in isolation, with controlled media where you will only see what is served to you by the DPMNE headquarters....*

On the same day, a second press release from the same speech by the leader Kovachevski titled 'Kovachevski: SDSM's concept means higher salaries, pensions and democracy, DPMNE's isolation and violence' which contains biased selection of information, but also disparaging VMRO-DPMNE in comparison to the promotion of their own party - *...we have been working for two years and providing higher salaries and pensions, while they, after two years of blockades, in less than 3 weeks which is as long as they have had ministers in the Caretaker Government, they have showed their real face, which has not changed. What does it mean when employees of the Ministry of Interior beat their colleagues just because they were doing their job? What does it mean when a member of the security of their leader beats his colleagues, and they are not even allowed to report that they were beaten...* In addition, a harmful narrative of inciting divisions and spreading panic, fear and insecurity is being developed by equating the current leader and political offer of VMRO-DPMNE with the previous one, former leader Gruevski and his offer, using words such as 'horror', 'fights' and 'regime'*...And there is no capital, there is no money that can defeat that will for an advanced and prosperous state that the citizens can only have with us. The citizens are watching immediately, he said that horror would reign, threats, fights on buses, a battered policeman. There is no difference between Gruevski's VMRO and this party now led by Mickoski. It's the same matrix, the same techniques, the same criminal structures, it's just that the people who run them are different. Therefore, no to that regime.* The same messages were repeated in the one identified post with a harmful narrative on the Facebook page of the leader Kovachevski from 19 February, which was also simultaneously published in an abbreviated form on the Facebook page of SDSM.

In February, SDSM also produced harmful narratives about the issuing of the citizens' travel documents. On the website of the party, three press releases with harmful content on the subject were noted. In the two press releases from 12 February titled 'Instead of a solution, DPMNE created chaos with the personal documents' and 'Talevski: DPMNE can't solve anything, they just lie and create chaos with the personal documents' as well as in the press release from 15 February with the title 'Because they cannot deliver a solution to the personal documents, DPMNE file politically motivated criminal charges' unverified findings and claims of unprofessionalism and unaccountability were used, leading to a harmful narrative of biased selection of information - *For months, DPMNE claimed at party press conferences from the White Palace that they had a solution and that they would solve the problem with the personal identification documents, the passports and the driver's licenses. Now, after they entered the caretaker government and have a minister of interior affairs, instead of a solution, DPMNE has gone on to create chaos with the personal documents and to spread panic among citizens... In addition, instead of increasing the capacity for taking pictures and issuing passports, the minister from DPMNE has abolished the issuing of passports without an appointment...*

The biased selection of information was also noted around the incident involving a person from Mickoski's personal security with an official from the Ministry of Interior in front of a nightclub in Skopje, which was used to accuse VMRO-DPMNE and its leader Mickoski. For example, the 19 February Facebook post titled 'The Ministry of Interior should answer what the role of Mickoski is in preventing the action against drugs?' resorts to airing unverified findings and claims of corruption, unaccountability, unprofessionalism and abuse of official duty - *Apart from the fact that the beating showed the real, criminal face of VMRO-MVRO, the public should also know why Mickoski's security was outside the doors of a coffee bar at night? The Ministry of Interior and the Caretaker Minister of Interior from DPMNE should answer to citizens: What was the role of Mickoski's security? Was their task to prevent action against the drug dealers? Are those drug dealers connected to Hristijan Mickoski and DPMNE and in what way? The citizens are waiting for answers.*

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

In February, four posts with harmful narratives were noted on the website of DUI and one post with a harmful narrative on the Facebook page of its leader Ali Ahmeti, where the communication focuses on glorifying one's own ethnicity and self-representation as defenders of the identity and rights of ethnic Albanians in the state and a party that is oriented towards the EU. The topic of the identified malicious posts on DUI's website is about the upcoming elections in the country and focuses on promoting its own candidate for president of the country while using unfounded attacks on political opponents. The party and its senior officials this month continue with the pre-election campaign 'Yes to Europe, No to Russia', followed by accusations of Russian influence in the country.

In a press release from 23 February titled 'VMRO and SDSM were against our idea of electing a president in the Assembly, they were also against the Albanian Prime Minister DUI presents a disinformation narrative using unverified findings that both VMRO-DPMNE and SDSM were against an Albanian prime minister and are against an Albanian president, although without the votes of SDSM MPs, Talat Djaferi would not have been elected as a Prime Minister of the Caretaker Government.

A day later, on 24 February, in a post from Arber Ademi's press conference titled 'Bujar Osmani is the right person for president, VMRO should distance itself from pro-Russian views' they talk positively about the leader of the party Ahmeti and the candidate for president of DUI Bujar Osmani, while the harmful narrative in the press release is noted in the criticism of VMRO-DPMNE, and SDSM is mentioned in an ambivalent tone. Namely, by using insulting labels and character attacks on the presidential candidate from VMRO-DPMNE, Gordana Siljanovska-Davkova - *We demand from VMRO DPMNE to take a stand against Russia, and in favour of Europe and distance themselves from the poetic pro-Putin views of their once defeated Russia-nostalgic candidate Gordana Davkova....* and unverified findings and accusations

of negative foreign influences in the country that are shaped into a disinformation narrative - *...Russian influence that has engulfed our economy, critical infrastructure, political parties, media, religious communities, civil society and is aimed at destabilizing our society. The fragile multi-ethnic, multi-religious and multicultural structure to promote a domino effect throughout the region*. You can also notice the ethnocentric tone in the argument for promoting the presidential candidate Osmani - *It's time, fellow citizens, after the first Albanian Prime Minister, the first Vice Prime Minister, the Minister of Foreign Affairs, the Minister of Defence and the Minister of Interior, the Ombudsman, the presidents of the Constitutional, Supreme and Administrative Courts, the presidents of the football, wrestling and boxing federations, to pave the road for the first Albanian President of the state.*

The post on Ahmeti's Facebook profile from 16 February refers to his speech on the occasion of the anniversary of the first shots fired in Tanushevci, where he presents himself and his party as saviours and defenders of the national identity and by glorifying his own ethnicity, develops a harmful narrative of ethnocentrism and extreme nationalism - *23 years since the first shots were fired by the NLA in Tanushevci, let's think about the greatness of those sons and daughters who gave their lives for the national cause of freedom and equality. That moment heralded the great victory of our rights that had been denied for centuries, put an end to oppression and opened another chapter that made Albanians a factor of progress and leaders of the most vital processes for the European future.*

VMRO-DPMNE

The main focus in the communication of VMRO-DPMNE for February continues to be criticism of the ruling parties, mostly accusing them of crime and corruption and of not working for the good of the state and the people. A highlight of public communications this month too is the emphasis and repetition of the concluding message: *It's never been worse. It is important to defeat them!* With the approach of the election period in the press releases of VMRO-DPMNE there is rhetoric in which the care for the Macedonian people, identity, interests are emphasized, in order to underline that VMRO-DPMNE is the party that works for the Macedonian interests, while the current ruling parties are not driven by the motive to preserve the Macedonian state. Several communications have been noted in which statements are made about what the future government led by VMRO-DPMNE would do, as preparation for the election rhetoric in the following period. Labelling of political opponents and the incomplete transmission of information, as well as the populist promotion of one's own views and ideology against those of political opponents, are also noted.

On the website of VMRO-DPMNE, 125 posts are noted, of which 27 are posts that contain a harmful narrative. The day with the most damaging narratives is 23 February with four posts. On that date, a significant number of news related to party activities of VMRO-DPMNE, news about presidential candidates and party accusations were recorded. The posts mostly deal with topics related to events in the country, 11 are on domestic politics, seven on crime, two each on corruption, economy and culture, one each on foreign policy and health, and one post labelled 'Other' is again related to country topics, the case of heavy metal poisoning at the landfill in Probishtip. Topics in the 'domestic politics' category refer to the change of travel documents and other personal documents within the legal term (five posts), the case of poisoning the landfill in Probishtip (two), as well as one for JSP Skopje and one criticism of Darko Kaevski from SDSM. The seven press releases that are categorized as 'criminal' include four press releases about the tender procurements in REK Bitola and in ELEM and one each about an armed confrontation between persons who are known for crime, the increased prices for services issued by the Real Estate Cadastre Agency of the Republic North Macedonia and accusation of breaking the laws.

On the Facebook profile of VMRO-DPMNE, 20 posts have been subject to monitoring, 16 of which have a harmful narrative. The period from mid-February is the period when the elections are called, the presidential candidates are announced and there is an increasing number of press releases about party activities. There is noticeable increased dynamics of the communication of VMRO-DPMNE to the Prime Minister in the Caretaker Government, SDSM, DUI as ruling parties, the change of personal documents and travel documents, a process that is under the competence of the Ministry of Interior, where there was a change since the end of January the minister is from VMRO-DPMNE, as well as criticism of the work of other institutions led by the ruling parties SDSM and DUI.

From the leader of VMRO-DPMNE, Hristijan Mickoski, ten posts were included in the monitoring, and two were noted as harmful. Both posts are from the domain of domestic politics, and in them he is presented as the saviour and defender of the people.

On the website of VMRO-DPMNE, the most frequently mentioned actor is the Government, SDSM and DUI together in 15 posts out of 27 and they are mentioned negatively, as well as SDSM in 7, Oliver Spasovski in 4, DUI in 2, Markovski Company in 2, REK Bitola in 4, also all mentioned with a negative tone. There is a similar trend on the Facebook page of VMRO-DPMNE, where the Government is mentioned in 8 of the 16 noted posts, Oliver Spasovski in 3, Markovski Company in 3, ESM in 3, REK Bitola in 2 and ELEM in 2.

The practice of naming the Government as 'the Government of SDS and DUI' continues, as well as 'unpopular and kleptomaniac government' and 'criminal government.' In terms of how they present themselves, a similar trend is observed as in the posts monitored on the website. In five posts it is noted that they present themselves as defenders of justice, in two as transparent/accountable, in two as defenders of their own national identity, in two saviours and in one post as oriented towards the EU.

When talking about SDSM, the letter 'M' is omitted from the short name of the party Social Democratic Union of Macedonia, to emphasize that they consider it a party that does not work for Macedonian interests. It is also noted that the Government is named as 'unpopular Government of SDS and DUI', 'the outgoing authorities of SDS and DUI', and sometimes also 'authorities of DUI and SDS' with DUI being mentioned first, to emphasize that they are in control even though they are the smaller partner in the Government.

In terms of how they present themselves, it was noted that there were no changes in the trend of posts from previous months. In nine posts they present themselves as defenders of justice, in five posts as defenders of the people, in five posts as saviours, also in five posts as defenders of their own national identity and in one post as transparent, accountable.

In a press release from 3 February VMRO-DPMNE, as a response to SDSM for the EU Negotiation Framework, presents itself as a defender of the national identity. The Government is mentioned in a negative tone, trust in it is undermined and populist discourse is used, which promotes the ideology of VMRO-DPMNE as better than that of their political opponent. It is said that the Bulgarian dictate that Macedonia accepted due to the weak Government is the worst thing that the country has ever accepted and that VMRO-DPMNE does not agree with the *Bulgarian dictate and it must be changed and Macedonia should get a better position. No matter how shaken they are in SDS, better times are coming for Macedonia. And those who destroyed the state will soon be a thing of the past, because with SDS we don't have a state and we have to change that.* The expression 'Bulgarian dictate' is used by VMRO-DPMNE after in July 2022 the Macedonian Government adopted the EU Negotiating Framework in which, among other things, the inclusion of the Bulgarian people in the Macedonian Constitution is requested and in that direction VMRO-DPMNE claims in its public statements that the Constitution will be changed under 'Bulgarian dictate', indicating that the Government does not work in the interest of the state, but under foreign influence and for foreign interests.

The topic of defending the state from 'SDS' and returning it in the hands of the citizens pervades several posts of VMRO-DPMNE in connection with several topics. Thus, in a press release from 7 February the Prime Minister is criticized, he is mentioned in a negative tone, attacked and trust in him is undermined, through biased selection and character attack. It is said that *Kovachevski spent 2 years in ignorance and doing nothing, keeping silent about DUI's criminal businesses and besides becoming a pendant of DUI, he has nothing else to brag about. The press release continues with the criticism that the Prime Minister does not even know about the physical violence against the members of the Alliance for Albanians, he does not even know about the bullet in Taravari's home, and today he did not even know the reason for the removal of the two directors.* In addition, the trust in the office of the President of the Government is undermined and a populist discourse is used that *the fear of the defeat of SDS and DUI is increasing, as the elections are approaching, where the citizens will send them to history, but also in front of the face of justice.* Through such narratives, VMRO-DPMNE, criticizing the Prime Minister for 'silence', 'ignorance', discredits him and presents him as unworthy for the role of prime minister.

Undermining trust in institutions by using unverified allegations, biased selection and character attack are also present in the press release from 27 February which refers to the murder of persons involved in crime. The press release says that it is *a 'continuation of the bloody drug showdown of the clans whose gruesome murders took place'* from the time when Oliver Spasovski was the Minister of Interior and that the current minister, who is from the ranks of the VMRO-DPMNE in the caretaker government, cannot be asked to clean up something for which no action has been taken before. It is said *that the strength of those clans comes from the fact that Spasovski, Zaev and Kovachevski put the Ministry of Interior at the service of criminals, and with the help of the DUI and SDS drug clans, it won votes in several consecutive election cycles.* Such generalisation and contextualisation of the murder case is an example of a violation of the principle of evidence-based communication.

The presentation of VMRO-DPMNE as a protector of citizens and a defender of the national identity is also present in the press releases of VMRO-DPMNE leader Hristijan Mickoski and party officials Aleksandar Nikoloski and Dragan Kovachki from the visit to Switzerland and the meeting with the overseas committees and the Macedonian diaspora, which are published by the party.

In a post from 3 February, on the Facebook profile of the VMRO-DPMNE leader, there is expressed concern about *the state being taken away from the people, due to crime, attacks on identity, foreign agendas and the erasure of Macedonianism. That the only way out is through the changes that are achieved with togetherness, unity and a strong commitment to Macedonia.* The text is accompanied by photos from the meeting, where the state flag, the former state flag with the sun from Vergina and the party flag are displayed. The post contains a populist discourse in which one's own ideology is promoted as the only solution, in contrast to political opponents who are criticized for destroying the state and undermines trust in them.

A similar narrative appears in the statement of VMRO-DPMNE official Dragan Kovachki about the same visit. In a press release from 4 February published by the party, it is stated *that together we will succeed in removing this unpopular government that has captured Macedonia'* and that the ruling parties have a common interest, *who will plunder Macedonia more. Both structures are based on anti-Macedonianism and basically do not care about Macedonian national interests.* The text also contains a call to the Macedonian diaspora to come to Macedonia and vote in the coming elections to unite for the Macedonian national cause because *this is the last moment, it is the last generation of Macedonian politicians who can save Macedonia, because if these stay in power, consider that we will not have a state.* The press release contains elements of biased selection and undermining of trust in governing structures, populism that presents one's own ideology as better, as well as extreme patriotism and nationalism and spreading panic and fear of the disappearance of the state.

In the interview of the party official Aleksandar Nikoloski for TV Alfa (whose team is in Lausanne and follows the party activities), published on 4 February, he speaks on multiple topics, with similar narratives being noted. Trust in the ruling parties is being undermined, for example, *Macedonians in the diaspora are troubled by crime, corruption and bad conditions in Macedonia, together we will defeat SDS and DUI, then regardless of whether we are talking about the high level of crime and corruption that prevails in Macedonia or the bad state of the economy, the state of education that is far from good, the drugs that reign on Macedonian streets among Macedonian children'*. Populist discourse is used, one's own party is presented as the defender of national interests, the saviour of the citizens, and the political opponent is denigrated, *'Zaev and Dimitrov humiliated (the people) by signing the shameful Prespa Agreement when the name of Macedonia was changed and now they are humiliating it for the second time by having to take out new passports with the new humiliating name, even though they have valid documents. And it is added that 'SDS' is doing a double humiliation to the Macedonian people and against which we will fight on 8 May.'*

If viewed as a whole, the posts contain similar elements of harmful narratives which should be analysed in the context of the pre-election period given their propaganda style. The impression left by the three press releases is that the party has already started the campaign, considering that members of the diaspora are called to come to Macedonia and vote, to help make the change. This fits into the wider picture that VMRO-DPMNE projects in its communication to the public, that the state is in danger and that the party together with the people can save it and make a change.

Levica

The monitoring of the websites and Facebook profiles of the political party Levica and its leader Dimitar Apasiev notes that their communication channels continue the already established trend of communication that is harsh and critical towards the ruling parties SDSM and DUI and towards the largest opposition party VMRO-DPMNE.

Levica mostly addresses the topics of domestic politics. The most common reactions are the validity and change of personal documents and travel documents with the old constitutional name of the state 'Republic of Macedonia', opening of the so-called 'Hague cases' for the UCK (NLA), the decision of the Constitutional Court not to introduce the entry for ethnicity in birth certificates, as well as the promotion of the presidential candidate Biljana Vankovska. After the promotion, the party and its leader were significantly active on Facebook, leading a campaign to encourage citizens to support Levica's candidate with signatures.

The negative tone towards DUI continues this month as well as the speech that portrays the party as an anti-establishment party. The most frequently mentioned actors in the posts of Levica are the parties SDSM, DUI, VMRO-DPMNE, as well as high-ranking officials from the parties such as Talat Djaferi, Ali Ahmeti, Oliver Spasovski, etc. The dominant accusation is that SDSM, DUI and VMRO-DPMNE are on one side, and that is the side against the citizens, often accused of working together against the interests of the citizens - 'broad coalition DPMNE-SDS-DUI', 'SDS and DPMNE'. Levica calls itself by its name, and portrays itself as a saviour (noted twice), a defender of identity (noted twice) and a defender of the people (noted once). For SDSM, the trend continues to name it as 'SDS', removing the letter 'M' from the abbreviation for the name of the party Social Democratic Union of Macedonia, to emphasize that, according to them, SDSM does not work for Macedonian interests. They name the largest opposition party VMRO-DPMNE as 'DPMNE', the Government as 'the quisling government of SDS and DUI', 'the degenerate and anti-Macedonian faction of SDS', 'the anti-Macedonian government of SDS and DUI', DUI official Talat Djaferi as 'amnestied terrorist', 'thug', 'political usurper', 'cancer of Macedonian society'.

Of the noted 11 posts on the Facebook profile of the leader of the Levica, Dimitar Apasiev, all are from the field of domestic politics. They are directed similarly like the party ones, towards VMRO-DPMNE, SDSM and government officials. Talat Djaferi is also named as 'the tyrant', SDSM as 'SDS', Minister of Interior Panche Toshkovski as 'the VMRO Minister of Interior', 'DPMNE Minister', Oliver Spasovski as 'SDS Minister', 'mafia', VMRO-DPMNE as 'vmroids', DUI as 'UCK', and President Stevo Pendarovski as 'Stevo the Louse'.

The practice of using hashtags that also carry a political message continues: #Fight, #LevicaFromParliament, #RedWave, #WeWillWin. Similar to the party's Facebook profile, its leader Apasiev also uses hashtags, such as: #ThankyouAntipatriots, #LevicaFromParliament, #ThankYouMinister, #PoliticalSuicides, #FinalCountdown, #TheFightBeginsNow #SignupforVankovska, #theBroadCoalition, #YouAreGonnaBeSorry.

In February, 13 posts were noted on the website, and seven of them contain harmful narratives. The most posts, i.e. two are from 12 February. One post is related to the topic of reopening the so-called 'Hague cases', and the second one on legislation to extend the validity of driver's licenses with the old name of the state 'Republic of Macedonia.' Of the 90 monitored Facebook posts, 21 posts contain a harmful narrative. In the monitored days, the most press releases with harmful narratives were on 8 February, which refer to laws blocked by Levica in the Assembly and the procedure initiated against the President of the Assembly Djaferi. Posts with harmful narratives were also noted on 15 February, which refer to the work of government officials, specifically the Minister of Foreign Affairs Bujar Osmani, as well as the changing of personal documents with the new constitutional name. Out of 21 noted press releases, 14 refer to domestic politics, three press releases are about foreign policy, one each about crime, justice, economy and social policy.

During the promotion of professor Biljana Vankovska as a presidential candidate of Levica, a statement issued on 7 February on the website says *that Levica has cast the dice in the face of the bourgeois parties and enters the #Fight in the presidential elections! In this historic hour, we propose Biljana VANKOVSKA, an eminent leftist who has been defending Macedonian nationhood throughout her professional career, as a candidate for president.* The text contains populist expressions, which position Levica as a party that works for the state's interest in contrast to other political parties. The text also presents unverified allegations about the destruction of the state, extreme nationalism and populism, while it is claimed that the fight for Macedonia is *against the dominance of the triple pact SDS, DPMNE and DUI, which continuously destroys the state! The existence of foreign influence is also expressed, that in an epoch when the Macedonian people and state are under a strong attack of foreign chauvinism and imperialist policies, we stand up to the challenge in which the Macedonian people must come out as WINNER*, as well as that it should not be allowed to have a president who will be *a puppet of foreign embassies and a vassal of foreign state interests.*

In this press release, the party uses populism, that the goal is to 'take Macedonia from the elites' and return it to where it belongs 'in the hands of the people!', i.e. Levica, following the leftist ideology, presents itself as a party that is not part of the political elites, but is together with the people. In this post, in addition to the narratives citing foreign influence, populism, language is used that deepens polarization, emphasizing the dichotomy 'we-the-people-good' and 'you-the-elites-bad'.

In press release of 28 February, published on Levica's website, the party is again presented as a defender of the interests of the citizens, that it is on the side of the people, against the other parties. We are talking about a topic from the field of domestic politics, the decision of the Constitutional Court not to allow entry for ethnicity in registers, after Levica contested the Guidelines for Keeping Registers and the Law on Registers. By using populist discourse, spreading panic and fear, extreme patriotism and nationalism and inciting divisions, Levica presents itself as the defender of the people, which succeeded in preventing further 'segregation' of the state: *'The attempts to disintegrate the Macedonian nation and state, through the secessionism of*

the so-called 'Albanian parties' allowed by SDS and DPMNE, with extreme right-wing and Nazi practices for segregation and division of society - by undermining the concept of one state, ONE NATION, are going to redefine the state concept through apartheid policies. The Levica resolutely opposes these destructive processes'. The post also contains character attacks and **hate speech** against the Minister of Justice, Krenar Loga, who is named as 'Loga the ballist'. It also undermines trust in other political parties that are considered to be acting together, while Levica is on the side of the people, contains elements of extreme nationalism and divisiveness: *Levica and the Constitutional Court struck ethno-tribalism, which is promoted by the criminal parties DUI, Besa and the Alliance of Albanians, who silently support the anti-Macedonian SDS and the fake patriots from DPMNE.*

One of the topics that was popular among the public from the domain of domestic politics was the reopening of the so-called 'Hague cases', that is, court cases for crimes from the conflict in 2001 that were not processed by the International Court of Justice in The Hague, but a decision was made to resolve them with Macedonian legislation. As a result of a political agreement in 2011, these cases were ended for further action by bringing legal solutions. During February, it was announced that the Council of Europe was mentioning the possibility of reconsidering these cases. A press release of 12 February published on Levica's website contains inflammatory and insulting speech towards the political parties DUI, VMRO-DPMNE and SDSM, talking about them with a negative tone and are presented as working together against the people, while Levica is a defender of Macedonian interests and national identity. Additionally, the text is illustrated with a photo of DUI leader Ali Ahmeti and other DUI members in military uniforms. DUI officials who are affected by these cases are named as *the Caretaker Prime Minister Talat DJAFERI, the leader of DUI - Ali AHMETI, as well as many other former officials, who for 23 years supported by SDS and DPMNE are destroying the Macedonian state. It also expresses populist discourse that for Levica it will be a condition for the formation of a government to have criminal prosecution for the atrocities and crimes of the DUI terrorist gang.* The post contains elements of extreme patriotism and nationalism and undermines trust in the political parties that lead the institutions of the state. Such discourse in the public sphere by political actors in the country can contribute to encouraging divisions on ethnic and political grounds, in addition if this rhetoric is considered in view of the election period in which the society is.

In a press release from 8 February on the Facebook profile of Levica it was announced that Talat Djaferi was punished for violating the Constitution after Levica submitted an initiative because he simultaneously served as the president of the Assembly and a member of the presidency of the DUI. The press release provides the legal basis and chronology of events, saying for Djaferi *the amnestied terrorist with the support of his coalition partners SDS and DPMNE paid the fine. The post also states that Levica calls on the citizens in the upcoming elections to support the only party that fiercely and by all means opposes the cancer of the Macedonian society, DUI, and to severely punish their coalition partners and collaborators, SDS and DMPNE!* The post attacks the personality of Talat Djaferi, undermines trust in the institutions through the attack on the political parties that were or are the ruling parties in the country. Populist discourse is also used, the division of 'us-good' and 'them-bad' is encouraged, while Levica presents itself as being on the side of the citizens.

The press release from Levica was shared by its president Apasiev on his Facebook profile on 8 February with the text 'Symbolic VICTORY against the Tyrant!', illustrated with the photo of Djaferi found in the party's press release. Apasiev's short post takes a populist tone celebrating a great victory and uses a character attack by calling Djaferi a 'tyrant'.

In a post dated 7 February related to the adoption of one of the laws in the field of energy in the Assembly, Levica publishes a statement in which it criticizes the adoption of the regulation, stating that MPs from Levica are against harmful laws for new power plants. The press release uses biased selection, allegations of foreign influence and narratives that undermine trust in the institutions, claiming that *DUI in the name of NATO-fundamentalism will enslave Macedonia energetically and that the tendency of amnestied criminals*

from DUI with such scandalous energy projects is clear. The text also states that if the political wing of the UCK wants to prove its commitment to NATO at any cost, we invite them to join the front in Ukraine-instead of putting the whole country under the hostage of private capital because of other people's appetites and interests! In addition, the text also contains a photo of DUI officials, Minister of Economy Kreshnik Bekteshi, who submitted the law and Deputy Prime Minister Artan Grubi, which helps the manipulative nature of the text that the laws in the Assembly are in favour of DUI's goals.

The press release was shared by the leader of Levica on his profile, on the same day 7 February, with the short text '*GUYS, WE ARE UNDER OCCUPATION!'*- a populist narrative that alludes to foreign influence and that can cause anxiety and panic among citizens.

In the monitored days, 67 posts were posted on the Facebook profile of the leader of Levica, Dimitar Apasiev, of which 11 were posts with a harmful narrative (10 reactions and one press release). On Apasiev's Facebook profile, the trend of sharing posts from the Levica party's Facebook page and adding his comment, which often contains a harmful narrative, continues. For example, the Levica Party announced on 15 February that it filed a criminal complaint against the Deputy Prime Minister Artan Grubi for illegal acquisition and concealment of property. While no harmful narratives are noted in the post, Apasiev shares the same and adds, *Now is the turn of the biggest MAFIA GUY in the Government!,* where insulting language is used towards the political opponent and a claim for his corruption is presented.

In connection with collection of signatures for the presidential candidate, posts containing offensive and populist speech were noted, such as the 27 February post:

1/5 more SIGNATURES needed. If we make an effort, we can complete them tomorrow. So don't delay! Let's count our people and shut the pagan muzzles of the bourgeois. And then let's deal with them, in the elections.✌
#LittleMore
#TheFightBeginsNow
#SignforVankovska

In a post dated 11 February Apasiev announces that the MPs from Levica will submit a law to extend the validity of driver's licenses with the name 'Republic of Macedonia'. He adds that: P.S. penalties for not using SEVERNA are a dystopia in which we live thanks to SDS, UCHK and DPMNE. Be careful in the next elections, you can't regret the day after.' - ☺#LevicaFromParliament

The post uses insulting expressions for political opponents such as 'SDS' for SDSM, 'UCK' for DUI and 'DPMNE' for VMRO-DPMNE in order to disparage them. The press release ends with a populist message that can be put in the context of the elections in the coming months, in order to mobilize citizens to vote for Levica.

Alliance for Albanians - Aleanca për Shqiptarët

In February, Facebook monitoring for the first time identified two harmful narratives on the Facebook page of leader Arben Taravari, but also three harmful posts on the Facebook page of the Alliance for Albanians. After an earlier split of the party into two camps led by Zijadin Sela and Arben Taravari, this month Arben Taravari officially submitted candidacy to run for President of the country with the support of his party and the European Union for Change (EUC) which entered into a joint pre-election coalition called VLEN (It is it worth it).[9] In its communication, the Alliance for Albanians presents itself as a defender of its own national identity,

9 https://www.slobodnaevropa.mk/a/32820748.html

and presents VMRO-DPMNE as nationalist, and SDSM, DUI and Levica as ultra-nationalist parties. In the posts with harmful narratives on the AA Facebook page, the main topic is the elections and the Minister of Justice and the Secretary of the party, Krenar Loga, are mentioned most often. For example, in a post from 23 February on the party's Facebook profile a video of Loga's interview with Shenja TV was published, in which unverified findings are noted that develop disinformation – *...Macedonians are boycotting the Prime Minister... The cross on Shapka is a play by VMRO with the Albanian opposition.... MANU is the cradle of Serbianism ... the Macedonian oligarchy and the Macedonian deep state have gripped the judicial system...' but also abuse of personal information – '... the president of MANU who speaks against the balancer and for the return of the unitary state is the father of a member of Vmro from the Youth branch of the party...'* In addition, there is also an ethnocentric narrative with extreme nationalism and patriotism, which incites inter-ethnic tensions and hatred towards Macedonians *...Macedonian supra-nationalism is camouflaged with a European appearance, with European clothes they want to dismantle the instruments that give us rights..., The elections on 8 May will be the beginning of the real clash between Macedonians and Albanians...*

In Taravari's Facebook reaction from 11 February, for an interview given by the President of Serbia, Aleksandar Vucic, the AA leader accuses of negative Serbian influence in the country and the upcoming elections, which is carried out through the support of the 'ultranationalist leader' Ali Ahmeti – *Unnatural attention comes from Belgrade to Macedonia. Serbian President Aleksandar Vucic spoke about the elections in our country, complaining about whose problem?! Is it for some Macedonian ultra-nationalist leader relying on the history of Vucic. Yes Yes! Believe it or not, Aleksandar Vucic cared about Ali Ahmeti!!! He said that Albin Kurti, the Prime Minister of Kosovo, will defeat Ali Ahmeti and rule Macedonia. Since when is Ali Ahmeti in Serbian interests that they even consider him the leader of Macedonia?! How can a Serb like Vucic, who does not have a good opinion of Albanians (except some from Albania), lead a campaign for Ali Ahmeti?!'*

Additionally, in Taravari's Facebook post dated 16 February, with a photo from the party's congress, an ethnocentric and nationalist tone is noted in the short status: *Tonight, in **the ancient (ancient) Albanian capital, in historical Skopje**, I understood more clearly than ever, that the change has begun and is not stopping anymore! Greetings from the People.*

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

This month, there were no posts with harmful narratives on the new page of the European Union for Change, but there were posts with harmful narratives on the Facebook pages of Alternativa (6) and Democratic Movement (1) and their leader Izet Medjiti (4). However, the communication of these two parties is similar, the press conferences are published on the channels of both parties. It is important to note that on 17 February, the ESP officially entered the pre-election coalition VLEN with the Alliance for Albanians and supported Arben Taravari as a candidate for president from the bloc of opposition parties of ethnic Albanians, so it can be noted that the communication focuses on promoting the new coalition and their presidential candidate.[10] Two of Alternativa's six posts with harmful narratives are press conferences published on behalf of the new VLEN coalition.

In the harmful communication, they continue to focus on harsh criticism and accusations against DUI, but also against the Government, and this month there are also attacks against the new Prime Minister of the Caretaker Government, Talat Djaferi, calling him 'technical administrator of the Caretaker Government and a random Albanian'. Contrary to how they portray DUI, as a synonym for crime and corruption, they present themselves and their parties as saviours and defenders of the people, of the identity of the ethnic Albanians and of justice.

10 https://telma.com.mk/2024/02/17/albanskite-opozicziski-partii-ja-oficzializiraa-koaliczijata-so-ime-vrednost/

The six Facebook posts of Alternativa refer to various specific topics such as the situation with the theatre and the library in Tetovo, irregularities in MEPSO, the constitutional amendments, the elections, mocking Artan Grubi's socks by calling him 'Dilber the colourful sock boy' and accusing DUI of being an aid to Russian influence in the country, but in all of them it is the same trend of using unverified findings that contain a biased selection of information and even disinformation, and less often negative labels for the representatives of DUI developing damaging narratives of character attacks as well as accusations of supporting undesirable Russian influence in the country. In addition to comparisons between DUI as bad and corrupt and Albanian opposition parties as good, harmful populist narratives are being developed.

For example, in a press conference post on the Alternativa's Facebook page dated 23 February titled VLEN: DUI nominates 'The Patient' for president, the only Albanian official with cases in the Special Prosecutor's Office. Unverified findings and incomplete reporting of the 'event' are used to develop harmful narratives of biased information selection. *Do you really believe that the citizens and the international factor do not know that Bujar Osmani is the only one who opened the sky to Russia and brought Sergey Lavrov to Skopje, for which you upset the main strategic partner of the Albanians, the USA, and Secretary Anthony Blinken did not stay in Skopje, as well as unverified findings that develop disinformation narratives – You think that the citizens do not know that your main partner is Russia! You are the ones who for 10 years co-ruled with the biggest pro-Russian in the country, Nikola Gruevskin. Then you sent him safely to Hungary. Citizens know that DUI has dozens of businesses for quick loans with Russian oligarchs. But who allows the opening of casinos by Russian and Serbian businessmen in our country, except DUI officials?* It is obvious that the unsubstantiated findings of negative Russian influence in the country are attributed to DUI – *all your actions and collaborations are typical of Russia and Serbia, only now you cannot hide them. Therefore, we make it very clear to you that we all know that on the one hand you pretend to curse Russia, and on the other hand you only allow its expansion and influence in North Macedonia.*

Consequently, there is also a populist narrative that promotes VLEN as a pro-European option that will save the state and the people from the negative elitist and pro-Russian rule of DUI – *That's why citizens are increasingly joining the real pro-European coalition every day, they are joining the opposition coalition for which it is WORTH (VLEN). That's why Arben Taravari will win confidently as a presidential candidate, because the citizens know who is WORTH (VLEN)! On 8 May the stone you try to throw at others will fall on your head and on 9 May the country will be freed from Russia, while the pro-European and pro-American spirit will triumph, because that's the only way it's WORTH (VLEN)!*

The same harmful narrative can be seen in Alternativa's Facebook post from 11 February with a short message-a quote and a photo from Afrim Gashi that is published on both his and the party's profile- *As of tonight, our political battle has become even clearer. The question in the elections on 8 May will be: Are you with Vucic of Serbia and Ali Ahmeti or are you with the united Albanian opposition - European Union for Change and Albin Kurti? It doesn't get any clearer than that. Also easier to decide.*

Monitoring of the Facebook page of the Democratic Movement noted a press conference post with a harmful narrative dated 8 February titled 'European Union for Change: DUI resolves and rematches, but people who want change unite!' by Mustafa Imeri who is fired from his position as the head of a department in a music school, who goes public with his story and ends up sending messages identical to those of the opposition bloc of ethnic Albanian parties. The same press conference was published on the Facebook page of Izet Medjiti and Alternativa. In this communication, unverified findings are noted, with which a biased selection of information is made and the populist narrative of the Albanian opposition is developed, in which the difference between DUI as 'a few politicians on the run' and the opposition bloc of Albanians as a representative of 'the people who demand change' is emphasized: *In fact, this caretaker government started the 100 days wrong. But I feel*

proud that in this battle between a few politicians on the run and the people demanding change, I am on the side of the people. Dear Sirs, you dismiss, but the people are united, you are retaliating, but the people are moving. The good in this bad is that this evil only has 90 days left. We will endure, 8 May is our day. Behind the voting booth, we will dismiss this government with our vote. CHANGE IS COMING!

The harmful narratives identified in the four posts on Izet Medjiti's Facebook page centred on criticism of Talat Djaferi and the Law on Games of Chance. For example, in a press release from his press conference on 28 February, Medjiti uses claims of corruption and crime – *With DUI's law, casinos don't close. DUI cooperates in 4 new casinos with the Serbian underground. What secrets does this law hide, which Grubi and the party of the green agenda want to secretly smuggle it, once with a European and once with a Sicilian flag. We will tell you STOP, because this scam cannot pass...'* and unverified findings – *'...In addition to the 'Casino in every alley' project, Artan is now successfully implementing the CASINO in every house project by awarding 4 ONLINE CASINO licenses to companies where Paparim Bajrami is a partner, now a well-known person who carries out the orders of the clan...'* a harmful narrative is being developed with a biased selection of information and the trust in the Assembly and in the high officials in the Government is being undermined by DUI, but with the negative labels towards Grubi and the allegations for negative foreign influence – *'With the introduction of this law, Artan Grubi will allegedly close some betting shops, in order to open the way for CASINO business exclusively to the crew of the Serbian underground. Russia through Serbia!'* panic, fear and insecurity spread among the public. The same press conference was published on the Facebook pages of the Democratic Movement and Alternative.

On the same day, Medjiti has a short status post that is a reaction to Prime Minister Talat Djaferi's visit to the Vevchani carnival in which he vilifies Djaferi that the highest political representative of the ethnic Albanians belittles and insults Albanians – *The current Caretaker Prime Minister is at the carnival at which Albanians and the UCK are insulted, he declared it a heritage of special importance... So now they will laugh at us with the name of Prime Minister Carnival. The pride and dignity of Albanians is WORTH (VLEN) much more than the special legacy that Talat leaves us.*

Monitoring of the communication of the members of the RNM Government through the official Facebook pages

From the monitoring of the Facebook pages of the government officials in the caretaker government, posts with harmful narratives were noted by the Minister of Foreign Affairs Bujar Osmani (1), the Minister of Economy Kreshnik Bekteshi (1), the Minister of Agriculture Ljupco Nikolovski (2) and Minister of Justice Krenar Loga (3).

One post with a harmful narrative was identified on the Facebook page of Deputy Prime Minister Artan Grubi. In general, the communication of the Deputy Prime Minister Artan Grubi is party-political, the party takes precedence in comparison to the institution he leads. This is also a result of the position he holds in the party as responsible for public relations. In his posts, the propagandistic party narrative prevails, which is ethnocentric, and inflammatory tones and historical facts are used, which he contextualizes in the current political moment. Grubi often connects his party with the legacy of the former NLA, trying to influence voters on an emotional level. In this context, Grubi leads the way, glorifies and hyperbolizes the figure of Ali Ahmeti in historical dimensions in almost all of his Facebook posts – *'All my friends, like an army, are lined up following Ahmeti, for one president, for our friend Bujar.'*

On the Facebook page of the Minister of Foreign Affairs, Bujar Osmani, abuse of the official profile for party propaganda is noted. In particular, on 23 February, a video of the minister from the hall of the United Nations was published where although he attends officially as a minister, he talks about his presidential candidacy for the upcoming elections in the country, with party rhetoric.

In addition, on 11 February, a specific case was noted of a post from the Facebook page of the Minister of Foreign Affairs and presidential candidate from DUI, Bujar Osmani, which was deleted a few hours later. The post uses accusations against VMRO-DPMNE of allegedly inciting foreign, Serbian influence, as well as negative labels for the media accused of boycotting the activities of the first Albanian prime minister, developing an ethnocentric narrative that these combined forces want revenge on Ali Ahmeti and to replace the strong Albanian arm - DUI, with derivatives that remained outside the process of lustration and reformation of DUI - the opposition parties of ethnic Albanians in the country.

> *As never before in the history of this country, the Macedonian national terrestrial media are boycotting the activities of the first Albanian Prime Minister, since the first day of his appointment. They are also boycotting the activities of the DUI ministers and the party itself. And in addition, we are witnessing from the same actors an aggressive campaign from various decision-making centres against president Ahmeti. In the end, through the mediation of the leader of VMRO, Mickoski got the Serbian president, Vucic, involved in the play.*
>
> *There are two goals of this synchronized anti-Albanian campaign:*
> *1) Revenge against Ahmeti for the war in 2001 and for the equality that war brought.*
> *2) Weakening a strong Albanian hand and replacing it with derivatives that remained outside the process of lustration and reforming the DUI.*
> *Moreover, in these difficult times for Albanians, when the focus of war is only hundreds of kilometres away from us, Albanians do not allow, and will not allow, dubious ideological and national figures to risk our future...*

In February, two posts with harmful narratives were identified on the Facebook page of the Minister of Justice and Secretary General of the Alliance for Albanians Krenar Loga, where party rather than institutional communication prevails. He presents himself and his party as defenders of their own national identity, transparent, accountable and EU-oriented. For that purpose, Loga uses propaganda techniques in his posts and inflammatory tones to emphasize that he is fighting for ethnic Albanian interests. For example, on 29 February in Facebook reaction after his interview on Shenja TV where he announces a clash between Macedonians and Albanians in the elections, Loga retracts his statement with an explanation that contains a harmful narrative about foreign influences in the country: The ideological clash *West-East should not be presented as a clash between Albanians and Macedonians, and at least as something said by me. What is generally known in our country is that in North Macedonia there are progressive European forces and regressive pro-Russian streams.* Unverified findings are also used and biased selection of information, as for example in posting of a video of his 23 February interview *The president who is Albanian can only be elected by the Assembly. North Macedonia has not reached the maturity for this through direct elections.*

In one identified post with a harmful narrative on Minister Bekteshi's Facebook page from 11 February, which is most likely a reaction to the interview of the President of Serbia Aleksandar Vucic, the same party ethnocentric narrative of DUI is noted in which the leader of the party Ahmeti is glorified and placed in a battle with Mickoski, the EUC and Vucic for the victory of the Albanians in the upcoming elections – *Ali Ahmeti against Mickoski, Vucic, EUC... Albanians will WIN under the leadership of COMMANDER ALI AHMETI.*

In the monitored days in February, a total of 52 posts were noted on the Facebook profile of Minister Nikolovski and two posts with a harmful narrative, in which unverified findings accusing VMRO-DPMNE are noted, with which he makes a biased selection of information that can lead the public to wrong conclusions. For example, in a post dated 16 February, in which Minister Nikolovski accuses the opposition of blocking the amendments to the Law on Agriculture, it is said: *From 2021 until*

now, DPMNE, through the Parliamentary Committee on Agriculture, has been blocking the adoption of these amendments and adjustments in the Law on Agriculture and Rural Development, and in the 23 February post, where the minister makes a comparison (with an infographic) who provided more financial support for farmers, criticizes the opposition again and writes *I read and hear empty words and general chaos in the promises of the opposition...* In the Facebook posts of Minister Nikolovski, the hashtag #ResultsForFarmers can be seen.

1.3 SUMMARY

The first two months of 2024 are characterized by pre-election rhetoric which was complemented by the horse-trading talks regarding the caretaker government. The most utilised topics were the issue of changing identification and travel documents with the new constitutional name, the scandal with the intrusion in M-NAV, the election of the caretaker government and the election of Talat Djaferi as prime minister in the caretaker government. To a lesser extent, there are topics related to the management of public institutions at the central and local level, while the most common topics used to produce harmful narratives are related to the management of public finances and the capabilities of officials.

In these two months, just like in previous, the largest political parties produced the most harmful narratives. The main governing and main opposition parties SDSM and VMRO-DPMNE are at the top, followed by smaller parties. There is a trend that small parliamentary parties are not noted to produce harmful narratives. This is due to the fact that the monitoring is not carried out every calendar day of the month, and also the smaller parties are less active and rarely express their views on social developments. The exception from the smaller parties is Levica, which is significantly active on Facebook, both through the profile of the leader of the party, Dimitar Apasiev, and through the party's Facebook profile, which is simultaneously used as an aggregator of the posts on the Facebook pages of the party branches.

As the election date approaches, the intensity of communication between the political actors increases. The language used is sharper and emotionally charged. In addition to frequent harmful narratives in which accusations are made against political opponents in order to undermine trust in them, there is also a frequent occurrence of populist discourse, frequent ethnocentric narratives, as well as accusations of foreign influence. This is noticeable especially among the parties of the Albanians, who resort to rhetoric to glorify national belonging and insist on ethnic personalization of the prime state positions (prime minister and president of the state).

Communication practices of political actors in January and February 2024

In January, monitoring of the websites and Facebook pages of the 10 political parties and their leaders identified 75 posts on the parties' websites and 73 Facebook posts containing a harmful narrative. More than half, i.e. 61.3 percent, of the identified harmful narratives on the parties' websites for the month of January are from VMRO-DPMNE, 29.3 percent from SDSM, and 8 percent from Levica. On the Facebook pages, just like in the past months, the largest share of harmful narratives is registered with Levica (43.8%) and its leader Dimitar Apasiev (11%).

Similar to the previous months, the parties create messages with an identical vector projection towards other political actors. VMRO-DPMNE directs the most harmful narratives at SDSM and DUI, which the opposition party presents as criminal structures, irresponsible and do not take into account national interests. SDSM, on the other hand, frequently labels VMRO-DPMNE as 'the obstacle of European integration' and accuses them of corrupt governance in local institutions across the country. Levica targets SDSM and DUI, but does not spare VMRO-DPMNE as well, presenting itself as a small party that works for the citizens against the big blocks of parties. The European Union for Change focuses on attacks

against Ali Ahmeti and the senior representatives of DUI, especially on the topic of negative foreign influence from the Prime Minister of Kosovo, Albin Kurti in domestic politics, but also on accusations against the government of corrupt and unscrupulous governance. With DUI, there are no direct attacks, but there are ethnocentric narratives and dichotomous rhetoric 'Yes for Europe, No for Russia' that is gaining momentum with the candidacy for the president of the country.

With almost all political actors that are subject to monitoring, it is noticed that there is a trend to present that they are on the side of the people, that they represent their interests, unlike their political opponents. The protection of the national interests of the Albanians in the country is the focus of the promotion of their own ideologies in the posts containing harmful narratives from DUI, the European Union for Change and the Alliance of Albanians.

The most common narratives used remain examples of unsubstantiated allegations, usually of criminal activity, corruption and unprofessionalism, or accusing the opponent of not working in the interest of the state. While in the ruling parties the narrative mostly focuses on the topic of pro-European and anti-European bloc, when the communication is directed at the opposition actors, in the opposition there is a trend to use almost any topic of wider public interest to criticize the authorities. Every topic on which critical performance data is presented is used by opposition actors often as a criticism for non-transparent and unprofessional performance, incompetence, often by building on what was previously published and putting it in the context of the incompetence of the ruling parties.

Just like in the previous reports, a violation of the principles of ethical communication of members of the Government was noted. Starting from Prime Minister Dimitar Kovachevski, on whose official Facebook page content about party activities is published (about establishing new party headquarters of the SDSM municipal organisation in Aerodrom).

January is the month of several Orthodox religious holidays, so the Prime Minister, his deputies - Marichikj and Grkovska, and several ministers, such as Minister Spasovski, Ministers Petrovska and Shukova, shared congratulatory messages, including on behalf of the institution (for example, 'on behalf of the Ministry of Interior') or informed about participation in religious events. Marking the holidays on the profiles of elected officials in a secular state does not correspond to the expectation that government communication channels are used exclusively for communication related to the work of the official, who should represent the interests of all citizens regardless of religious, political or any other personal conviction.

In January, harmful narratives were also noticed on the Facebook pages of Deputy Prime Minister Grubi, who made claims *about attempts to destabilize and disorientate our European path coming from a single centre - Russia,* which is the first time an accusation has been made by a deputy prime minister from DUI for the interference of foreign factors in the internal political relations in the country. Additionally, at the end of the month, the Deputy Prime Minister presents party and ethnically inspired narratives, in the context of the placement of Talat Djaferi as the first Prime Minister-designate of the Caretaker government who is an ethnic Albanian.

On the Facebook page of the Alliance of Albanians, a video was published of an interview with the Minister of Justice from the ranks of the AA, Krenar Loga, in the debate show 'OnTime' on KOHA Television, in which he accuses foreign entities of interfering in the internal affairs of the state, contrary to the state interests: *...There were developments in Banjska and in B&H with Dodik, Macedonia cannot be immune to Serbian and Russian influences because they have a common past in the common Yugoslav state, and because they are Slavic brotherly nations.* In the interview, Loga presents his party as a defender of his own national identity, and speaks negatively about VMRO-DPMNE and Levica.

In February, 53 harmful narratives were noted on the Internet and 83 on the Facebook pages. The most harmful narratives on the websites were noted with VMRO-DPMNE (27), SDSM (15), Levica (7), and the least harmful narratives were identified in DUI (4). On the Facebook pages, the most harmful narratives were noted with Levica (21) and the leader of the party Dimitar Apasiev (10), and for the first time a harmful narrative was noted from the leader of the Alliance of Albanians, Arben Taravari.

The main actors remain unchanged. The main opposition party mostly directs harmful narratives towards the ruling SDSM and DUI, while SDSM targets VMRO-DPMNE. Levica directs harmful narratives to SDSM and DUI as the ruling parties, as well as to VMRO-DPMNE. The main actor of the European Union for Change is DUI, which usually does not have a specific actor, but glorifies the work of their party.

Political communication from the beginning of 2024 needs to be seen in the context of the elections that await the country in the spring of 2024 – presidential and parliamentary elections. Considering that the election campaign for the presidential elections starts on 4 April, for the presidential elections in the second half of April, and the elections were called in the middle of February, it is expected that during this period there will be fierce rhetoric on the part of the political actors. In that direction, during the month of February, an increased dynamic is noted in the posts by political actors. The language used is fierce, more often offensive, frequently has expressions of populist discourse that is typical of election campaigns.

If in January more focus was noted in presenting unverified allegations about corruption, crime, disparaging the political opponent and undermining trust, in February, in addition to these, an increased presence of populism and nationalist rhetoric was noted. This trend is expected considering that the pre-election period is approaching and the topic of defence of Macedonian national interests has been a very current topic in the last year and a half, after the adoption of the so-called 'French proposal' i.e. the Negotiating Framework with the EU.

The trend continues for the ruling parties to mostly use a narrative that focuses on the topic of pro-European and anti-European bloc, when the communication is aimed at the opposition actors. The opposition, on the other hand, uses every topic, mostly from domestic politics that is of wider public interest, to criticize the authorities. In addition, certain trends can be noted in February that foreshadow the election platforms and campaigns. SDSM communicates that their pro-European agenda is the only option for the citizens against the anti-European opposition, specifically the parties VMRO-DPMNE and Levica, which has no plan and vision for the country. VMRO-DPMNE uses a more distinct rhetoric for the protection of Macedonian national interests, projecting an image that the ruling parties SDSM and DUI are not working to preserve the state. DUI sticks to an ethnocentric narrative in which they present themselves as defenders of their own national identity and pro-European saviours of the Albanian people in the country, while accusing political opponents of extreme nationalism and encouraging negative foreign/pro-Russian influence in the country, which is confirmed by the pre-election slogan of the 'YES for Europe, NO for Russia' party. This month, the Alliance for Albanians and the European Union for Change have joined in a coalition with Arben Taravari as a joint candidate for President, and hence their communication is gradually synchronizing with a focus on accusations against DUI for crime, corruption and enabling harmful Russian and Serbian influence in the country. Levica, on the other hand, has a more intense and sharper rhetoric aimed at all political parties that are from the ruling majority, as well as VMRO-DPMNE. Almost all political actors use rhetoric that puts themselves on the side of the people, in contrast to their political opponents. In the discourse of small parliamentary parties, no harmful narratives were recorded during the monitoring period.

In February, several cases were also noted when members of the Government abused the official channels of communication of the institution they manage. Such is the case of Bujar Osmani, who used his presence at the UN as Minister of Foreign Affairs for his own promotion for the presidential candidacy. Similar case is the Minister of Justice, Krenar Loga, who also commented on inter-party disputes through

the official government Facebook profile, but also used nationalist rhetoric. Malpractice of this type has also been noted among the Minister for Political System and the Minister for Agriculture, Forestry and Water Management.

Numerous violations of the standards and principles of public communication by political actors

The monitoring in January and February 2024 shows that the dominant political actors in Macedonia, both from the ruling and opposition political parties, violate the standards and principles to be followed in political communication. They very easily resort to accusations about their political opponents without supporting them with arguments. Unfounded accusations of corrupt practices are being made, which undermine trust in the institutions. The frequent criticism by influential political actors (the former Prime Minister and the leader of the opposition) of media, which encourages a climate of distrust towards media workers and violation of freedom of expression, is worrying. Unverified data is used, information is presented selectively, which makes it impossible for the public to get a complete picture of the operation of political entities and cannot make an informed decision, especially when it comes to election processes. The monitoring determined that the harmful narratives used in the public discourse of the political parties in Macedonia violate the principle of evidence-based communication. Manipulative speech, which includes disinformation, misinformation and malinformation, can seriously affect democratic processes and elections by creating and spreading lies, character attacks, which can result in a decrease in trust in the electoral process and institutions. The frequent presentation of unverified allegations about corruption, crime, the use of offensive language to disparage the political opponent, lead to a decrease in the level of professionalism and ethics of the political culture for communication, but also the culture of speech in the sociolinguistic sense. Hence, it is important that politicians and public officials do not use disinformation and share only verified information in their communication.

Political actors have an obligation to be transparent in their information, to represent the public interest, not to be a source and not to spread disinformation and unverified information, as well as not to use hate speech, discriminatory speech and to respect the rights and obligations from freedom of expression. Transparency is considered one of the important prerequisites in the fight against corruption. The lack of transparency in the communication of political actors, if it happens often, can contribute to the normalization of non-transparency in information, limit the information space and affect in general terms the reduction of transparency of institutions. Political entities are obliged to practice active transparency in their work and to publish materials that are of interest to the media and the public.

In Macedonia, it is a well-known practice for parties to use nationalist rhetoric, especially in the run-up to and during the elections, especially since it is rhetoric that is emotionally charged and easily stirs up the emotions of the citizens. The analysis shows that in February this inflammatory nationalistic speech is intensified, as well as the populist discourse which uses narratives that certain political actors work to preserve Macedonian national interests, unlike others who are corrupt, do not work for the good of the state or serve foreign interests. Propagation of extreme patriotism and nationalism can contribute to greater division in society, especially in a sensitive period such as the election cycle in a society like ours where democracy is still fragile.

Political actors need to refrain from using and spreading hate speech and discriminatory speech that can cause intolerance and incite divisions. According to Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression, whereby this right includes the freedom to represent a certain opinion, as well as the freedom to seek, give and receive information and ideas through the media: 'Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression, which includes the right not to be harassed because of their opinion, as well as the right to seek, receive and disseminate information and ideas through media of any type, regardless of frontiers' (Universal Declaration of Human Rights).

The principle of ethical communication means that elected and appointed officials, as well as party officials, have an obligation in their communication with the public and the media to practice ethics in communication. Political parties are encouraged to adopt codes of conduct which, among other things, oblige their members, officials, candidates and elected and appointed persons to tackle speech that incites intolerance, discrimination or hatred. They are also called upon to treat participants with respect during their press conferences, to practice equal treatment when asking questions and to refrain from labelling media workers and human rights activists (Joint Declaration on Politicians and Public Servants and the Freedom of Expression from 2021).

Regardless of whether they are from the ruling political parties or opposition actors who aspire to govern the country, all political actors have a legal and ethical obligation to communicate with the public in a timely, transparent and professional manner. When political actors practice communication in which there is a low culture of ethics and professionalism, biased selection, unverified accusations or allegations that cannot be proven, labelling, ridicule, humiliation, then harmful narratives multiply in the public discourse.

Political actors represent the will of the people, who trust them to manage the state and state resources on their behalf. Therefore, they must practice a discourse in which harmful narratives will be to a minimal level. Otherwise, the non-democratic culture of public communication and behaviour is normalized, which prevents the democratic advancement of the political debate. It also prevents better offer for citizens who need to make a decision in the electoral process based on the plurality of information that is available to them in the presentation of the work of political actors.

2. Monitoring of the media coverage of political actors

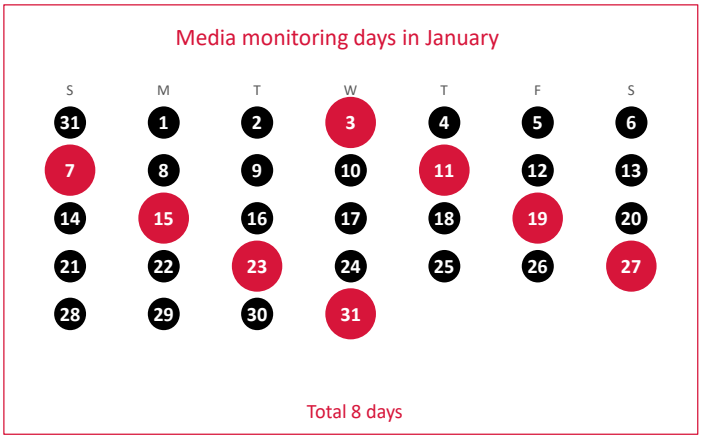
Analysis of the online media and television stations' coverage of political actors is the second, parallel process in the Determining Political Harmful Narratives research. It is complementary to the first component of monitoring, i.e. the monitoring of the political actors' communication with the public. 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 contrary, do they, unquestionably follow the agenda dictated by political actors.

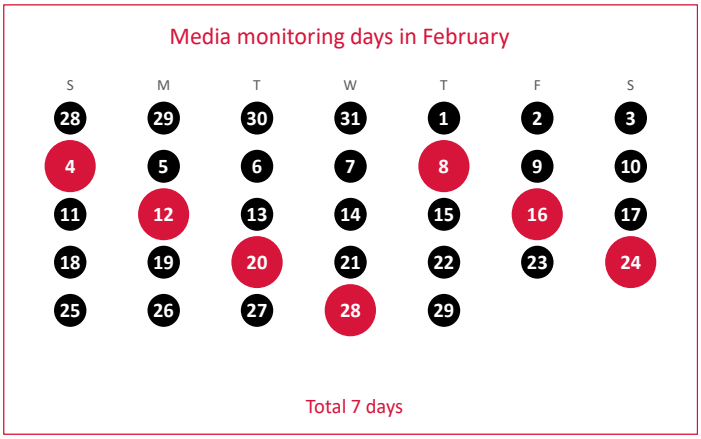
The media sample includes the following 11 online media and 9 television stations:

Online media outlets: Lokalno; Nezavisen; Sloboden Pechat; 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 (public); MTV 2 (public, 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 January and February, spread over four-day intervals ('every fourth day in the month'). Days for media monitoring were the following days in January: January 3, 7, 11, 15, 19, 23, 27, 31 (eight days in total) and in February: 4, 8, 12, 16, 20, 24, 28 (seven days).

2.1. Monitoring report on online media coverage of political actors

Report for January 2024

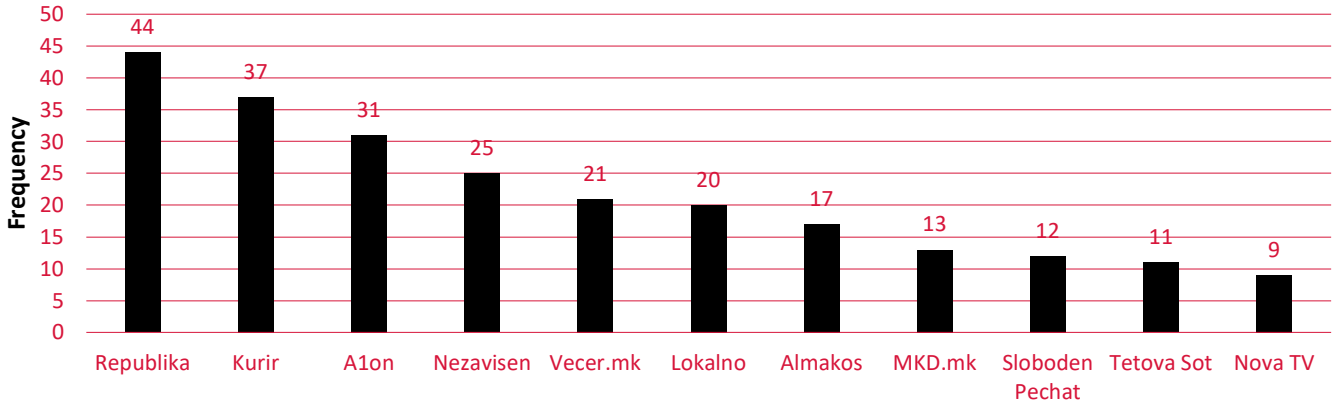
The beginning of 2024 was characterized by a continued intensity of harmful narratives in the online media outlets, despite the fact that January is the month with the highest number of holidays in the year, and it was expected that politicians and political parties would take a break from politics and from outwitting each other on numerous political issues. The permanent growth in the number of harmful narratives from the previous four-month monitoring period (September 209, October 154, November 215, December 207), reached a number of 240 news items with harmful narratives. They were predominantly related to domestic politics, above all, the election of the caretaker government (its structure, the election of prime minister) on the eve of the presidential and parliamentary elections in the country, but also the developments related to the Macedonian Navigation (M-NAV)) (the violent intrusion in the control tower, the measures taken, the reactions of the EU), the judiciary and the prosecution (elections of judges, prosecutors), the replacement of identification documents (ID cards, passports, driver's licenses) with the new name of the state.

Contextually, the analysis shows that, of all the news items with harmful narratives that were found, the reported (shared) press-releases (primarily from political parties, i.e. 98) and the broadcast politicians' speeches, or 72 news items, which together make up for 70.8% of the analysed news items, dominate in terms of genre. If we add the 22 posts taken from Facebook statuses, press conferences and interviews given to other media, jointly they constitute 192 news items or 80.0% of all analysed news items with harmful narratives. 22 news items are noted as reports, 16 news items as news, while analyses, comments and interviews are very rare and sporadic. At the same time, as expected, precisely because of genre structure, the largest number, or 209 news items, have very precise sources of information, but most of the time it is only one source (213 news items) and one-sided reporting dominates, i.e. in 217 news items only a single source was consulted. The reason for publishing the news items are most frequently pseudo-events (113 news items or half of all the analysed items), i.e. party press conferences and statements of political actors, then current events (70 news items), with social developments (27 news items) and current affairs (17 news items) lagging far behind. By default, as in the previous monitored months, the largest number of items in the news (**213 or 88.8%) are not signed**, as opposed to the 18 items where the name/initials of the author/journalist of the article is stated, while 9 news items were taken over from another media outlet (TV stations or news agencies).

Frequency of harmful narratives in online media

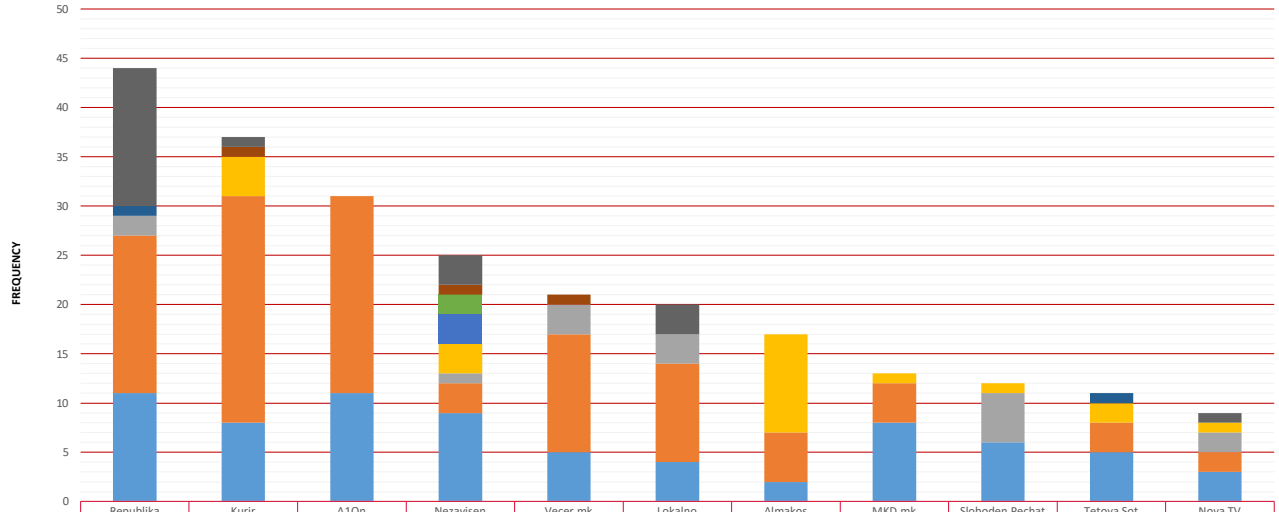
Republika (44) and Kurir (33) have the largest number of news items containing harmful narratives again, but the rest of the analysed portals have changed positions in the ranking, meaning that A1on and Nezavisen come next, only then followed by Vecer.mk and Lokalno, while Nova TV has the fewest news items with harmful narratives. The example of Vecer.mk is striking, as the number of news items with harmful narratives gradually decreases from one month to another.

Table 11. News items with harmful narratives in January 2024



The genre structure of the analysed news items containing harmful narratives remains unchanged and continues to consist of political parties' press releases and broadcast politicians' speeches. Party press releases are the dominant form in Kurir (in 23 out of 37 news items) primarily from the political party VMRO-DPMNE and A1on (in 20 out of 31 news items) also from VMRO-DPMNE, but also from Levica, then in Republika (14 out of 44 news items), Vecer.mk (12 out of 21 news items) and Lokalno (10 out of 20 news items), while politicians' speeches dominate the reporting in Tetova Sot (5 out of 11 news items), Nezavisen (9 out of 25 news items) and MKD.mk (8 out of 13 news items). Cumulatively, these two genre forms are most prevalent in Kurir (31 out of 37 news items), Vecer.mk (17 out of 21 news items), Lokalno (14 out of 20 news items), MKD.mk (12 out of 13 news items) and in all the news items published on A1on. The Republika portal stands out in particular, where, in addition to the political party press releases and politicians' speeches (total of 27 news items), there is also a large number of news items (14) of broadcast parts of interviews, press conferences, Facebook statuses of political entities, covering exclusively the political party VMRO - DPMNE and its members. In other words - a total of 41 news items out of the 44 news items that were found to contain harmful narratives, whereby the portal, apart from being a broadcaster - 'spokesperson' of press-releases, reactions, views, speeches of a certain political entity that have a negative connotation, in/directly enters the trap of creating harmful narratives. In contrast, from all analysed portals, Almakos stands out, where, out of a total of 22 news items with harmful narratives, 10 can be considered to be reports in terms of genre.

Table 12. News items with harmful narratives by genre structure in January 2024



	Republika	Kurir	A1On	Nezavisen	Vecer.mk	Lokalno	Almakos	MKD.mk	Sloboden Pechat	Tetova Sot	Nova TV
Other	14	1	0	3	0	3	0	0	0	0	1
Interview	0	1	0	1	1	0	0	0	0	0	0
Commentary	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0
Analysis/Commentary	0	0	0	2	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Analytical report – news item	0	0	0	3	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Report	0	4	0	3	0	0	10	1	1	2	1
News/news with a statement	2	0	0	1	3	3	0	0	5	0	2
Broadcast press-release	16	23	20	3	12	10	5	4	0	3	2
Broadcast politicians' speech	11	8	11	9	5	4	2	8	6	5	3

Domestic politics is a dominant topic in all online media regardless of the number of news items with harmful narratives. In Nezavisen (24 out of a total of 25 news items), Sloboden Pechat (11 out of a total of 12 news items), Tetova Sot (10 out of a total of 11 news items) and Nova TV (8 out of a total of 9 news items) it is nearly the sole topic that the public is informed about. In Vecer.mk it dominates with 16 news items (out of a total of 21), in Almakos with 13 news items (out of a total of 17), in Lokalno with 15 news items (out of a total of 20) and in MKD.mk with 9 news items (out of a total of 13). It is only in the portals Republika, Kurir and A1on, where, in addition to domestic politics, the economy, crime and corruption are often covered. Republika, after domestic politics, pays the most attention to crime and corruption, Kurir to economy and crime, and A1on to foreign policy, crime, corruption and local self-government. Health, education and social policy are of sporadic importance.

More importantly, the topic of domestic politics is reduced to brief political party press releases or positions, statements of political actors (taken from other media outlets or various events) chockfull of harmful narratives and delivered in a standard format for easy recognition by the public. A few typical examples:

- *VMRO-DPMNE: Kovachevski sold SDS, just to spend another day serving DUI and to see the deserter Talat Djaferi become Prime Minister,* a news item consisting of three short paragraphs taken verbatim (both the title and the text) from the website of VMRO-DPMNE (source, **Republika, 31.1.2024**). The same news item in identical form and content was also published in Kurir on the same day.
- *Mickoski: It is sad to see the lows that SDSM has fallen to*, news item, i.e. an interview with the president of VMRO-DPMNE, Hristijan Mickoski, taken word for word from the Press24 portal (source, **Kurir, 3.1.2024**), and shared on other portals as well.
- *VMRO-DPMNE: Is he a Prime Minister, or is he a pedlar, there should be neither coffees, nor secret meetings, the situation in the country is too serious,* an article of three short paragraphs aimed at Prime Minister Dimitar Kovachevski and his incompetence for the position, taken verbatim from VMRO-DPMNE's website (source, **A1on, 3.1.2024**), and also shared by Vecer.mk and numerous other portals, television stations, news agencies.
- The news item *All the roads from the M-NAV intrusion lead to DUI*, consisting of a few short sentences and taken verbatim from VMRO-DPMNE's website (source: **Vecer.mk, 19.1.2024**) in which the gangs of the 'European' DUI threatened air traffic. The same article, with the same title, but with abbreviated content, went on to be published by MKD.mk, while Kurir went a step further by changing the headline for the same press-release, *VMRO-DPMNE: Two weeks later there is still no solution to the intrusion into M-NAV, the authorities are protecting the DUI gangs* (source, **Kurir, 19.1.2024**), which went on to be shared by many other portals.
- *Kaevski: For DPMNE, the business interest tops everything else, they talk about Bulgarisation, and they make millions in Bulgaria* - an article consisting of two very short passages, from the interview of MP and SDSM spokesman Darko Kaevski, on how fellow MPs from VMRO-DPMNE make money with companies in Bulgaria, while at the same time are against the inclusion of Bulgarians in the Constitution (source, **Nova TV, 19.1.2024**), which was published by other portals.

The reason for the publication of these news items are most frequently pseudo-events and actual events. 113 news items (47.3%) were found to be on pseudo-events, and this includes press releases of political parties, press conferences, statements and reactions by political entities (politicians, spokespersons, MPs, mayors, members of political parties) and if to those we also add those news items created by guest appearances of political entities in other media, 8 in total, then the number of pseudo-events accounts for 121 news items (50.65%). 70 news items (29.3%) have been found to be actual events and together with the current affairs events, which are 17, they add up to 87 or 36.4%. Pseudo-events are most prevalent in Kurir and Republika. In Nezavisen pseudo-events and social events are almost equally represented, while A1on, Vecer.mk, Tetova Sot, Sloboden Pechat and Nova TVs strike a balance between current and pseudo-events, with pseudo-events prevailing over current ones in Lokalno, while current events prevailing in Almakos and MKD.mk.

The political actors in the analysed news items

In all the monitored portals, there are numerous actors represented in the news items with harmful narratives, but those with two actors dominate (64 news items or 26.4%). They are followed by those with three (41 or 17.1%), four (32 or 13.3%), five actors (25 or 10.4%) and six actors (29 or 12.1%). Moreover, their representation is different when it comes to collective or individual political actors. The portals with the largest number of news items with harmful narratives are dominated by collective actors, i.e. in Republika they are the parties VMRO-DPMNE, SDSM, DUI and the Government, and in Kurir VMRO-DPMNE and the Government of SDSM and DUI. In contrast, in A1on, in addition to VMRO-DPMNE, the Government, SDSM, DUI and Levica, Prime Minister Dimitar Kovachevski, the president of VMRO-DPMNE Hristijan Mickoski and the President of the Assembly (now Prime Minister in the Caretaker Government) Talat Djaferi are often represented, while in Vecer.mk, SDSM and DUI have an advantage, and in Almakos DUI, the Government and VMRO-DPMNE. In contrast, in Nezavisen, in addition to the party VMRO-DPMNE, the most represented are Prime Minister Dimitar Kovachevski and the president of VMRO-DPMNE, Hristijan Mickoski. It is the same case with Lokalno, with the dominance of VMRO-DPMNE, but also SDSM and DUI, followed by the Prime Minister Dimitar Kovachevski, the president of VMRO-DPMNE Hristijan Mickoski. In Nova TV, VMRO-DPMNE and Prime Minister Dimitar Kovachevski are most represented, in Sloboden Pechat, the president of VMRO-DPMNE Hristijan Mickoski, Prime Minister Dimitar Kovachevski and the President of the Assembly Talat Djaferi, in Tetova Sot VMRO-DPMNE and SDSM, and in MKD.mk VMRO -DPMNE, the Government/authorities and the President of the Assembly Talat Djaferi. As a whole, the **party VMRO-DPMNE is the most represented political entity on the pages of the online media in the news items with harmful narratives** (with the exception of Vecer.mk), and SDSM, DUI and the Government/authorities are far behind it, while Dimitar Kovachevski stands out from the politicians and Hristijan Mickoski. At the same time, the established practice remains that the opposition VMRO-DPMNE names the political opponent SDSM as 'SDS' (mostly in its party press-releases) and vice versa, the ruling SDSM addresses the political opponent as 'DPMNE'.

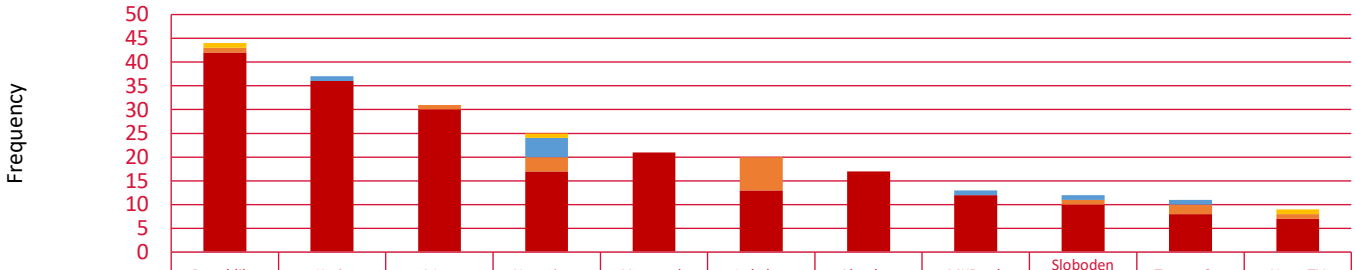
The representation of political actors varies from portal to portal. Thus, Republika, Nova TV, Lokalno, Sloboden Pechat, Almakos and MKD.mk mostly talk/write about the actors in the context of the topic, while Vecer.mk does so in all analysed news items. On the other hand, Nezavisen often quotes the actors, A1on quotes them and talks about them in the context of the topic, and Tetova Sot quotes and paraphrases the political actors. Only Kurir equally quotes and paraphrases them and talks about political actors in the context of the topic. But when it comes to the assessments of political actors, the most negative comments (first of all, from another political entity) are addressed to SDSM, the Government, DUI and VMRO-DPMNE. In the portals Republika and Kurir, it is the Government of SDSM and DUI, in Vecer.mk-DUI, SDSM and Prime Minister Kovachevski, in Nova TV and Tetova Sot - VMRO-DPMNE, in A1on - the authorities/Government, DUI and Kovachevski. There are almost no positive assessments except for one or two incidental examples (for example, in Tetova Sot and Nova TV for SDSM). The journalist has almost no role in evaluating political actors and leaves it to other political entities or to the actors themselves, what they have done or what they will do 'good' for the citizens. For example, in Kurir, Mickoski with a positive assessment of himself, in Republika VMRO-DPMNE and Mickoski, in Nova TV Dimitar Kovachevski, in Sloboden Pechat Dimitar Kovachevski and Talat Djaferi, while in A1on VMRO-DPMNE.

(Non)professionalism in journalism

The monitoring, in this period as well determined one-sided reporting in online media. In almost all analysed news items with harmful narratives (that is, 217 news items or 91.6%), the portals consulted only one side of the 'story'. Such are all the news items of Vecer.mk, Almakos, Nova TV, Sloboden Pechat, while Kurir, Republika and A1on, as an exception, each have one article in which two or more sides are consulted. Only in Tetova Sot, Lokalno and Nezavisen, apart from the dominant representation of one side of the sources, there are also several news items with two or more sides. The Lokalno portal stands out in particular, in which, out of a total of 20 news items with established harmful narratives, one side was consulted in 13, and two sides in 7.

At the same time, the portals mostly rely on one source of information (213 news items or 88.8%), which is not surprising precisely because of the largest number of news items with broadcast party press releases and politicians' speeches. At the same time, in Vecer.mk and Almakos, all analysed news items are from one source, while in other portals, sporadically, there is one article with two or three or more sources (especially Kurir, A1on and MKD.mk) or several such news items (in Republika, Sloboden Pechat, Nova TV). Lokalno and Nezavisen deviate from this unwritten rule with a larger number of news items with multiple sources of information.

Table 13. Number of sources by online media outlet January 2024



	Republika	Kurir	A1on	Nezavisen	Vecer.mk	Lokalno	Almakos	MKD.mk	Sloboden Pechat	Tetova Sot	Nova TV
There are no sources	1	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
Three and more	0	1	0	4	0	0	0	1	1	1	0
Two	1	0	1	3	0	7	0	0	1	2	1
One	42	36	30	17	21	13	17	12	10	8	7

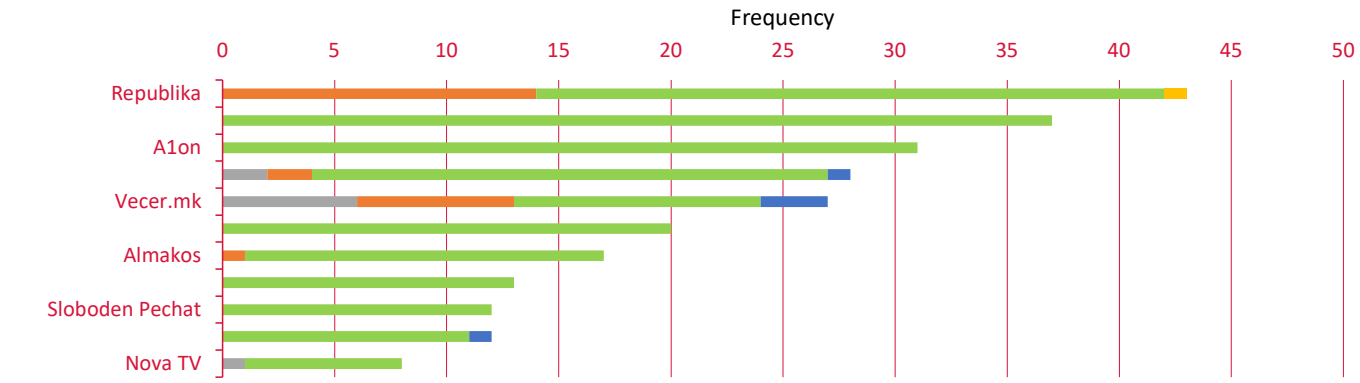
Obviously, the imperative in journalism to consults at least two sides or two sources for every piece of information (current affair) that is being published in the media, was not upheld by internet portals. This is the reason why, from time to time, you can read what the other side says in the form of a 'reaction' to certain information (press-release), and mostly from political parties, but not in a post by the same portal. However, even when a current event is in question, it is uncertain whether the public will be informed in a balanced way, if it relies on a single portal for information. The following example shows this in the most illustrative way – a local event is in question, the adoption of a decision by the Council of the City of Skopje to pay subsidies to the salaries of the employees of the Public Transportation Company (who had been blocking the traffic), which was in the news in almost all media outlets (television stations, newspapers, news agencies), the portals flooded the Internet space with texts, photos, video excerpts, which started on 22.1.2024 and 'finished' on 23.1.2024, a day included in the monitoring for this research. Then the public could read the press release about the event from VMRO-DPMNE in one of the analysed portals, and the reaction of SDSM in another. Two views of the story.

> The portal A1on published the VMRO-DPMNE's statement: *If hypocrisy had a second name, it would be Apasiev, yesterday his councillors voted in favour of JSP's money laundering, today Apasiev pretends to be against it,* a news item consisting of the 'standard' three short paragraphs copied verbatim from VMRO -DPMNE's website, which pins blame for the fact that the JSP workers cannot get paid directly to the Mayor of the City of Skopje, Arsovska, and the Levica party (source, **A1on, 23.1.2024**). But in the Lokalno portal we read SDSM's reaction to the same event: *VMRO-DPMNE wreaked havoc on JSP, Ilija Dimovski was the one issuing orders*, so that finally at the second urgent session of the Council of the City of Skopje a decision was made to pay subsidies to JSP's employees and normalize the public city transport (source, **Lokalno, 23.1.2024**).

When it comes to the type of source, in the news items that were subject of analysis, the most numerous type for all the media outlets were precise sources of information (209), and unclear or imprecise sources were far fewer, as well as the practice of citing another media outlet as a source (39 in total). Kurir, Lokalno, Sloboden Pechat, A1on and MKD.mk only referred to precise sources, while Almakos, Nova TV and Tetova Sot sporadically featured an unclear, imprecise source or a source from another media outlet (mostly in a single news item). Republika and Nezavisen, alongside the accurate sources which dominated, also cited unclear and imprecise sources slightly more frequently than the portals. An exception, similarly to the previous

monitored month, is Vecer.mk where, in addition to accurate sources (in 11 news items), news items with unclear (6 news items) and imprecise sources (7 news items) were almost evenly distributed, in addition to several news items taken over from other media outlets.

Table 14. Types of sources by online media outlets in January 2024



	Nova TV	Tetova Sot	Sloboden Pechat	MKD.mk	Almakos	Lokalno	Vecer.mk	Nezavisen	A1on	Kurir	Republika
Unclear	1	0	0	0	0	0	6	2	0	0	0
Imprecise	0	0	0	0	1	0	7	2	0	0	14
Precise	7	11	12	13	16	20	11	23	31	37	28
The journalist as a source	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
Another media outlet	0	1	0	0	0	0	3	1	0	0	0

The portals regularly accompany the news items containing harmful narratives most frequently with archival and current photos. Often, in particular when it comes to current political affairs, several photos can be found in separate news items, together with video statements, but they are almost regularly not marked, with the exception of Sloboden Pechat, where, like in the previously monitored months, all photos are marked with either the name of the photojournalist or the source from which they were taken. A striking example of media visualization is the article *DUI is crime and corruption from the lowest to the highest level: Djaferi parks in a square, his village organizes a celebration for him,* published in Republika on **31.01. 2024**. It reported on Talat Djaferi's election as a Prime Minister of the Caretaker Government and how he celebrated it, and on that occasion the MP of VMRO-DPMNE, Dragan Kovachki, expressed his position (undoubtedly the position of his political party as well). In fact, a press conference was in question, but in order to find out about it (because it was not noted anywhere in the text, apart from the strapline which reads 'Dragan Kovachki's position'), one must re-read numerous other sources that informed about the event. The news item has two unmarked photos, one with luxury cars parked in the square in Skopje, and another one with the party president Ali Ahmeti with Talat Djaferi and DUI ministers in the background, with the logo of the social network TikTok, as well as a link to Dragan Kovachki's video statement. There were harmful narratives both in the headline and the text itself directly transliterated from the video statement embedded in the news item. In parallel, the Kurir portal writes about the same 'event': *Talat Djaferi and DUI receive party guests at the state's expense, they parade around in bars and gatherings, this would not have been possible without Kovachevski, with the strap line Parading instead of working and a subheading Kovachki claims that DUI is crime and corruption from the lowest to the highest level.* The news item only contains Dragan Kovachki's photo from a press conference and access to his video statement, as well as text with identical content. Vecer.mk, on the other hand, publishes the same content with a slightly modified title, *Talat and DUI throwing a party at the state's expense, PARADING IN RESTAURANTS* (the second part of the title is in capital letters, probably to give it a special emphasis), with verbatim transliteration, in addition to MP Dragan Kovachki's video statement and a photo of Talat Djaferi, the main political actor, celebrating his election as Prime Minister of the Caretaker Government. The photo is unmarked and it leaves it up to the public to 'creatively' deduce that it is from the village of Forino, the birthplace of Talat Djaferi. In that sense, just as a reminder for journalists, the old wisdom: a picture/photo – is worth a thousand words.

Dominant harmful political narratives

The number of news items with harmful narratives in the online media has been growing steadily from month to month. In January, it soared to a number of 240 news items, with a total of 467 posts, i.e. sentences, paragraphs, parts of texts, headlines of news items. The harmful rhetoric is most prominent in the Republika and Kurir portals with the largest number of news items with harmful narratives, followed by A1on and Nezavisen, while in Nova TV, Sloboden Pechat and Tetova Sot their number is much lower. This time the focus is on presenting unverified or difficult to verify findings as grounds to accuse a political opponent (114 cases) and allegations of corruption, impartiality/unaccountability, unprofessionalism, abuse of office without attempting to substantiate those findings (104 cases), followed by labelling, ridicule and gross disrespect of other persons and use of demeaning words (55 cases). In other words, the practice of undermining trust in institutions, biased selection and character attacks on a certain person and their demonization, continues.

This monitoring showed too that the practice of **creating multiple news items from a single event** (mostly from interviews with certain politicians) is prevalent and directly leads to **multiplication of the harmful narratives**. This, like before, can be most frequently observed in Republika and Kurir. A few typical news items:

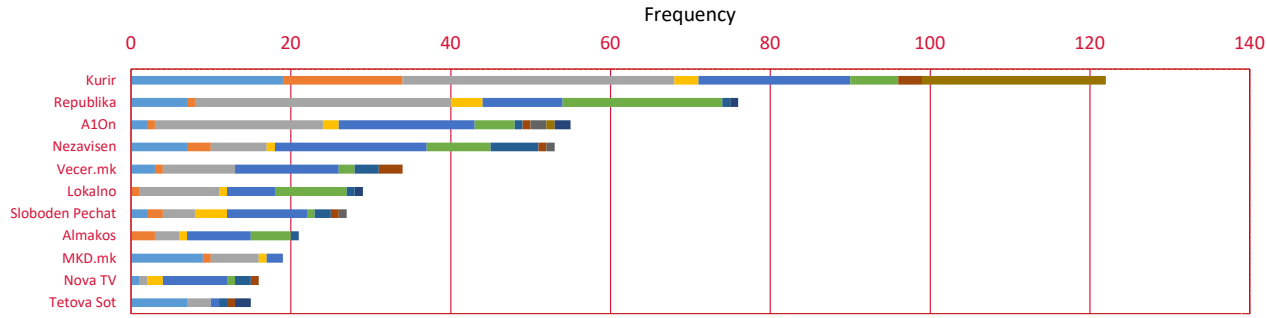
Republika separately reports several parts of the interview with the president of VMRO-DPMNE Hristijan Mickoski in three news items on the Press 24 portal under the title Hristijan Mickoski: *It is sad to see how low SDSM has fallen.* All news items and the interview were published on the same day (3 January, 2024). In one of the news items: *Pendarovski wasted the entire mandate, and did nothing*, the focus is on President Stevo Pendarovski, i.e. Mickoski's full answer (in several sentences) to the journalist's question 'How satisfied are you with Stevo Pendarovski as President?', which he describes as *a man who neither does the job, nor takes a stand compared to a traffic light* (that is, the first traffic light, which is 'metaphorically' the President), who does a great job, but cannot lead a country. There is also a photo in which Pendarovski and Mickoski are wearing masks, meaning that it was taken during the Covid-crisis period and 'surprisingly' marked as *Photo: Office of the President of the Republic of Macedonia*. This news item went on to be published on the pages of numerous other portals, with exactly the same content (of a single paragraph) and a title dominated by the narrative about President Pendarovski, he neither does his job, nor takes a stand. The second article *I am appalled by the scandals in healthcare*, from the Press 24 interview, also quotes Hristijan Mickoski's answer to the question about the developments in the Clinic for Radiotherapy and Oncology and Gynaecology in full. The third news item, on the other hand, *It is sad to see how low SDSM has fallen, and even sadder to see them beg DUI to enter a coalition with them in order to mitigate the defeat*, is a verbatim quote of Hristijan Mickoski's answer to the journalist's question: *Kovachevski called for the creation of a European front, will DUIs join the list?* Here, for the first time, at the end of the news item, the public is offered the option to watch the entire interview.

Kurir, with two news items, published on 15.1.2024, transmits parts of the interview of VMRO-DPMNE's MP, Rashela Mizrahi, from her appearance on the show 'In Favour or Against' on Alfa television. In the first new item: *The DUI authorities and their little political partner SDS are only causing scandals, but everyone who broke the law will be held accountable,* the emphasis was on the scandal in the Macedonian Navigation, and in the second one *SDS and DUI are afraid that the truth about Oncology will out, that is the reason why the materials from the enquiry commission have not been submitted to the Prosecutor's Office*, in the case of Oncology. A similar example comes from the Republika portal, which 'took advantage of' the guest appearance of the vice-president of VMRO-DPMNE, Aleksandar Nikoloski, in the same show on Alfa television (from 27.1.2024), to publish two news items. One (on 31.1.2024) *I expect Djaferi to turn Macedonia not into a two-nation state, but a single nation state, a state of the Albanian people,* with Nikoloski's views on the rule of Talat Djaferi as Prime Minister of the Caretaker Government, and the second, *The SDSM government humiliated the Macedonians twice*, on the problems with the issuing of the travel documents with the new

name of the country. Logically, the question arises as to why exactly these specific topics/issues were chosen and then turned into news items (with harmful narratives) from shows (with a duration of 45 to 50 minutes) in which the political entities speak and express their views on many other current political issues (the events in M-NAV, the rule of law, the negotiations for the country's membership in the EU...) or, simply, why they do not prompt, or guide the public to a link where they can watch the entire broadcasts.

All online media outlets, both those with the largest and those with the least amount of harmful narratives, are dominated by narratives which lead to the undermining of the trust in institutions and biased selection, narratives which, in continuity and without exception, are at the top of the ladder in all the monitoring conducted so far. This is followed, in significantly lower numbers, by character attacks on specific people and their demonization, as well as disinformation. The graphic representation follows below:

Table 15. Harmful narratives in online media news items in January 2024



	Tetova Sot	Nova TV	MKD.mk	Almakos	Sloboden Pechat	Lokalno	Vecer.mk	Nezavisen	A1On	Republika	Kurir
Disinformation	7	1	9		2		3	7	2	7	19
Fomenting divisions			1	3	2	1	1	3	1	1	15
Undermining trust	3	1	6	3	4	10	9	7	21	32	34
Populism		2	1	1	4	1		1	2	4	3
Biased selection	1	8	2	8	10	6	13	19	17	10	19
Character attacks, demonization		1		5	1	9	2	8	5	20	6
Foreign influence	1	2	0	1	2	1	3	6	1	1	0
Spreading panic, fear	1	1	0	0	1	0	3	1	1	0	3
Extreme patriotism, nationalism					1			1	2		
Hate speech									1		23
Ethnocentrism	2					1			2	1	

Republika is the portal featuring the largest number of news items with harmful narratives (44 news items), that most frequently, with 34 posts (words, paragraphs, parts of texts), tries to undermine the trust in institutions, followed by character attacks on a certain person (20 posts) and biased selection (10 posts). For example, in the article *In Macedonia now, the underground is above ground and rules the streets*, indisputably a press release by VMRO-DPMNE, but defined as 'VMRO-DPMNE accuses', state institutions are qualified *as criminal lairs*, and the offices of the Ministry of Interior are taken advantage of by *mobsters from around the world to obtain Macedonian passports by abusing the identities of Macedonian citizens* (Republika, 3.1.2024). Or the news item *Mickoski on the European Front announced by the SDS-DUI: The connecting tissue there is crime and money, there is nothing European about them,* where on the occasion of the conference of the Macedonian Pan European Union, the president of VMRO-DPMNE, Hristijan Mickoski, when answering a journalist's question on SDSM's announcement of a possible coalition with DUI, calls it a *criminal coalition whose only joint interest is the impoverishment and looting of the people* (**Republika, 27.1.2024**). The article with the same title and content was also published in Kurir, Vecer.mk, Sloboden Pechat, as well as in numerous portals, television stations and news agencies.

In **Kurir** there were 37 news items with harmful narratives, and the largest number of them refer to undermining trust in institutions (34 posts), followed by biased selection (19 posts) and disinformation (19 posts). The news item *Macedonia is a captured state, ruled by corrupt politicians*, is a verbatim quote of VMRO-DPMNE's press-release both in text and as a video (typical for election campaigns) with particular emphasis on the 'corruption of the DUI political party' and its officials, with donors as the main recipients of public procurement in the party's institutions, and 'the judiciary is their anvil' (Kurir, 11.1.2024). Ivanka

Vasilevska, MP from VMRO-DPMNE in the Assembly of RNM, speaks about the government *as unpopular and hybrid, while the people that lead the judiciary, health, and education as low-quality staff, in the news item Over these seven years, the unpopular government of SDS and DUI has shown us that it only pursues personal interests and others interests that are not in favour of the nation,* taken as an excerpt from the show 'In Favour or Against' on Alfa television (source, **Kurir 3.1.2024**).

A1on ranks third according to the number of news items with harmful narratives (31 news items), the most numerous of which are the ones undermining of trust in institutions (21 posts) and biased attitudes (17 posts). The portal published two separate news items on the same issue and on the same day, one under the title *Mayors of VMRO caught in the act – they bought a machine at price that was 40,000 euros higher than the actual price* – an excerpt from SDSM's press-release and the second *The same recording machine that SDSM accuses about, was procured by Strumica municipality for 15,000 euros*, from VMRO-DPMNE's press-release, where the two political parties describe each other as *liars*, and the (VMRO) mayors *were caught red-handed*. The case in question was the procurement of machines for horizontal signalling in the municipalities of Bitola, Veles, Strumica, but it is unclear whether there were one or two machines and at what price they were bought, one according to VMRO-DPMNE, the other according to SDSM (although supported by various documents). Moreover, in the space between these two news items (of a few minutes), a news item was published based on SDSM's press release, *PPO (Public Prosecution Office) to investigate the embezzlement of the mayors from DPMNE with the purchase of more expensive machines* (**Lokalno, 15.1.2024**). Numerous other portals, televisions, news agencies also informed about this issue and it undoubtedly remains unsettled, but the public is 'confused' as to who to believe and how to get true and reliable information.

In its 25 news items containing harmful narratives, **Nezavisen** mainly uses biased selection (19 posts), but also character attacks (8 posts), as well as undermining the trust in institutions (7 posts) and disinformation (7 posts). The news item *Pavlovska-Daneva elected as a constitutional judge by the Committee on Election and Appointment Issues with seven votes 'in favour'*, cites the opinion of the VMRO-DPMNE MPs that Ana Pavlovska-Daneva's appointment to be a constitutional judge is party-orchestrated (as a former vice-president of SDSM) thus fully completing the partisanship of the Constitutional Court, but also describing her as a 'battery-operated Facebook-legal expert', and in return, as a response to this, a description of the legal experts who evaluated Daneva badly as the ones that are actually battery-operated (Nezavisen, 31.1.2024). Or the news item *It is unprecedented in history to propose ministers and not vote for them*, consisting of several short paragraphs, and the position of the Deputy Prime Minister in charge of European Affairs Bojan Marichikj on the structure of the Caretaker Government, taken from the programme 'Studio 10' on TV 24. He evaluates and labels VMRO-DPMNE, as a *frivolous, duplicitous and probably a unique case in the history of democracy* which offered its ministers and then did not vote or abstained from voting for that Government. (**Nezavisen, 15.1.2024**)

Vecer.mk published 21 news items with harmful narratives, whereby undermining the trust of the institutions was the most prevalent narrative, (13 posts) followed by biased selection (9 posts). For example, in the news item, the *Executive Committee and Central Committee of VMRO-DPMNE authorized Mickoski to select the staff for the caretaker government, and Djaferi will not be supported*, (Vecer.mk, 11.1.2024) Timcho Mucunski, when announcing the decisions of the EC of VMRO-DPMNE for the election process, indicated that Kovachevski and Ali Ahmeti control and influence the judiciary and the Prosecutor's Office, dubbed the institutions as *tools for tendering procedures*, and the Ministry of Interior is a *partner in crime*, meaning that the institutions were not independent, impartial and professional (source, **Vecer.mk, 11.1.2024**). Or the news item *Talat and DUI welcome party guests at the expense of the state and parade around in bars* where, although the focus is on Talat Djaferi's celebration after becoming the Prime Minister of the Caretaker Government, in his statement MP Kovachki from VMRO-DPMNE also qualifies DUI as a criminal and corrupt party supported by the argument that they drive around the foreign journalists and party guests at the expense of the state by using their staff to drive the state vehicles from the ministries, and using the premises of the institutions for private parties and gatherings, all the way to the tenders worth millions awarded to their party donor Eurovia (source, **Vecer.mk, 31.1.2024**).

The other portals, for example, Almakos in the news item *Caretaker Government/SDSM: VMRO offered staff without potential,* very briefly (in a single paragraph) in relation to the election of the caretaker government, and quoted from SDSM's press-release, came to a conclusion and deducted that the president of VMRO- DPMNE, Hristijan Mickoski was lying, that he did not have a stance, or political capacity, that *he did not know what to do with himself or the party,* and described VMRO-DPMNE as *saying one thing, thinking another, and doing something completely different* (source, **Almakos, 27.1.2024**). Whereas **Sloboden Pechat**, in the news item *The citizens can accurately distinguish between the current government and the government of VMRO-DPMNE*, briefly conveys the views of Igor Janushev, MP from VMRO-DPMNE, expressed in the show Triling on TV 24, about what the government of SDSM and DUI had done by then. It proceeds to quote that they had committed national treason, treason as a result of the corruption, crime and inaction and that they should be held accountable for everything they have done unlawfully and illegally (source, **Sloboden Pechat, 19.1.2024**). Or the news item *The challenges faced by the state are fuelled by Russian influences,* in which Artan Grubi, in his address at the Year of European Opportunities conference, makes accusations of Russia's interference in the internal affairs of the state (without serious supporting evidence), asking questions about whether they have influence in the religious communities, the media, the non-governmental sector, while the citizens are left to seek the answers themselves. The article was also published in Lokalno, Nezavisen, A1on and numerous other media outlets with the same or a similar title (source, **Sloboden Pechat, 23.1.2024**). **MKD.mk**, in the article *Osmani says that the Dutch ambassador actually requested DUI's support* reports the views of several political entities on the occasion of the meeting between the Dutch ambassador and the leader of DUI, Ali Ahmeti, and the occasion (according to the post of the embassy) was the continuous two-year decline of the rule of law. This position was also held by the Minister of Foreign Affairs, Bujar Osmani, but it should take place in parallel with the process of negotiations with the EU. Izet Medjiti (from the Democratic Movement) in turn pointed out that DUI was the main obstacle to the functioning of the legal state, while VMRO-DPMNE was focused on spewing accusation about a state capture and rule of corrupt politicians, a government that is rich and people that are impoverished, especially by DUI that has never been held responsible so far, the judiciary on the anvil, they have the head of the prosecution for organised crime by the neck... (source, **MKD MK, 11.1.2024**)

Report for February 2024

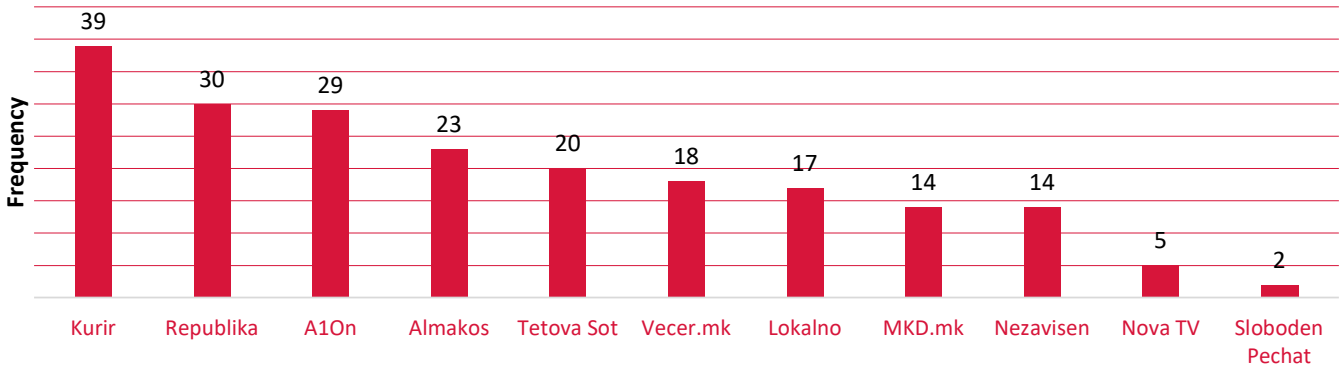
The online media continue to present harmful narratives from and regarding the political actors in the country at an unabated pace this month. There were identified **211** news items with harmful narratives, thematically focused on the domestic politics, and above all, on the 'pre-election campaigns' (far before the official one that starts on 18 April) of the political actors for the upcoming presidential and parliamentary elections. The turmoil, the regroupings, the divisions in the Albanian political parties, the issues/problems (legal solutions) with the change of the citizens' identification documents, but also the economic policies and reforms of the country, corruption and crime (harmful/dubious tenders, offers and contracts, public procurement, building permits). In this monitoring period the topic was also the media and journalists, i.e., their political profiling and condemnations and threats to the freedom of the media.

The genre structure consists predominantly of the politicians' speeches (65 news items or 30.8%) and party/political press releases (64 news items or 30.3%), which together with the reported Facebook statuses of the political entities and their interviews given to other media (10 news items or 4.7%) cover almost 2/3 (or 65.8%) of all analysed news items. Followed by reports (33 news items or 15.6%) and news/news with statements (23 or 10.9%). This time, the number of interviews (11 news items, or 5.2%), previously almost neglected, should not be overlooked, while analyses, comments remain on the margins. The largest number of analysed news items with harmful narratives have precise sources of information, but most of the time, as before, it is one source (in 186 news items or 88.6%). Hence, one-sided information dominates, i.e., in **192 news items**, the media reported only one side. While party press conferences and politicians' statements, i.e. pseudo-events, are the most common reason for posting news items (91 news items, or 43.1%), followed by current events (78 news items, or 37.0%) and social events/social topics (31 news items or 14.7%). The practice of not signing the reported information/news continues, and such are 194 news items (or 91.1%), and only 8 news items have the name or initials of the author/journalist, while in 9 news items it is stated that they were taken from other media (mostly from television stations, but also other portals).

Frequency of harmful narratives in online media

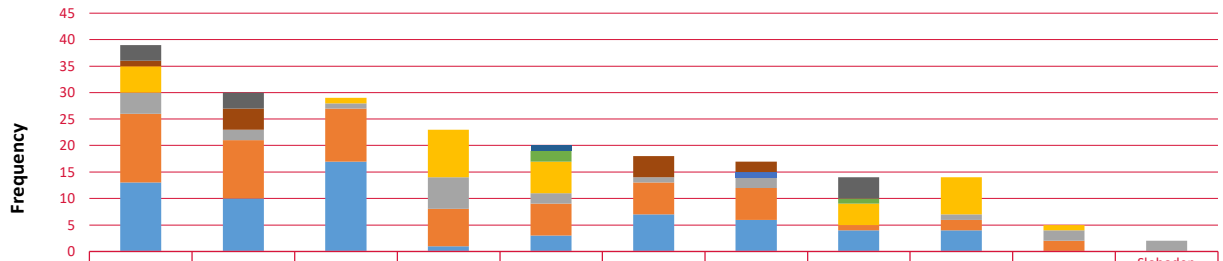
The Kurir portal (with 39 news items) has the largest number of news items with harmful narratives, followed by Republika (with 30 news items) and A1on (with 29 news items), and then Almakos (with 23) and Tetova Sot (with 20). In Vecer mk, for the third month in a row, a slight decrease in the number of such news items was registered, while in Tetova Sot, on the contrary, a continuous growth of such news items was noted. During this period, Nova TV and especially Sloboden Pechat, have the smallest, even negligible number of news items with harmful narratives.

Table 16. News items with harmful narratives in February 2024



In terms of the genre, in the analysed news items with harmful narratives, the reported speeches of politicians and party press releases dominate. A1on (in 17 out of 29 news items) and Kurir (in 13 out of 39 news items) have the most reported speeches of the political entities, while party press releases are the most frequent, as in Kurir (13 press releases), all from the VMRO-DPMNE party, and A1on (10 press releases), however from several political parties, VMRO-DPMNE, SDSM, Levica and the VLEN Coalition, as well as in the Republika (11 press releases), mostly from the party VMRO-DPMNE and the coalition partner SPM, and, as an exception, SDSM (only one press release). Collectively, the two genre forms are almost unique in A1on (in 27 out of a total of 29 news items), which makes the portal stand out as the most active reporter of the views of various political entities. On the other hand, MKD.mk has 7 news items compared to 4 news items with politicians' speeches and 2 party press releases. Also, Tetova Sot has 6 news items with party press releases, but just as many reports. Almakos is the portal with the most reports (9) of all analysed news items, as well as 6 news, 7 party press releases and 1 broadcast speech of a politician.

Table 17. News items with harmful narratives according to genre structure in February 2024



	Kurir	Republika	A1On	Almakos	Tetova Sot	Vecer.mk	Lokalno	Nezavisen	MKD.mk	Nova TV	Sloboden Pechat
Other	3	3	0	0	0	0	0	4	0	0	0
Interview	1	4	0	0	0	4	2	0	0	0	0
Commentary	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0
Analysis/commentary	0	0	0	0	2	0	0	1	0	0	0
Analytical reportage/news item	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0
Report	5	0	1	9	6	0	0	4	7	1	0
News/news with a statement	4	2	1	6	2	1	2	0	1	2	2
Broadcast press release	13	11	10	7	6	6	6	1	2	2	0
Broadcast speech of a politician	13	10	17	1	3	7	6	4	4	0	0

Thematically, domestic politics dominates the news items with harmful narratives in all internet portals. This is especially visible with Almakos (in 19 out of a total of 23 news items) and MKD.mk (in 11 out of a total of 14 news items), but also in Tetova Sot (in 14 out of a total of 20 news items), Vecer mk (in 12 out of 18 news items) and Nezavisen (in 9 out of 14 news items). With other portals, first of all, Kurir and Republika, but also Lokalno, in addition to domestic politics, economy, crime and corruption are often in focus. Thus, in Kurir, apart from domestic politics (with 26 news items), the economy (with 9 news items) appears often (mostly from portals) and sporadically justice or healthcare. Regarding Republika, where the domestic politics (with 22 news items) is complemented by several news items from the sphere of the economy and corruption, while in Lokalno, in addition to the 10 news items regarding domestic politics, 4 refer to crime, and one each to the economy, social, the corruption. A1on addresses the domestic politics in 15 news items, and economy, foreign policy, crime and corruption in 2 news items. In Sloboden Pechat and Nova TV, the small number of news items with harmful narratives focus on the domestic politics.

Issues related to the domestic politics, usually 'tailored' in the 'communication centres' of the political parties in the form of press releases, or taken from the statements or speeches of their presidents, members, MPs, spokespersons and reported on the pages of the online-media, to the public and are offered for reading, usually with more photos than text, with a catchy title and its repetition in the content, without a clear context, but with an emphasis that the political entity not only communicates 'something', but also 'highlights', 'demands' , 'asks', 'answers'. A few characteristic examples:

- The news item 'MASTER is a masculine noun from FEUDALISM - used by BUJAR, ARTAN, ALI...' with the supertitle 'FOR YOU SORAVIA IS A LOTTERY - FOR US GERMANY', is composed of several short sentences and a photograph, a compilation of several photos with children's toys and two photos showing Ali Ahmeti, Artan Grubi, Bujar Osmani, and at the end of the text, the Facebook status of Djevdet Hajredini is given, where he says concerning Ali Ahmeti that he is the master of crime and corruption in this country. From the offered content, readers can only assume that the reason for the news item is the candidacy of Bujar Osmani as a presidential candidate, but they are 'taught' what the word 'master' means, and what the religious books say about it. This is a news item without an author (the journalist, the media, a political party), without a source (who are those 'we' in the supertitle), or maybe it is a pamphlet, so it is unsigned. (**Vecer.mk, 28.2.2024**).

- The news item 'Kovachevski LOSES, so he's nervous, everyone is to blame for the low rating, not just him', is composed of three short paragraphs. If you analyse the supertitle (the name of the VMRO-DPMNE party), it is a party press release. The main actor is Kovachevski (without his position) and his low rating in the polls, but according to the meagre content, it is more about the relevant polls (without mentioning which) in which 'SDS loses', then 'SDS and DUI who rule with crime and corruption', and 'SDS and Kovachevski leave office'. Finally, as an established practice in all VMRO-DPMNE press releases are the sentences 'It has never been worse' and 'It is important to defeat them', which are reported in full and without journalistic distance in the media (**Vecer.mk, 8.2.2024**).

- News item 'Instead of a solution, DPMNE creates chaos with the identification documents', SDSM's party press release, consisting of three short paragraphs, the first of which is a repetition of the subtitle in the news item. In terms of content, the text is addressed to the political opponent VMRO-DPMNE, which creates chaos with the personal documents and spreads panic among citizens, without facts and without data. What is the public informed about, about VMRO-DPMNE or about problems with the personal documents? (source, Kurir, 12.2.2024) On the same day, simultaneously, the portal also posted the press release of VMRO-DPMNE under the title 'Spasovski did not provide forms before leaving the office, the SDS Government is consciously creating chaos by changing the passports', and it was also posted by numerous other media. The question is, what should citizens read, both press releases, related to the chaos with the change of the identification documents created by SDSM and VMRO-DPMNE? In that 'chaos', no one from the media paid attention to part of the title of the press

release of VMRO-DPMNE, that 'Spasovski did not provide forms before leaving the office'. Unclear and ambiguous, was he then supposed to get forms before leaving the office (a day, two, a week)?

- News item 'Beating policemen and obstructing action against drugs, the Ministry of the Interior should answer what the role of Mickoski is', SDSM's press release, consisting of three short paragraphs and a photo of Hristijan Mickoski, for the prevention of action against drugs in a coffee bar in Skopje. Here, it is said that 'the public is waiting for an answer', and in fact SDSM is demanding an answer from the Ministry of Interior regarding the role of Hristijan Mickoski, the president of VMRO-DPMNE and the biggest political opponent of SDSM. What does the party announce, to whom does it announce, especially to the media? They will then pass on the information to the public and what should it understand from the press release? That the problem is serious or that the key is that the head of security of the president of VMRO-DPMNE, Hristijan Mickoski is involved in the 'scandal'. The press release was broadcast by numerous media, news agencies and television stations, and days later they informed regarding the suspension and the initiation of criminal charges against the bodyguard/policeman (source, **Lokalno, 20.2.2024**)

- News item 'Chaos in Skopje is an example of what happens when DPMNE gets power', party press release of SDSM, consisting of two short passages in which SDSM 'claims' that the VMRO-DPMNE local government destroyed the public transport in the city and 'emphasizes' that it blocked the project for a new and ecological public transport RTS, it destroyed JSP and other public enterprises, created a chaotic and dirty city. The press release was originally reported from the website of SDSM, but the news items 'claim' and 'emphasize' are from the media itself. Generally, this statement, if it is at all, says a lot and does not communicate anything, but only states findings. It is unclear to the public 'what the author wanted to convey'. Moreover, on the same day, the portal also posted the press release of VMRO-DPMNE 'Why is chaos happening again in the JSP, even though subsidies have been approved for, as Arsovska said, 'let's not think about it for the whole year'?', where the coalition of Danela Arsovska, SDS, DUI and Levica in the City of Skopje are pointed out as directly responsible for the chaos in the JSP. Here it becomes clear to the reader that the occasion is the announcement of the JSP employees that there would not be transportation due to unpaid January salary. The story ended in a few hours after the problem with the treasury and transfer of subsidy money is overcome. However, what is the message, for the public to read and re-read all daily information in detail, no matter how unclear or mutually contradictory it may be, and carefully monitor which 'centre' they come from (source, **A1on, 16.2.2024**)

In that context, the reason for the posting of these news items is also significant. The monitoring found that almost half of the analysed news items with harmful narratives were pseudo-events (91 news items, or 43.1%). These include party press releases, press conferences, views, statements, reactions of the political entities that are planned and created to attract the media attention and the publicity of the political entities, parties, government, political leaders, ministers... as direct creators of media content with harmful narratives. This is followed by current events (78 news items or 37.0%), and far less social events (31 news items or 14.70. Seen through the prism of online portals, the most pseudo-events are present in the news items of Republika (17 out of a total of 30 news items), Lokalno (10 news items) out of a total of 17), Tetova Sot (14 out of a total of 20 news items) and MKD.mk (7 news items out of a total 14). In the other portals, such as Kurir, Vecer.mk and Almakos, both pseudo and current events are almost equally represented, while in A1.on, both pseudo and current events and social developments are present. Only the Nezavisen portal predominantly informs regarding the current events (11 news items out of a total of 14).

The political actors in the analysed news items

The actors represented in the news items with harmful narratives are numerous. Those with two actors dominate (in 51 news items, or 24.2%), followed by those with three (in 37 news items, or 17.5%), and four (in 37 news items, or 17.5%), and even five actors (in 31 news items, or 14.7%), invariant in all monitored months so

far. In terms of the portals, Kurir, Republika and A1on stand out with the largest number of actors, according to the number of news items with harmful narratives. In this monitoring as well, the collective dominates, and at the top is the Government, mostly prevalent in Kurir, Republika and A1on. Afterward, VMRO-DPMNE is the most presented in Kurir, Republika, A1on and Lokalno, and SDSM, presented the most in Republika and Lokalno, while DUI is mentioned the most in Tetova Sot and Almakos, but in Vecer.mk, as well. Among the individual actors, the president of VMRO-DPMNE, Hristijan Mickoski, is most often present in the media (especially in Tetova Sot and Lokalno), and the president of SDSM, Dimitar Kovachevski is the next, and among the other numerous actors, the president of DUI can be mentioned, Ali Ahmeti, and ex-Deputy Prime Minister Artan Grubi. As special attributes as regards to the political entities remain the renaming of SDSM to 'SDS' by the political opponent VMRO-DPMNE, as well as VMRO-DPMNE to 'DPMNE' by the political opponent SDSM, and occasionally the addressing of Dimitar Kovachevski as 'Tache', above all from VMRO-DPMNE.

The presentation of the political actors varies from portal to portal, but most often they are talked about in the context of the topic, and especially Vecer.mk, which exclusively talks about all the actors mentioned in the news items in the context of the specific topic and issue. Almakos, Republika, Lokalno and A1on, although less often, also quote the political actors, while Kurir and Tetova Sot practice both quoting and paraphrasing the political actors. As for the assessment of the political actors, cumulatively, negative assessments of them dominate, but directed by someone else, and positive directed towards themselves, while the journalist is mostly in the role of 'neutral observer' with the exception of Nezavisen, where they also use neutral (with regard to the Minister Panche Toshkovski), and negative (toward the Minister Krenar Loga) and positive assessments (toward Dimitar Kovachevski) by the journalist. However, in Vecer.mk there is no assessment of the journalist (negative, positive, ambivalent, neutral) and that is left to someone else, and it is addressed to SDSM, DUI, the Government, Ali Ahmeti, Artan Grubi, the media (all negatively evaluated). The same is the case with Nova TV - the negative ratings are addressed to VMRO-DPMNE and SDSM. As regards to Tetova Sot, in addition to the neutrality of the journalist, there are several negative assessments addressed to Hristijan Mickoski, VMRO-DPMNE and Bilal Kasami, the president of Besa. It is similar case with Kurir, where in addition to the predominantly neutral assessments of the journalist, in several cases they also present negative views towards Oliver Spasovski and SDSM, while in Republika, the present small number of negative assessments are directed at SDSM and Dimitar Kovachevski.

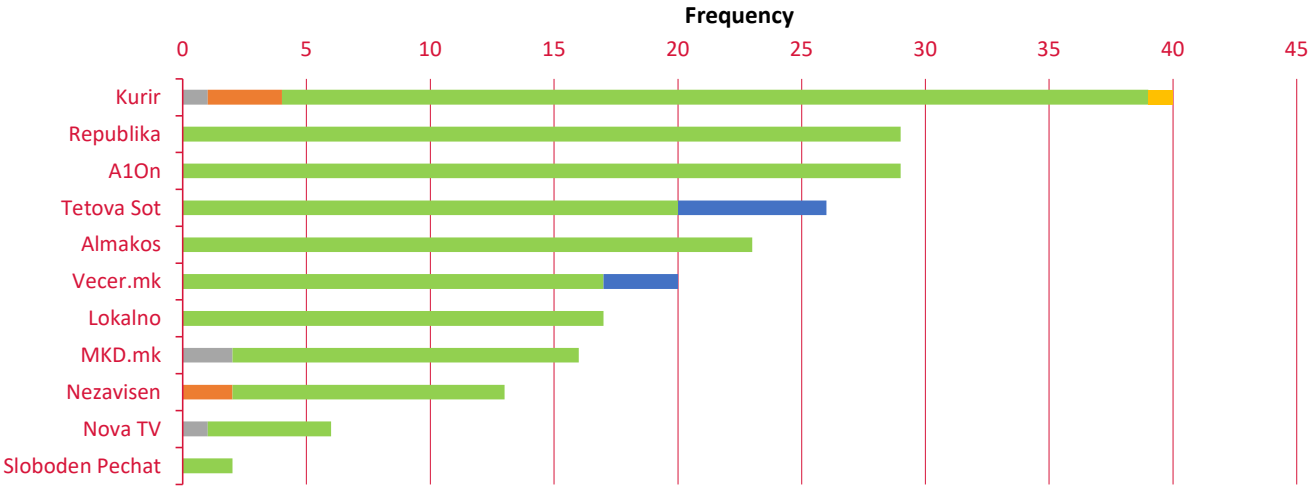
(Non)professionalism in Journalism

One-sided information as a common feature of all analysed online media is a constant that is repeated monthly. In 91.9% (192 news items) of the analysed news items, the media informed with respect to one affected party, in January it was 91.6%, and in December 90.8%. This is most visible in the case of Republika and Vecer.mk, and even in the case with Nova TV and Sloboden Pechat with the least number of news items with harmful narratives, where all news items are one-sided. Kurir and A1on supplement one-sided information only in one case, with two/more sides. Almakos and Tetova Sot each have three such news items with two/more sides. Lokalno, in addition to the dominant 13 news items (out of a total of 17) where they consulted one side, in two cases they consulted two, and in other two several sides, and the case is similar regarding MKD.mk. Concurrently, the reliance on one source of information is a constant in providing information on the portals. If in the previously monitored months 88.8% (January) and 89.4% (December) of the news items had one source of information, this time the outlook is almost identical - 88.6%, which is directly related to the large number of news items defined as party press releases and reported speeches of the political actors. In connection to Vecer.mk, Republika and A1on, all news items are as mentioned in the previous sentence, and in Kurir and Nezavisen only one news item has three or more sources. Almakos, Tetova Sot and Lokalno each have several news items with two/three or more sources. An exception is MKD.mk where, in addition to the 8 news items with one source, there are also 6 with two/three or more sources.

Regarding the sources in the analysed news items, the situation from the previous monitored months is recurring - the dominance of the precise sources of information. Nonetheless, in this round of monitoring it is noted that their number has increased at the expense of vague, imprecise, or other media sources. 202

precise sources were determined in a total of 211 news items, in January there were 209 precise sources in 240 news items, and in December 175 precise sources in 207 news items. Of all the analysed online media, Almakos, Republika, Lokalno, Nezavisen and A1on exclusively use precise sources of information, while among the others it is rare and exceptional to find a vague or imprecise source. Perhaps, as an exception, Vecer.mk, and especially Tetova Sot, use more sources from other media. Nevertheless, it must be noted that this modality is also directly related to the genre structure, and above all, the most numerous party press releases and reported speeches of the political entities.

Table 18. Type of sources according to online media in February 2024



	Sloboden Pechat	Nova TV	Nezavisen	MKD.mk	Lokalno	Vecer.mk	Almakos	Tetova Sot	A1On	Republika	Kurir
Unclear		1		2							1
Imprecise			2								3
Accurate sources	2	5	11	14	17	17	23	20	29	29	35
The journalist as a source											1
Another media outlet						3		6			

Regarding the **visualization of the analysed news items**, all of them are supported by a photo/s, mostly regarding the actor/actors that is the subject of the news item, and less often with an actual video statement. Archive (110 in number) and current (98) photos dominate, but the largest number of them, as until now, are not marked, with the exception (again) of the Sloboden Pechat portal (and a few others) where all news items with harmful narratives, are signed and marked. Archive photos are mostly used by Kurir, Republika, Lokalno and Nezavisen, and current ones by Tetova Sot, A1on and MKD.mk. Similar as before, this time also several news items with photos that attract special attention, especially with their 'content' which reinforces, emphasizes the negative narrative. For example:

The news item 'PHOTO/ Russian connection of Bilal Kasami and Besa' with a collage of several photos of new members of Besa and their relationship with Russia, and in the short text an explanation that they studied in Russia, participated in actions developed by the 'Russian Centre' in Skopje and received vouchers and certificates of appreciation from the centre. The text has no author and it is not known who wrote and created it (source, Tetova Sot, 28.2.2024). Also, the news item 'VMRO continues the campaign '61 MPs, Government without Albanians', also posted in the same portal, with three identical photos, slightly altered, on the first one under the number 61 it says 'for a Government without' and on the other two 'for a Government without squiptars', which were taken from the Facebook status of Lidija Andreevska, according to the portal, a supporter of VMRO-DPMNE. This text also has no author and comments on the assumed status, i.e. the demand that the Macedonians give 61 mandates to VMRO-DPMNE, to form a Government without Albanians, recalling that the former Prime Minister Gruevski also demanded 61 mandates (Tetova Sot, 28.2.2024). The news item under the title 'Commander Forina did not come to pay respect to Goce Delchev' is also striking, on the occasion of the commemoration of the 152nd anniversary

of the birth of Goce Delchev and the paying of respect by President Stevo Pendarovski and the delegation of the Caretaker Government. The text is short, it consists of a few sentences, but there are four photos, the first one is Talat Djaferi, the second one is President Stevo Pendarovski in front of Goce Delchev's grave, the third one is the delegation of the Caretaker Government, and the fourth one is Talat Djaferi again in a completely different environment. 'The absence of Caretaker Prime Minister Talat Djaferi who did not come to pay his respects to the Macedonian hero was notable' is written in bold letters above the photo, and the photo shows him smiling, with raised hands and a cigar between his fingers at a recent celebration in his birth place Forino on the occasion of his appointment as Caretaker Prime Minister. Not surprisingly, the news item does not have a signature (who prepared it - the newsroom, a journalist), but a serious and 'conscious' manipulation, with the photo, was made undoubtedly in order to defame Djaferi himself (source, **Republika, 4.2.2024**).

Dominant harmful political narratives

A slight drop in news items with harmful narratives can be seen this month. The number of such news items is 211 that were identified with a total of 330 indicators, i.e. wordings, sentences, parts of texts, news item titles that indicated the existence of harmful narratives. The most noticeable is their presence in Kurir (77 posts), followed by A1on (47 posts) and Republika (39 posts), or half of the entire harmful rhetoric. Hereupon, the main focus is on unverified findings as a basis for accusing the political opponents, i.e. biased selection (121 cases), and far less on labelling, ridicule and gross disrespect of other persons, i.e. character attacks and demonization of a specific person (53 cases), as well as allegations of corruption, non-transparency/non-accountability, unprofessionalism, abuse of office without substantiation, i.e., undermining trust in the institutions (50 cases).

Thus, the practice of 'creating' and compiling multiple news items of selected parts of an event, etc. 'copy-paste' creation of media content, in the portals it is often supplemented with 'news item-announcement' for a specific event (mostly an interview) and a short headline text, typical of television journalism. A few characteristic examples:

The Kurir, Republika and A1on portals, briefly, on 4.2.2024, with a few short sentences, inform the public that the vice-president of VMRO-DPMNE, Aleksandar Nikoloski, was visiting Tringen, Switzerland, 'probably' for a meeting with the Macedonian diaspora. In all three portals the text is identical and is repeated from the title with the addition that 'SDS and DUI' for these 6-7 years have destroyed something that has been created for generations, and in the news item there is also a photo of Nikoloski with a flag with the sun with 16 rays in the background (without explaining where it was filmed). The title is the same in Kurir and A1on 'The Macedonian is nationally trampled, the economy is sinking, and corruption flourishes', while in Republika it is more 'creative', 'If you have to describe what is happening in Macedonia in one sentence, it is that the Macedonian is nationally trodden on.' Furthermore, it is not possible to determine who the author of the text is, but the question is whether the portals download and copy the news item from each other. On the website of VMRO-DPMNE, on the same day, a short interview with Aleksandar Nikoloski was posted with the title 'Macedonians in the diaspora are troubled by crime, corruption and bad conditions in Macedonia, together we will defeat SDS and DUI'. Nonetheless, in the questions and answers, apart from the fact that Nikoloski had a meeting with the diaspora in Tringen after Geneva and Lausanne, nothing was said from what was conveyed in the news items of Republika, Kurir and A1on.

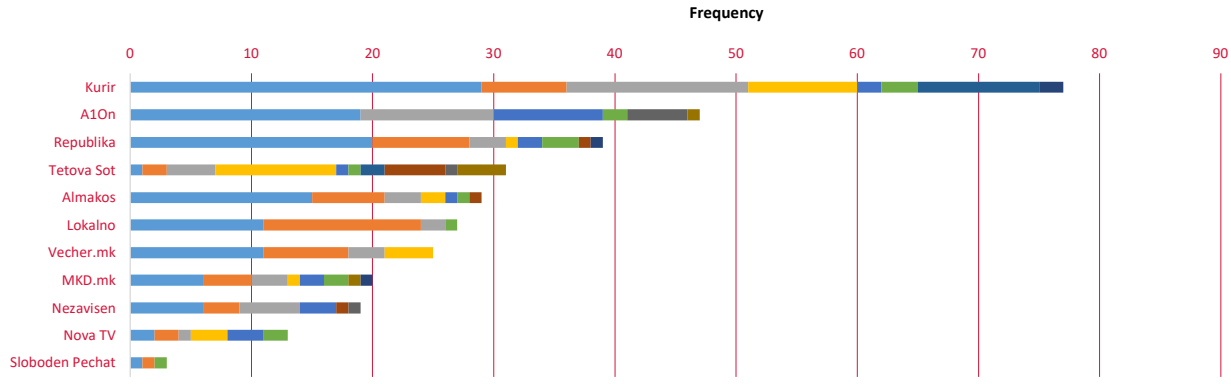
On 28 February, 2024, the Republika portal posted the news item 'Toshkovski for the Government: They are illiterate and half-wits, they fight more for the interests of Greece than for Macedonia', with a short text regarding the amendments to the Law on Travel Documents and possible refusal to vote from MPs from ruling parties, which, according to Toshkovski, they care more about the interests of Greece than about their country. It is an excerpt from the interview in Republika with the caretaker minister, which is signed by the author/journalist (probably the same one who conducted the interview), a photo of Toshkovski in the premises of the portal where the conversation was recorded, and a short video recording of the interview with the same content from the news item. The exact same news item, with the same title, content and video recording, but a photo of Toshkovski from a press conference (with the indication - Ministry of Interior) was posted by Kurir.

At the end of the two news items, it is written that 'the full interview with the minister for Republika would be broadcast the following day', which is an 'news item - announcement', characteristic of televisions where the conversation, the interview with a certain political actor is announced in the news editions and the viewers can watch it later /at the end of the news editions/right after the news editions. The portals invite the public to be patient until the next day, but to follow them anyway. In contrast, Vecer.mk also posted the news item, but with shortened content, only with a photo of Toshkovski (undoubtedly from a conversation on a television show, without stating the source) and with an indication that it is from an interview with Republika and 'link' that leads to the page of Republika where the news item is posted.

On 4.2.2024, the Almakos portal posted two news items, with the titles 'AA does not need social media chairperson, Central Assembly to be held on Saturday' and 'Taravari alone held final meetings with other political leaders', the first with 5-6 short sentences, and the second one with a paragraph of a few lines. Both news items present the views of Zijadin Sela, in his capacity as the founder and president of the AA Assembly, regarding its division into two 'camps', regarding the shenanigans of President Arben Taravari who 'smuggles' the party to those who want to destroy it. In the first news item, the genre form cannot be determined (perhaps incomplete news item), while in the second it is indicated that it is a press conference. However, judging by the content of the news items, as well as from the given photos (in both photos, Zijadin Sela is at the same press conference, and in the background members of the party) both news items refer to the same event from which two short 'stories' are made up.

In general, the harmful narratives in online media are predominantly concentrated on biased selection, and especially in Kurir, Republika, A1on and Almakos. Then the character attacks are the next, especially in the Lokalno portal, and the undermining of trust in the institutions in Kurir and A1on. The amount of disinformation, especially in Tetova Sot and Kurir, as well as hate speech in Kurir and populism in A1on is also notable. Charted the situation is as follows:

Table 19. Harmful narratives in online media coverage in February 2024



	Sloboden Pechat	Nova TV	Nezavisen	MKD.mk	Vecher.mk	Lokalno	Almakos	Tetova Sot	Republika	A1On	Kurir
Biased selection	1	2	6	6	11	11	15	1	20	19	29
Character attacks, demonization	1	2	3	4	7	13	6	2	8		7
Undermining trust		1	5	3	3	2	3	4	3	11	15
Disinformation		3		1	4		2	10	1		9
Populism		3	3	2			1	1	2	9	2
Fomenting divisions	1	2		2		1	1	1	3	2	3
Hate speech								2			10
Foreign influence			1				1	5	1		
Extreme patriotism			1					1		5	
Ethnocentrism				1				4		1	
Spreading panic, fear and uncertainty				1					1		2

Kurir is the portal with the largest number of news items with harmful narratives (39) and as many as 77 posts (sentences, wordings, paragraphs, titles of news items) dominated by biased selection and undermining of trust in the state institutions. For example, in the news item *None of the propaganda of SDSM and DUI succeeded, VMRO-DPMNE will come up with a unified list in the elections*, the portal uses the

guest appearance of the vice-president of VMRO-DPMNE, Aleksandar Nikoloski, in the show 'Espresso with Zlatev and Bocevski' on radio Lider. The emphasis is on the double humiliation of the Macedonian people (the Prespa Agreement and the issuing of documents with the new name of the country), supplemented by crime and tenders in REK Bitola, with Nikoloski's assessment that the country is run by 'people who are spineless, criminal and without national consciousness', which 'creatively' interpreted refers to those (the authorities) who do not have their own conviction, their own attitude, people without character, criminal groups and people without nationality. (20.2.2024). Or, the news item *'The resigning authorities make an epic robbery of 46 million euros for coal mining'*, with excerpts from the same guest appearance by Aleksandar Nikoloski on radio Lider, where he talks about the tender for coal mining for REK Bitola, which goes to a company favoured by the Government, and asks if this is part of the deal between SDSM and DUI where in *'loving robbery SDSM will steal from REK Bitola, and DUI will steal from coal imports'*. There is a 'loving robbery' and an 'epic robbery' in play, and the portal in the title reinforces it by defining it as an 'epic robbery' (20.2.2024).

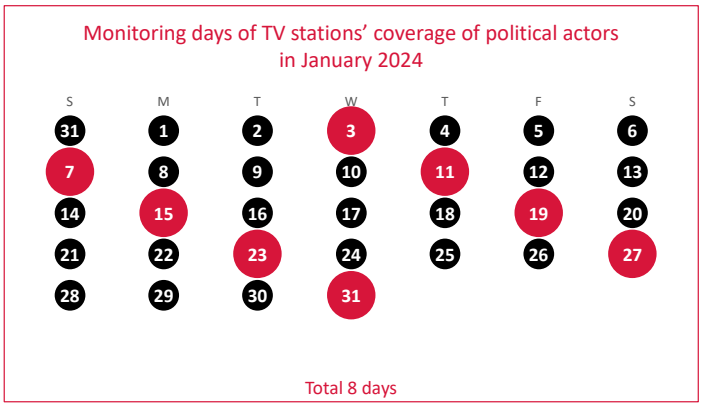
Republika, with a total of 30 news items with harmful narratives (and 39 indicators), most of the news items use biased selection. In the news item 'Here's how Tache threatens the journalists that they will 'squeal in the basements' with one sentence at the beginning, it is explained that the former Prime Minister Dimitar Kovachevski, dissatisfied with the news item on TV Telma concerning the student meal, threatened and accused the journalists and the media that they took sides of VMRO-DPMNE, and below are two video inserts from the statement (without specifying where, on what occasion, whether it was a press conference) of Kovachevski, where he says that *'the choice of the citizens is simple, either a country with European standards or a country in isolation with controlled media where you will only see what is served to you by the DPMNE headquarters'*, that the media have been sold and are now being sold. There is the reaction of MP and member of the EC of VMRO-DPMNE, Mile Lefkov, and according to the photo and video recording of a press conference, as regards the miserable events that SDS is doing before elections, quoting what Kovachevski said, about his direct threats towards the media and journalists in order to *intimidate journalists and influence their reporting, but also calling on the EU Delegation, all international organizations to react to this act because VMRO-DPMNE truly cares about freedom of expression, freedom of speech and the freedom of the media* appraising Dimitar Kovachevski as 'an incompetent resigning politician who decided to destroy the reputation of Macedonia' (source, Republika, 20.2.2024). Then, on the same portal, the press release/reaction of MAN (Macedonian Association of Journalists) followed with the title *For Kovachevski and Zaev - journalists are: sold out, vain, propagandists... What do they expect from them after this?* with a photo of Dimitar Kovachevski and Zoran Zaev from a few years ago, during the Covid crisis (Zoran Zaev is wearing a mask). In the text that follows, the attitude of Kovachevski (appointed as Prime Minister) towards all journalists and media (and Telma TV as sold) is assessed by MAN as unlawful (with slander, insult and humiliation) and contrary to all professional standards, principles and ethics, adding that he is known for constant threats, insults and offences and pressures on the media and journalists (just like his predecessor Zoran Zaev). Apart from Telma, he also threatened MRT, Alfa, Kanal 5, and called for a judicial lynch against the journalist Dragan Pavlovikj Latas from the parliamentary podium. At the end, they announce that the International Federation of Journalists would be notified and underline that this Government would be remembered as the most repressive against media freedom and freedom of speech. AJM (the Association of Journalists of Macedonia) also sent a statement/reaction, but the portal did not post it, but reported on the reaction of the Agency for Audio and Audiovisual Media Services, from where they criticized the Prime Minister's statement.

Also, in the portal **A1on**, of all the news items with harmful narratives, the most numerous are those with biased selection (19 out of a total of 29). For example, in the news item *Is Filev, the director of SDS from Radovish, a drug dealer in a police bulletin*, a short statement (of two paragraphs) by the spokesperson of VMRO-DPMNE, Naum Stoilkovski, is given about the connections of 'SDS with the drug mafia' referring to a police bulletin from Shtip and the initials of a person arrested for drugs, and asking if it was the director of the inter-municipal centre for social affairs in Radovish, then stating that SDS and Oliver Spasovski turned Macedonia into mafia territory. It is probably a VMRO-DPMNE party's press release, and the photo shows Stoilkovski in front of a lectern and behind him, with graphic visualization, on one side you can see a text in a

frame - 'Is the director of SDS from Radovish a drug dealer in a police bulletin?' and on the other a blurry photo with people in red vests - recognizable as SDSM (source, A1on, 28.2.2024). Or, the news item *DPMNE can't solve anything, it just lies and creates chaos with the changes of the identification documents*, a statement (where, when) by the MP of SDSM, Mile Talevski, for VMRO-DPMNE which makes and creates problems, lies to the citizens that they will they solve the problems with the documents, they will change the country's name when they come to power, they just lie and always put the blame on someone else, while SDSM solves the problems and will come up with a specific law on personal documents. That is the rhetoric from SDSM and VMRO-DPMNE, which has been regularly repeated in recent months. The only thing that is clear from the statement is that SDSM would submit a law on personal documents (source, A1on, 12.2.2024). Therefore, as a clarification of all uncertainties and dilemmas, on the same day, **Sloboden Pechat** posted an exhaustive report on which legislation on personal documents was adopted and which was not and why, including the statement of Minister Toshkovski before the Assembly and the position of President Pendarovski on personal documents, as well as the press release of VMRO-DPMNE on criminal responsibility of ex-minister Spasovski for abuse of office.

In other portals, for example, in **Vecer.mk** the news item is striking 'Aliu with an analysis of Grubi's political profile: It is a hybrid profile between narcissism and Machiavellianism', where the portal took parts of the guest appearance of the Minister of Information Society and Administration, Azir Aliu, from the show '10 Minutes' on TV 21, i.e. his description of the political profile of Artan Grubi. In several passages, qualifications are lined up for Grubi (with his photo) as a powerful, attention-seeking man, but with minimal empathy for others, manipulative, a man who divides and does anything to achieve his goals, and it is because of him that divisions have occurred in DUI. Ali Ahmeti, on the other hand, went from being an experienced politician to a 'folk singer by making videos and sharing them on social media' (8 February, 2024). **Lokalno**, in the news item *Last week we remembered what VMRO-DPMNE in power means and what the regime means,* conveyed the statement of the president of SDSM, Dimitar Kovachevski at the opening of an election headquarters in Kisela Voda, with an attack on VMRO with Mickoski that showed the real face is no different from that of Gruevski (the regime) using the same techniques, the same structures, the same people (recalling the incident in the coffee bar in Skopje and the beating of policeman), while praising his own party for being progressive, party of labour, left-oriented of the country, party of trade unions, workers, that SDSM is the citizens, pensioners, students, and only with it the citizens can have a prosperous country (20.2.2024).

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



In January, the central news editions of 9 national TV stations were analysed in the following days **in January**: January 3, 7, 11, 15, 19, 23, 27, 31 (eight days in total) and **in February**: 4, 8, 12, 16, 20, 24, 28 (seven days).

Report for January 2024

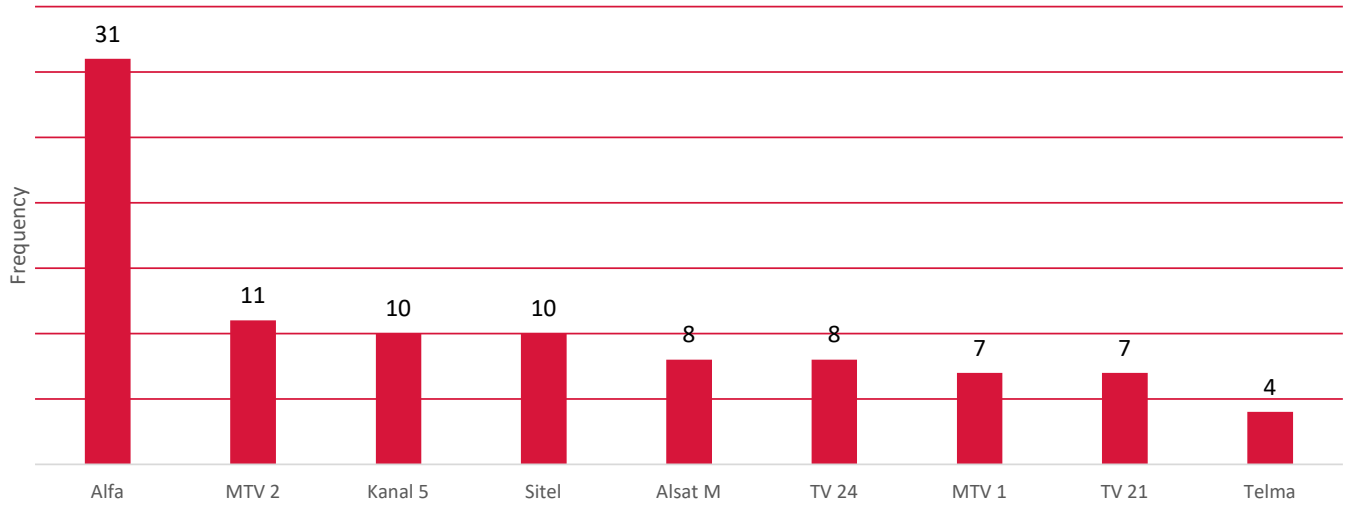
In January 2024, the central news editions of 9 television stations were analysed, and the analysis covered a total of 8 days (3, 7, 11, 15, 19, 23, 27 and 31 January).

A total of 96 news items with harmful narratives were registered, which is the highest number so far, since the beginning of monitoring in September 2023. Compared to October (66 news items), November (69), December (87), a constant growth of this trend can be observed, which is due to the obvious tightening of political rhetoric with the upcoming elections.

Frequency of harmful narratives among TV stations

The analysis of the central news editions of 9 TV stations in January found a total of 96 reports that contained one or more different harmful narratives. Among the TV stations, TV Alfa stands with 31 news items (or 32.3% of the total number), while for the rest of the TV stations, we do not see any major changes from the average. There are 11 news items with harmful narratives registered with MTV 2, 10 by Kanal 5 and Sitel each, 8 by TV 24 and Alsat M each, 7 by MTV 1 and TV 21 each, while 4 by TV Telma.

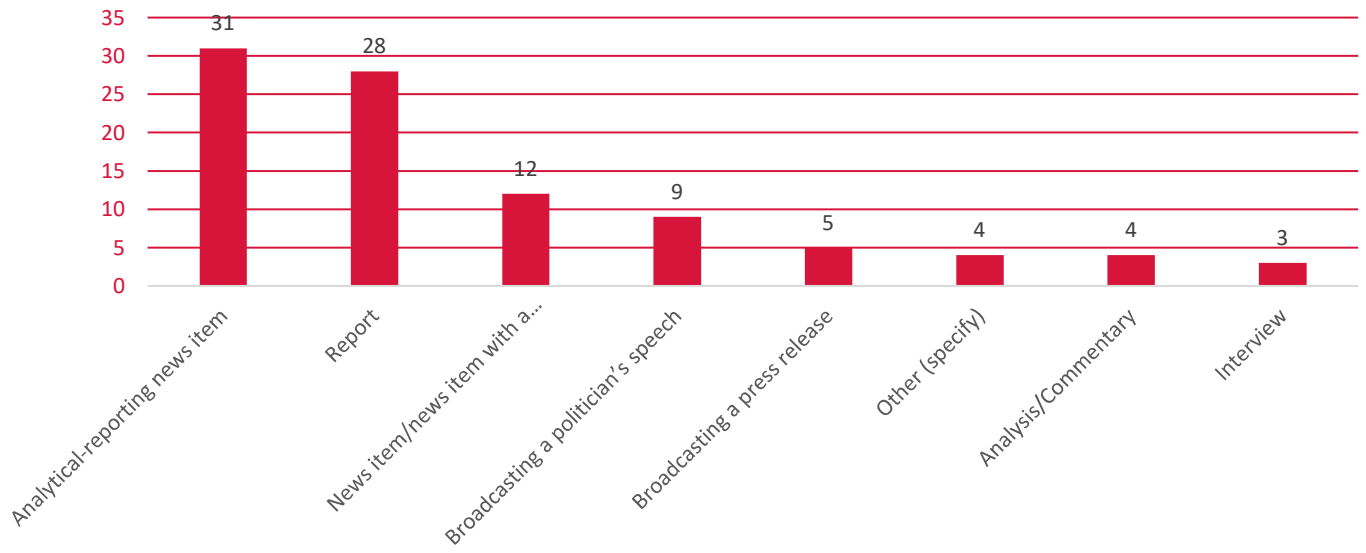
Table 20. News items containing harmful narratives by TV station in January 2024



The highest number of news items with harmful narratives were recorded on 11 January (19 or 19.8% of the total number), which were due to the political party reactions after the criticism coming from the Dutch ambassador to the country, Dirk Jan Kop, addressed to the leader of DUI, Ali Ahmeti, for the deterioration of the rule of law. On the other days, the number ranged between 9 and 14 news items.

In contrast to the online media, where the most prevalent genres were party press-releases and reported politicians' speeches, the news on TV stations was dominated by analytical-report news items (31 or 32.3 %) and reports (28 or 29.2 %). Although not with the same frequency as in the online media outlets, here too there were news items that contained only speech by a politician (9 or 9.4 %) or a press release (5 or 5.2 %).

Table 21. Graph displaying the broadcast news items containing a harmful narrative by genre in January 2024



Similarly to the previous reports, this month we also noted the phenomenon in which the media outlet was offered only as a space to air the political speeches and press-releases, while the role of professional journalism was neglected. The journalist's task is to critically analyse the developments, and not just leave media space to political actors who see it as a platform to spread their own ideology. The media must be a 'watchdog of democracy' and a critic of the current social and political developments, public institutions and political activities.

Harmful narratives were most often noted when informing about domestic politics (64 news items or 66.7%). After domestic politics, there were news items in the areas of justice (8), economy (7), crime (6), corruption 5, etc. Out of the topics we noticed, the most prevalent in January were the cross-party accusations related to the incident in the company responsible for the management and control of the civil air traffic M-NAV, followed by the reactions to the statement of the Dutch Ambassador Kop, the amendments to the Law on Games of Chance, the replacement of personal documents, the upcoming elections and the structure of the caretaker government. Very often, political actors misuse these important social topics for their own benefits and to score political points, while the media, instead of offering the main role to the experts in the area, once again allow political statements to dominate the public discourse.

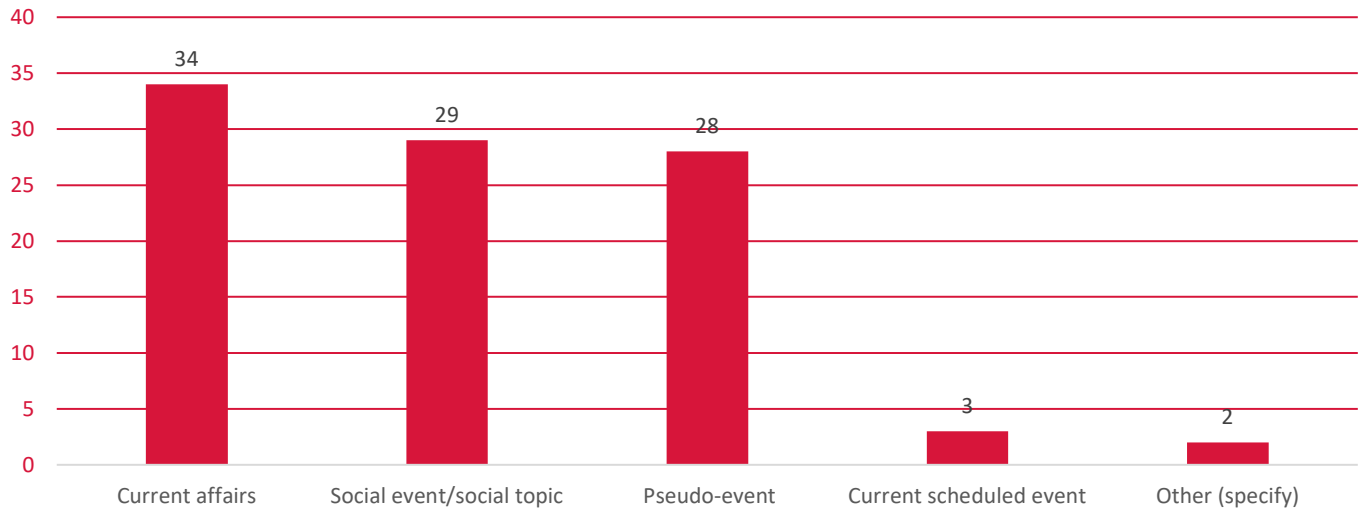
One such example is the topic related to the problems of the Public Transport Company (JSP), for which we could hear the political voices of SDSM, VMRO and Levica, but we could not see the main actor, nor the experts in the area who could offer a realistic point of view and possible solutions, instead of insults and accusations:

While there were no buses in Skopje, while the JSP employees were freezing outside in the streets, demanding to be paid their salaries, the DPMNE councillors were making arrangements in their groups and messages how to trick them. For DPMNE, the JSP employees' appeal, the cry and the fight for their rightfully earned salary, is a means to play with the workers and an opportunity for political marketing, says Gordan Shutarov, a councillor from SDSM in the City of Skopje. (**TV Kanal 5, 23 January**).

Most often, the topics covered with the news items were current affairs (34 or 35.4%), immediately followed by social events (29 or 30.2%) and pseudo-events (28 or 29.2%). This ratio is similar to the previous months, with the difference that the number of news items covering a pseudo-event is on a constant rise (in December there were 19 news items or 21.8% where the occasion for the news items was a pseudo-event). This is a

signal that the political parties, in their quest for more space to promote their ideas and commitments, are increasingly using these techniques of organizing events without any other reason apart from generating media attention and publicity. MTV 1 (5 news items or 71.4%), followed by MTV 2 (4 news items or 36.4%) and TV Alfa (10 news items or 32.3%) are the ones that enabled the political actors, through various pseudo-events, to take media space to promote their views on a variety of topics without any obstacles, but also to attack their political rivals by using various harmful narratives.

Table 22. Reason for the news item (January 2024)



The role of the media in democratic societies is to represent the interests of all groups and seek answers to ask questions that are important to citizens. In that process, regardless of the ubiquity of politicians and their willingness to offer an opinion on every topic, the answers should be sought from the expert public, who will not use these questions for political points, but will offer an analytical approach and serious solutions.

Political actors and sources in the analysed news items

Without any exceptions, the actors who dominate the news items with harmful narratives, but who also generally receive the most space in the mainstream media, are the three largest political parties in the country: SDSM, VMRO-DPMNE and DUI. Their media presence is very often shown as a collective, without individualization, so usually everything that belongs to the opposite camp is bad, criminal, unsuitable, backwards, and must be changed. As an example, we single out the statement of the president of VMRO-DPMNE, Hristijan Mickoski, aired on TV Alfa: *DUI does not scare me in any way, DUI must go into opposition. Just imagine, this party has been part of the government for over twenty years. It has been part of all the ups and downs. An unreformed crowd of people who present themselves as defenders of a cause, but are in fact thieves who make deals for tenders and commissions.* (**Alfa TV, 3 January, 2024**).

The individual actors who dominate the news items with harmful narratives are once again part of this political trio (SDSM, VMRO-DPMNE, DUI), mainly in their role as party leaders, spokespersons, ministers or MPs.

This omnipresence of the actors from these three political parties in the television news programs can mean two things. First, the fact that television stations give the most space to the biggest political entities in their news programs and we very rarely get to hear any other voices on the air, even when it comes to specific and professional topics where an opinion from experts would be naturally expected (amendment of laws, election of judges and prosecutors, etc.).

Second, the creation of harmful narratives is typical of the political discourse of political entities, and their representatives do not refrain from using insults, labels, disinformation or accusations without any basis and without any evidence, in the political dialogue.

Table. 23. Total viewing of the first, second and third actors by TV channel in January 2024

TV channel	Actor	Frequency	Mode of presentation			Who represents the actor and how they are represented											
						The journalist				Someone else				Himself/herself			
			Quoted	Paraphrased	He/she is being talked about	-	+	-/+	0	-	+	-/+	0	-	+	-/+	0
MTV 1	Hristijan Mickoski	**4**	3	3	2				3	1							
	Dimitar Kovachevski	**2**	1	1	1				2	1							
	SDSM	**2**	1		2					2							
MTV 2	The Government	**2**			2					2							
	Dimitar Kovachevski	**4**	4	4				2	2								
	SDSM	**2**	2	2					2								
	Ali Ahmeti	**3**	1	1	2				3								
	VMRO-DPMNE	**5**	4	3	2			2	2	1							
	Hristijan Mickoski	**2**	2	2				2	2								
	Artan Grubi	**2**	1	1	1				1	1							
Kanal 5	Bujar Osmani	**2**	2	2					2								
	Dimitar Kovachevski	**6**	6	6					6								
	VMRO-DPMNE	**3**	3	3	2				1	2							
	Hristijan Mickoski	**3**	3	2					3								
Sitel	VMRO-DPMNE	**4**	4	2			2								2		
	Dimitar Kovachevski	**4**	4	2	3					4					1		
	Hristijan Mickoski	**3**	3	3			1								2		
	the government / DUI and SDSM	**3**		1	3					3							
Telma	VMRO-DPMNE	**2**	2							2							
	Dimitar Kovachevski	**2**	2						1								1
	Hristijan Mickoski	**2**	2						1								1
	Talat Djaferi	**3**			3					3							
Alsat M	Hristijan Mickoski	**3**	3	3					3			1			1		
	The Government	**3**			3					3							
	DUI	**4**			4					4							
Alfa	Government/SDSM, DUI/Government	11			11	7		1		4		2					
	Hristijan Mickoski	6	3	4	2		3		6				2				
	Dimitar Kovachevski	6	2	2	5	6			2	4		1					
	VMRO DPMNE	6			6				6								
	DUI	5			6	4				5							
	SDSM	3			3	3				3							
	Talat Djaferi	3	1	1	3	2				2							
	Zoran Zaev	2			3	1			1				1				
	Antonijo Miloshoski	2		1	3		1		1	1	1						
	Kovachevski	2	1		3				2	1							
TV21	Dimitar Kovachevski	**5**	5	5				4	1								
	The Government	**2**			2			1		1							
TV 24	SDSM	**3**			3					3							
	Hristijan Mickoski	**2**			2					2							
	DUI	**2**			2					2							

The journalist's approach to the actors was most frequently neutral, which is the case for almost all television stations with the exception of TV Alfa. Out of the total of 11 news items on TV Alfa featuring SDSM, the authorities or the government as actors, in 7 cases the journalist presented them negatively, i.e. took a negative attitude, and in only one case they were presented in a neutral way. The attitude towards the president of SDSM, Dimitar Kovachevski, is similar, who is presented by the journalist in a negative light in all 6 news items where he occurs as an actor.

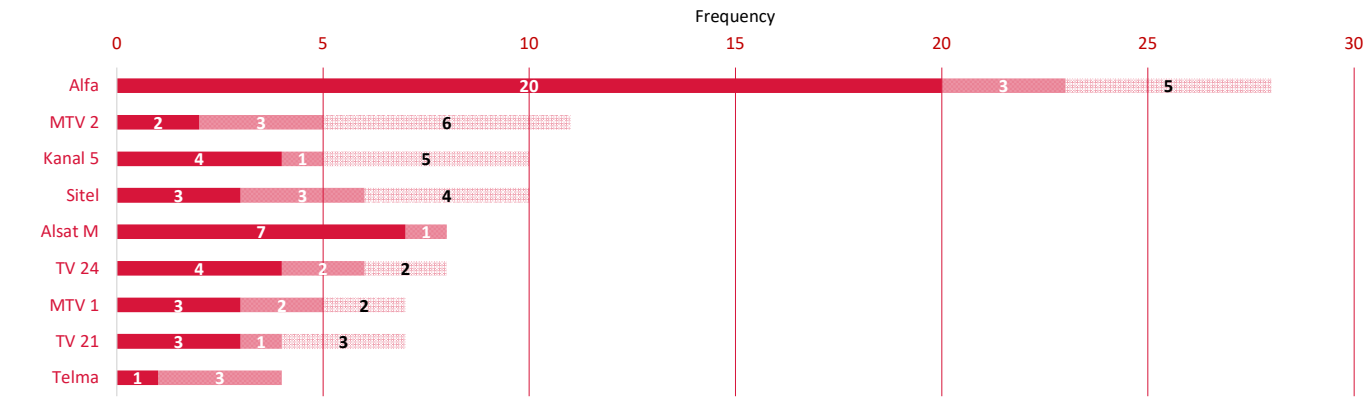
On the other hand, the president of VMRO-DPMNE, Hristijan Mickoski, in the 9 news items on TV Alfa in which he is featured as an actor, was presented in a positive light by the journalist 3 times, and 6 times in a neutral way. In the announcement for the news item in the block broadcast on 15 January, the journalist says:

Zaev was going to send DUI into opposition, at a certain point he didn't even want to hear about an Albanian prime minister, and today his successor Kovachevski sees in them some kind of messiahs for his political future through a pre-election coalition with DUI. To the analysts, there is no great philosophy in the reversed roles of SDSM and DUI, because it has long been clear who is who in the Macedonian Government and who is pulling the strings. (**Alfa TV, 31 January**)

This attitude of favouritism and lack of objectivity contradicts the professional standards and principles, such as Article 14 of the Code of Ethics of Journalists, which clearly states that the *reporting of political processes, especially elections, should be impartial and balanced. The journalist must ensure a professional distance from political entities.*[11]

In that context, the impartiality and balance in the reporting come into play, that is, how media and journalists use sources in their reporting and to what extent they provide a chance to all parties to present their views and viewpoints. Unfortunately, the situation is similar to the previous months in which the news items with only one side (47 or 49 %) dominated, at the expense of news items showing two (19 or 19.8 %) or more sides (27 or 28.1 %). The situation is similar with the number of sources consulted and most often it is one source (41 news items or 42.7%), then two sources (21 or 21.9%) or more sources (31 or 32.3%).

Table 24. Distribution of sides and sources by TV in January 2024



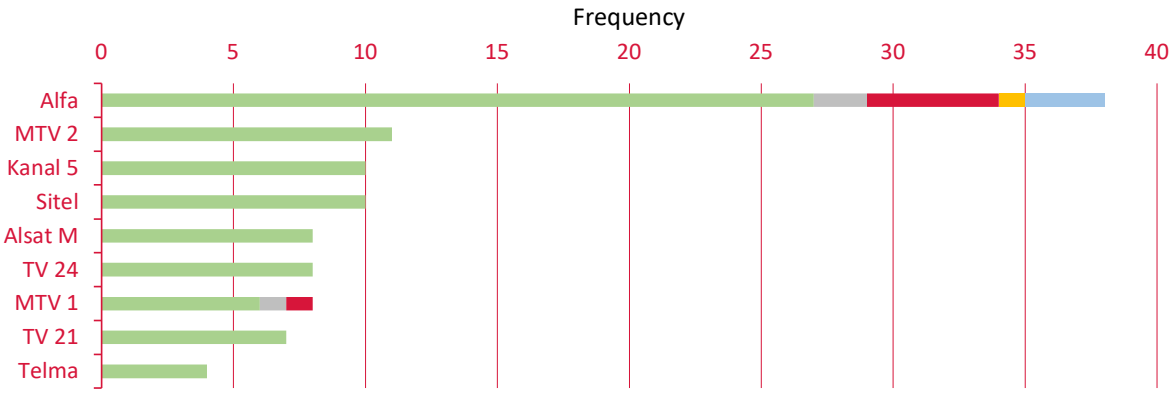
	Telma	TV 21	MTV 1	TV 24	Alsat M	Sitel	Kanal 5	MTV 2	Alfa
Only one side	1	3	3	4	7	3	4	2	20
Two sides	3	1	2	2	1	3	1	3	3
Multiple sides	0	3	2	2	0	4	5	6	5

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

As is evident from Table No. 5, news items with only one side were the most common on Alsat M (7 or 87.5 %) and TV Alfa (20 or 71.4 % of the total number of news items with harmful narratives).

The sources used are mainly precise and clear (91 or 94.8%), and the exception once again is only TV Alfa, where there were also cases of other media as a source (3), imprecise sources (5) and unclear sources (1).

Table 25. Distribution of types of sources by TV station in January 2024



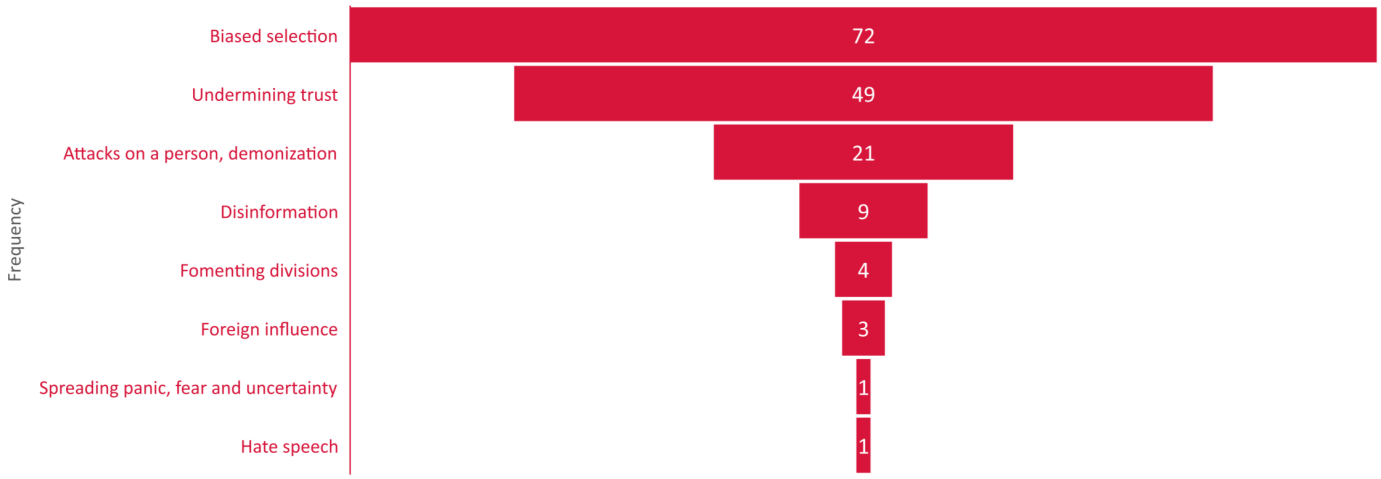
	Telma	TV 21	MTV 1	TV 24	Alsat M	Sitel	Kanal 5	MTV 2	Alfa
Precise	4	7	6	8	8	10	10	11	27
Unclear			1						2
Imprecise			1						5
Journalist									1
Other media outlet as a source									3

One-sided and unbalanced reporting poses a serious problem and cannot be part of professional journalism. In those cases, where the journalist has already given space to the unsubstantiated attacks, labelling, disinformation or insults of a political actor, the least they could do is consult the other side and confront it with the accusations, thus offering them a chance to present the other side of the story.

The most common harmful narratives

During the monitoring of the central news blocks of 9 TV stations in Macedonia in January 96 news items were registered that contained harmful narratives. A total of 160 harmful narratives occurred in these news items, which indicates that there is more than one harmful narrative in a large proportion of the news items.

Table 26. Frequency of harmful narratives in January 2024



Similarly to the previous months of the monitoring, news items containing the harmful narratives biased selection (72) and undermining trust (49) appear to be the most common.

The creation of these narratives most often stems from claims of corruption, non-transparency/non-accountability, unprofessionalism, accusations of abuse of office without supporting arguments, as well as biased selection that does not reflect the reality of the claims. As an example, we highlight the statement of the MP of VMRO-DPMNE, Dragan Kovachki, in which several different accusations were made without any supporting evidence:

The representatives of the Government, by abusing official positions, by trading in influence to obtain foreign grants in the area of security to farmers whose husbands are state officials, prove that the institutions are being abused to the highest possible extent and used for personal lucrative purposes. By being silent, PPO, Pendarovski and Kovachevski confirm that they know and approve of this act. (**MTV 1, 23 January 2024**)

Certainly, journalists cannot always be aware whether the claims are true or not, but the lack of facts and supporting arguments should always prompt them to ask further questions, do journalistic research or deeper analysis, as opposed to simply report the political statements. Of course, if the information cannot be confirmed or it is a matter of assumption, i.e. speculation, this should be stated in the news item.

Otherwise, journalists and the media, even if they are not the direct producers of speculative, misinformation or malinformation, become their transmitters and amplifiers, thereby contributing to the increasing polarization in society and mistrust in institutions.

In terms of numbers, the most frequent ones in January were the harmful narratives consisting of character attacks and demonization (21), as well as disinformation (9).

In a statement given on 31 January, the MP of VMRO-DPMNE calls the political party DUI unbridled, and the president of SDSM servile and a traitor to his own party, which he had sold.

Kovachevski sold the SDS, sold his own MPs for another day in power with the DUI criminals. The unbridled DUI would not have been possible without the servile Kovachevski, who was guided by his mentors from DUI. (**Alfa TV, 31 January, 2023**)

On the other hand, the ruling political party SDSM continues to vilify and present its political opponent VMRO-DPMNE as a party that is against European integrations and has a 'clear Eastern orientation', which in this context means is pro-Russian. This is the statement of the president of SDSM, Dimitar Kovachevski, who directly accused the opposition of being close to the 'East':

This election will not be an election between the left and right, this election will be one between the West and East. In 2024, that's what our elections will be like, because usually in the world there are elections where you have political parties of the centre and left of centre, or political parties of centre and right of centre, in our country now there will be elections where the political parties that are pro-western will be faced with the political parties that are clearly in favour of steering the state towards the East. (**TV Kanal 5, 23 January, 2024**)

The role of the journalist in this case too was only to report, they broadcast the narrative to the audience and the electorate, without intervening in any way. However, similarly to the cases of accusations of corruption and non-accountability unsupported by any evidence and arguments, these statements should also be treated more seriously by the media. The journalist, in order to offer the citizens an objective and clear picture of the social processes, is obliged to provide additional answers for the basis of these claims and the evidence they rely on. Also, VMRO-DPMNE, which was accused of being close to the 'East', should be given space to express their own position regarding such theses.

In contrast to the previous months, in January narratives were noted that **directly accused a foreign entity of interfering in the internal affairs** of the country (3), but without any evidence in support of such serious claims. Those narratives promote the notion of Russia's heavy involvement as a general truth, as if it is a fact that has been around for a long time, without the need to support it with evidence or arguments. As an example, we point to the statement of the DUI representative and Deputy Prime Minister in the Government, Artan Grubi, in which he claims that everyone is aware knows about Russia's interference in the internal affairs of the country.

And you all know that this is the truth, that there are Russian advocates, that there are Russian elements that are doing everything possible in their power to disrupt the clear parliamentary majority and the coalition that wants to see this country as a member of NATO and the EU and in a long lasting friendship with America. (**TV 21, 23 January**)

Without delving into deeper analysis of these claims, it is important to note that serious accusations of this kind must go hand in hand with supporting arguments, and the task of the journalist is to seek an answer about the basis of such conclusions. Otherwise, they just remain in the realm of speculation and offer no grounds for a serious discussion required by such serious claims.

Table 27. Attitude of the media towards harmful narratives

Indicator	Number of indicators	Number of news items	No. of news items in which only the journalist produces the HN	No. of news items in which only the political actor produces the HN	1. The journalist transmits it without any intervention	2. The journalist clearly points it out, but does not take sides	3. The journalist reports it with condemnation/criticism	4. The journalist reports it with approval	No. of news items in which both are in support	The journalist supports the politician's indicator.	The journalist opposes the politician's indicator.
MTV 1	12	7		12	12						
MTV 2	11	11		11	11						
Kanal 5	16	10		15	16				1	1	
Sitel	13	10	1	9	2	7	1	2	3	2	1
Telma	5	4		5	2	3					
Alsat M	9	8		9	9						
Alfa	46	31	11	19	3	16	2	14	16	14	2
TV 21	8	7		8	7	1					
TV 24	9	8	1	8		6		2			
Total	**129**	**96**	**13**	**96**					**20**		

Similar to the previous months, the highest number of harmful narratives were created by political actors, while the journalists, in their reports, only reported them without taking any position. Alfa TV is an exception to this pattern, because in its news block it was either the journalist who created the harmful narrative by themselves (11 cases) or they did it together with the political actor (16 cases). In terms of similar cases in which journalists forgot their professional obligations and were directly responsible for creating a harmful narrative, there are only two more examples, one in TV Sitel and one in TV 24 each.

The role of the professional journalist is to ask the important questions and carefully analyse the words of the political actors, while examining the facts and claims being offered. At the same time, it is important to note that it is **not the job of journalists to produce counter statements**, but to question the claims and facts given by anyone who is part of the public dialogue. A critical approach to all phenomena and political actors in society is a feature of impartial and balanced journalism.

MTV 1

On the first channel of the Public Service, during the monitoring in January, 7 news items were noted that contained harmful narratives[12]. Most often these were: biased selection (8), undermining the trust in institutions (4) and character attacks (3).

We highlight one news item from 27 January, as an example of allegations of corruption, non-transparency/ non-accountability and abuse of office without attempting to substantiate those allegations.

A new policy cannot be expected from the man who, as the chairman of the Macedonian Assembly, made a series of unconstitutional moves, says opposition leader Mickoski after the decision to make Talat Djaferi Prime Minister of the Caretaker Government in the 100 days before the elections. (**MTV 1, 27 January, 2024**)

The news items with harmful narratives with MTV 1 mostly addressed topics related to domestic politics (5), justice (1) and corruption (1). In all the news items that were registered, the author of the harmful narrative was the political actor, and the journalist simply reported it without any intervention. In three of the seven news items with harmful narratives, only one side was presented, while in the rest we have either two sides (2) or more sides (2 news items). One thing that is typical of MTV 1 is that the largest number of news items are from so-called pseudo-events (5 or 71.4%), that is, the harmful narrative originates from an event that the political parties organised not on the occasion of any socially important or current event, but with the only intention to get more space to air their positions and narratives.

MTV 2

In January, 11 news items with harmful narratives were registered on MTV 2, which is a significant decline compared to the previous month (17 news items in December). The most commonly noted harmful narratives were biased selection (9), followed by undermining trust (2) and character attacks (1). All harmful narratives, without an exception, were the product of political statements (11), while the journalist only reported them without intervening. Such an example is the SDSM statement in which the opposition is accused of having pro-Russian stances:

VMRO remains alone in its pro-Russian agenda, against the EU and without coalition partners. (**MTV 2, 19 January, 2024**).

The largest number of these news items are related to current events (6 or 54.5 %) on topics of domestic politics (8 or 72.7 %).

12 MTV 1's central news editions in January were shorter than usual due to the broadcasting of the European Handball Championship.

TV Alfa

The number of news items with harmful narratives aired by TV Alfa in January is the highest compared to all the other TV stations (31 or 32.3% of the total number of registered news items). The most common harmful narratives that emerged were biased selection (22), undermining trust (19), and character attack/ demonization (11).

A specific feature that sets Alfa TV apart from the other TV stations is the fact that it is not only the political actors that participate in the creation of harmful narratives, but very often journalists as well. Moreover, in 11 cases the journalist was the only one responsible for the harmful narrative, while in 16 cases the journalist and the political actor created the harmful narrative together.

Another thing that sets Alfa TV apart is the provocative discourse, the bias and the partisan approach. For example, in the news item broadcast on 15 January, the journalist bids the possible results of the elections:

According to the latest polls, the rating of the social democrats is dropping dramatically, while the status quo of the members of DUI is more or less the same as that of the Alliance for Albanians. According to the latest polls, if pre-election coalitions were to be entered, even if SDSM, Alliance and DUI went to the elections together with dozens of smaller parties, they would still not be able to form a new government, because the number of votes for VMRO-DPMNE and the opposition political block of the Albanian community is larger. (**Alfa TV, 15 January**)

Without citing sources or indicating the polls that would accurately point to the cited ratings or the possible election results, the journalist speculates and offers formulas according to which the new government majority would be formed.

The most frequent actors who appear in these news items on TV Alfa are SDSM, the Government, the authorities (11) and Dimitar Kovachevski (6). These actors are usually painted in a negative light, very frequently by the journalist themselves. The journalist presented a noticeably negative attitude towards SDSM, the Government/the authorities in 7 cases, and also towards Dimitar Kovachevski, in all the 6 cases when he was mentioned.

TV Kanal 5

In January, a total of 10 news items with harmful narratives were registered in the central news editions on TV Kanal 5. The majority of them were related to undermining trust (7) and biased selection (6).

The role of the journalist in these reports was usually a quiet broadcaster (16 cases) of the harmful narratives created by the political actors. The areas in which the harmful narratives occur is a little more diverse than in the other television stations, so in addition to domestic politics (3 news items), we also have foreign policy (2), crime (2), justice (1), etc. In 4 news items, only one side was presented, while in the rest either 2 sides (1) or more sides of the event (5).

In the report published on 11 January, the accusation of VMRO-DPMNE MP, Antonijo Miloshoski, for irregular and rigged tests in the selection of judges and prosecutors is broadcasted:

In the written test, the government's favourites will leave some of the questions unanswered, someone else will answer on their behalf and they will receive the maximum number of points. The agreement is between DUI, SDSM, the Alliance for Albanians, that each of them will have their share of future judges and prosecutors. (**TV Kanal 5, 11 January, 2024**)

This is a very serious accusation, but without any evidence, it remains only in the realm of speculation and claims of corruption and abuse of office without any attempt to substantiate those claims, which leads to undermining trust in the institutions. However, it should be mentioned that in this particular case, the journalist asks the questions and confronts the President of the Academy of Judges and Prosecutors, as well as Prime Minister Kovachevski with these accusations.

TV 21

During the monitoring of TV 21 in January, we registered a total of 7 news items containing one or more harmful narratives. Most often these harmful narratives contained biased selection (4) and character attacks/ demonization (2 cases).

According to the other parameters, TV 21 does not stand out from other TV stations. Domestic politics topics dominate the news items with harmful narratives (6 or 85.7 %), as well as one-sided news items (3 or 42.9 %). The occasions for the news items were most frequently current events (5 or 71.4%) or a pseudo-event (2 or 28.6%).

Sitel TV

With TV Sitel 10 news items have been registered as containing harmful narratives. The largest number of them were related to undermining trust in institutions (9) and biased selection (9).

The monitoring of the news items noted a significant number of statements (4) in which the political actor intentionally does not present the full picture of the 'event' and intentionally omits information that refutes the position of the one presenting it. Such is the statement of the then Prime Minister Dimitar Kovachevski, who claims that there is no example in the world where a political party did not vote for the ministers who come from their party, not mentioning that a very similar case was the voting for the caretaker government in 2016, when SDSM abstained from voting.

One cannot act like a 13-year-old child: I will put forward the minister, but I will not vote, I will not vote for this, I will not vote for that... Everyone must be serious. Nowhere in the world can you find a case where you put forward your ministers, but then expect someone else to vote for them. Go ahead, find me an example where someone proposed ministers and asked someone else to vote for them. (**TV Sitel, 11 January, 2024**)

With TV Sitel, in January, domestic politics dominated the news items (7 or 70 %), but unlike the majority of the TV stations that we analysed, most of the news items presented several positions, i.e. 7 (or 70 %) had either two or multiple positions.

Alsat M

Alsat M TV registered a total of 8 news items with harmful narratives in January. Most of them were related to biased selection (6) and undermining trust (3).

Those reports were mostly one-sided, that is, they offered only one side of the story to the viewer (7 or 87.5%).

The examples with accusations of corruption, unprofessionalism and crime were the most typical ones, but not with arguments and specific examples, but only as an election slogan. Such was Besa's statement, published in the news on 31 January:

Corruption is the face of SDSM and DUI, this is a government made by DUI and SDSM that will not be remembered for the investments it made, but will stay in history as a government of crime and corruption. (**TV Alsat M, 31 January 31, 2024**)

TV Telma

In January, a total of 4 news items containing one or several harmful narratives, mostly related to encouraging undermining of trust (3), biased selection (2) and disinformation (1), were registered in the central news of TV Telma.

Harmful narratives in which we see unverified findings, but also serious accusations without any arguments can be found in Telma's news programs, such as the accusations of the then Prime Minister Kovachevski that the opposition was not doing any work, but came to the Assembly only to obstruct it:

They were part of the Assembly for the last 4 years, and the only thing they did was to obstruct. They came here to put obstacles; they didn't come here to work. (**Telma TV, 19 January**)

TV 24

In contrast to the previous months, TV 24 recorded an increase in the news items that contained harmful narratives in January (8). These were mainly biased selection and character attacks. Except for one case, when the journalist was responsible for creating the harmful narrative, in the rest of them, the harmful narrative was created by political actors.

We emphasise the article from the Assembly in which the journalist, instead of critically analysing the party's accusations, uses the practice of 'he-said-she-said, pointed out, they say', thus taking on the role of a silent bystander reporting politically harmful narratives. By doing so, he consciously or unconsciously becomes a catalyst for disinformation, misinformation, or malinformation.

During the hearing, MP Marija Petrushevska from VMRO-DPMNE called Daneva a Facebook legal expert on batteries. According to Petrushevska, the nomination should be withdrawn: Forgive me, but the Colourful Revolution and Facebook-politicians have plunged the country to the bottom, they have destroyed the legal order, you have destroyed the state order, you have destroyed the self-sufficiency, the independence of this country, the sovereignty... (**TV 24, 31 January, 2024**).

Report for February 2024

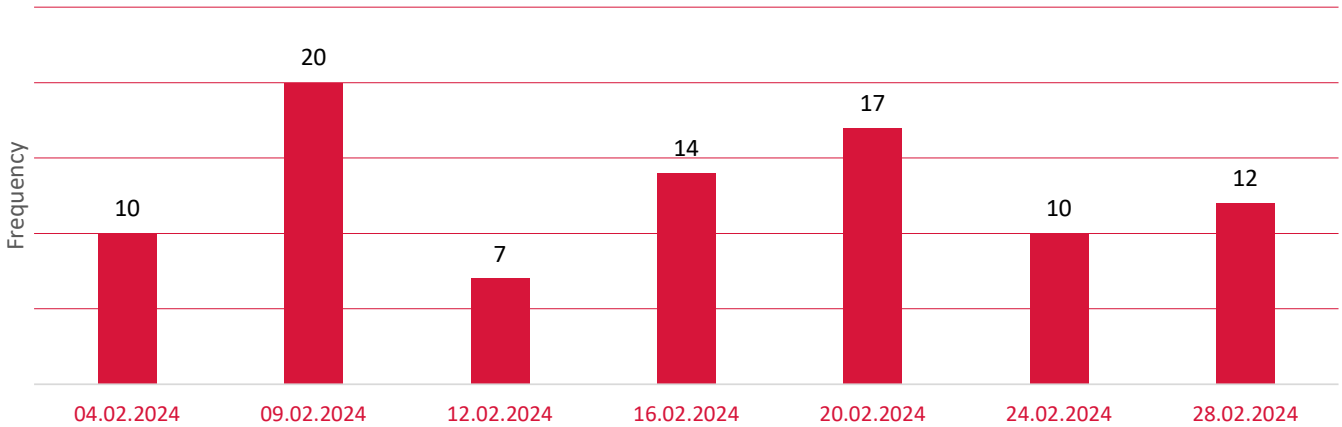
In the second, and the shortest month of 2024, the central news editions of 9 TV stations in the following 7 days (4, 8, 12, 16, 20, 24 and 28 February) were analysed.

During the analysis, a total of 90 news items were registered that contained at least one of the harmful narratives that we monitor. Most often it is the harmful narrative biased selection (58 examples), and TV Alfa is the television station that dominates the number of news items with harmful narratives (40 or 44% of the total number).

The analysis of the television stations' central news editions in February found a total of 90 items that contained one or more different harmful narratives. What is worrying is the constant growth of such news items, which is an indicator of the sharpened rhetoric among the political actors, but also a problem with professional journalistic standards.

Compared to December when we recorded an average of just under 11 (10.9 per day)[13] news items daily and January with 12[14], in February the number rose to almost 13 news items per day (12.9) that contained harmful narratives.

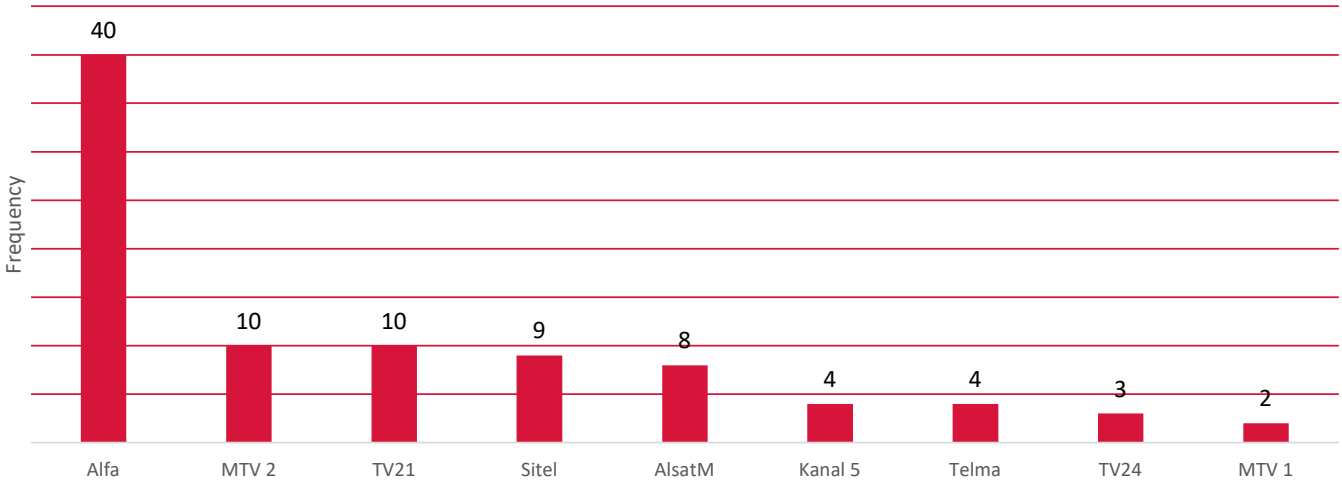
Table 28. Presence of news items by date in February 2024



The day with the largest number of news items containing harmful narratives is 8 February, with a total of 20 news items. It is interesting that as many as 8 of these 20 news items are related to the turmoil in the political party Alliance for Albanians and the statements of its representatives. By number of news items, the order is as follows, 20 February (17 news items), 19 February (14 news items), 28 February (12 news items), etc.

TV Alfa with a total of 40 news items (or 44% of the total number) is the TV that by far created or reported the most harmful narratives of all televisions. It is followed by MTV 2 and TV 21 with 10 each (or 11.1 each), Sitel TV with 9 (10%), TV Alsat M with 8 (8.9%), TV Kanal 5 and TV Telma with 4 each (each 4.4%) and finally TV 24 with 3 (3.3%) and MTV 1 with 2 (or 2.2%) news items.

Table 29. News items that contain harmful narrative according to TV in February 2024



13 In December, a total of 87 news items with harmful narratives were registered in the monitored 8 days, or 10.9 news items per day.

14 In January, 8 days were monitored and a total of 96 news items with harmful narratives or 12 news items per day were recorded.

Of the genres, similar to the previous months, the most represented are analytical-report news items and reports (both 30 or 33.3%), which in total comprise two-thirds of all news items. This is followed by the reported speeches of the politicians (11 or 12.2%), news (5 or 5.6%), reported press releases (4 or 4.4%), interviews (4 or 4.4%), etc. There are also news items that can hardly be placed in any of the existing genres, such as statements and discussions taken from social networks and similar.

Domestic politics is the area in which topics related to harmful narratives are most present (60 news items or 66.7%). But, similarly to January, in February we also see an increase in harmful narratives in other areas, such as the economy and crime (7 news items each or 7.8 each), justice (5 or 5.6%), health (4 or 4.4%) etc.

The topics are very different, but they are mostly related to the elections, so that is the narrative, pre-election, with many attacks, mutual accusations and insults. Even the topics that do not seem to be directly related to the campaigns and the May elections are framed in such a manner and have campaign overtones. Such are, for example, the domestic party turmoil in the Alliance for Albanians party (12 news items), where the leadership in the struggle for supremacy in the party often uses language full of insults and mutual accusations without arguments and evidence. The problem with the issuance of the personal documents and the passports (12 news items) is also a trending topic in February, as well as the Law on Games of Chance (4 news items) and both topics were used in a daily political context and the parties used them to earn some pre-election plus point in their performances and speeches.

The topic that was popular and can be analysed as a special case study is related to the statement of the president of SDSM and former Prime Minister, Dimitar Kovachevski, who, inacceptable for a public figure (and especially not for the president of one of the largest political parties and former prime minister) attacked the journalists and the media, insulting them and accusing them of serving someone's party interests, that they were easily sold and placed at someone's service:

> *From here I want to tell them, they took sides for nothing. They will squeal again in some basements when they press them, similarly like when Andrej Petrov took them out from A1 Television, and they now again they put themselves in the service of those who stuffed them in basements in 2010, 2011. That's what happens when the media will put themselves in the service of a political party, and then they'll come to their senses and it's too late. And where will they run to? To SDSM. Why? In order to restore democracy to them, which they sold it themselves, they are still being sold, as they say - bitcoin is bought when it is the cheapest, and that is why they have gone there now, and I have to say this, so let them be angry tomorrow, AJM will call us in order to apologize, we will apologize. (**TV Kanal 5, 20 February, 2024**).*

Such a statement, which was also broadcast by other TV stations, which comes from the president of one of the largest political parties and a man who until recently was the head of the Government, represents a serious attack on journalistic freedom and the professional media, which must not occur in any form in a democratic country. This statement caused a reaction among media organisations[15] and

15 Reaction of the Association of Journalists of Macedonia. Party tensions towards journalists are unnecessary and counterproductive - Kovachevski should not blame journalists. https://znm.org.mk/%d0%bf%d0%b0%d1%80%d1%82%d0%b8%d1%81%d0%ba%d0%b8%d1%82%d0%b5 -%d1%82%d0%b5%d0%bd%d0%b7%d0%b8%d0%b8-%d0%ba%d0%be%d0%bd-%d0%bd%d0%be%d0% b2%d0%b8%d0%bd%d0%b0%d1%80%d0%b8%d1%82%d0%b5-%d1%81%d0%b5-%d0%bd/. Accessed on 21 March, 2024.

at the Agency for Audio and Audiovisual Media Services[16], and the next day the former prime minister apologised for what he said.[17]

Certain social developments or social topics were the most common reason for the news items included in the monitoring (36 or 40%), followed by current events (28 or 31.1%). Even in February, there is no shortage of news items made from pseudo-events (22 or 24.4%), i.e., press conferences, press releases and statements whose purpose was only to generate media attention and publicity, and not any current topic. Mostly MTV 2 (6 reports or 60%), followed by Alsat M (4 reports or 50%) and TV 21 (4 reports or 40%) gave political parties a chance, through such pseudo-events, to get media coverage in the central news editions.

Political actors and sources in the analysed news items

It was already emphasized in several previous reports that the assessment of the actors is usually not done by the journalists, but by the political actors from the opposite camp, who through their statements, press releases, press conferences find a way to address their political opponent, and that, as expected, they do it through negative ratings. For example, the party VMRO-DPMNE on TV Alsat M is mentioned three times, and all three times commented negatively by some other political actor.

We underline the statement of the SDSM representative and Deputy Prime Minister, Fatmir Bitiqi, who sees his party's optimism in the elections, as he says, in fact that VMRO-DPMNE and Levica are against EU integration:

Because in the block against the European integration are VMRO and Levica that openly say that VMRO does not have a clear plan for EU integration, while Levica with its views is closer to the Asian integrations than the European ones. All others are pro-EU integration and that does make us optimistic. (**TV Alsat M, 8 February, 2024**).

It is already becoming obvious that the attacks of the ruling SDSM party are mainly focused on the alleged anti-EU policy of the opposition, and there are more examples of this in the January report. This statement is also in that direction, in which the Deputy Prime Minister in the government claims that the opposition parties VMRO-DPMNE and Levica are in a certain block that is against the EU integration of the country, but also that VMRO-DPMNE has openly said (meaning there is a public statement) that there is no a clear plan for EU integration.

This is a serious accusation, and even though it comes from a political actor in a pre-election period, it needs to be analysed and further investigated by the journalist, whose task is not only to convey accurately and in a balanced manner all the statements of the political actors, but also to analyse them professionally and to investigate them additionally. In this particular case, in order to exclude the possibility of disinformation and manipulation, a question should follow to the Deputy Prime Minister to indicate when and in which statement a representative of VMRO-DPMNE said that there is no plan for EU integrations.

16 Reaction of the Agency for Audio and Audiovisual Media Services. CONDEMNATION OF THE STATEMENT OF THE LEADER OF SDSM. https://avmu.mk/2024/02/21/%d0%be%d1%81%d1%83%d0%b4%d0%b0-%d0%b7%d0%b0-%d0%b8%d0%b7%d1%98%d0%b0%d0%b2%d0%b0%d1%82%d0%b0-%d0%b7%d0%b0-%d0%bb%d0%b8%d0%b4%d0%b5%d1%80%d0%be%d1%82-%d0%bd%d0%b0-%d1%81%d0%b4%d1%81%d0%bc/. Accessed on 21 March, 2024.

17 Kovachevski apologised: I accept all the reactions, I don't want the return of the times before 2016. Makfax.https://makfax.com.mk/makedonija/%D0%BA%D0%BE%D0%B2%D0%B0%D1%87%D0%B5%D0%B2%D1%81%D0%BA%D0%B8-%D1%81%D0%B5-%D0%B8%D0%B7%D0%B2%D0%B8%D0%BD%D0%B8-%D0%B3%D0%B8-%D0%BF%D1%80%D0%B8%D1%84%D0%B0%D1%9C%D0%B0%D0%BC-%D1%81%D0%B8%D1%82%D0%B5/. Accessed on 21 March, 2024.

Table. 30 Total prevalence of first, second and third actor by TV channel

TV channel	An actor	Frequency	Mode of presentation			Who and how presents the actor											
						The journalist				Someone else				Himself/herself			
			Quoted	Paraphrased	He/she is being talked about	-	+	-/+	0	-	+	-/+	0	-	+	-/+	0
MTV2	SDSM	**2**	2						1								
	VMRO-DPMNE	**2**		1	1				2	1							
	Zijadin Sela	**3**	1		2					1	1						
	Talat Djaferi	**2**	2						2								
Kanal 5	Dimitar Kovachevski	**2**	2	2	1												
Sitel	VMRO-DPMNE	**4**	4	1	1		1				1			1			
	The Government	**4**	2	1	4	2				1							
	DUI	**2**			2					1							
	Hristijan Mickoski	**2**	2	2	1												
AlsatM	DUI	**4**			4	1				1							
	VMRO-DPMNE	**3**			3				1	3							
	Authorities/Government	**2**			2					1							
	Albanian opposition	**2**	1	1					1								
Alpha	Government/SDSM, DUI/Government	19			19	11				13			2				1
	Hristijan Mickoski	3	3														3
	Dimitar Kovachevski	8	5		7	6				1							5
	DUI	4			4	3				2							
	SDSM	2			2	2				1							
	Talat Djaferi	2			2	2											
	Aleksandar Nikoloski	3	3														3
	Bujar Osmani	2			2	2				1							
	Oliver Spasovski	2	1		2	2											
	Basic Public Prosecutor's Office	2			2	2											1
	Fatmir Bitiqi	2	2			2							1				2
	Fatmir Medjiti	2	2		1			1									2
	MRTV	2			2		1			2							
TV21	Talat Djaferi	**3**	1		2				2	1			1				
	Arber Ademi	**2**	2						2								
	Arben Taravari	**2**	1		1				2								
	Fraction of Zijadin Sela	**2**	1		1				1	1							
	Fatmir Medjiti	**2**	2						2								
	Artan Grubi	**2**			2				1	2							

In rare cases, the assessment of the actors is done by the journalists and the media. Such examples, as before, are found mostly with TV Alfa, where the Government is discussed in 19 reports, and the journalist presented this collective actor negatively 11 times, while not once positively. It is interesting that in none of these 19 cases, we cannot see a quote, not even a paraphrased statement from a representative of the authorities or the Government. If this is added to the portrayal of the president of the SDSM and recent Prime Minister, Dimitar Kovachevski, who is presented negatively by the journalist 6 times out of 8 times, the SDSM party, which is presented negatively in all of them as an actor out of 8 times, the same conclusion is drawn again regarding the reporting of TV Alfa, that it is characterized by bias and favouring a certain political option, which is contrary to the professional standards and principles. Here is an example from the anchor's announcement in the central news editions:

[...] What is he joking about, and what is the Deputy Prime Minister Fatmir Bitiqi serious about? While pushing scandalous laws on the fast lane in the Assembly, instead of a substantive debate, the Government deceives the public with jokes that can cause serious consequences, or with investments that supposedly will happen someday. [...] Such jokes are probably just an attempt to defocus, because while the public is trying to discover the sense of humour of the Deputy Prime Minister, in the Assembly, the Government is 'going about its business' (**TV Alpha, 8 February, 2024**).

Only in two more media outlets we see an example when the journalist represented the political actor (and negatively in all cases), in two reports broadcast on TV Sitel and in one report on TV Alsat M. In all other cases, the role of the journalist was only to convey the statements of the political actors, who evaluated each other, and they, the journalist, did not intervene in any manner.

By looking at Table No 3, it can be seen that, just as before, the media give the largest space to the largest political parties in the country, who get space to speak on every possible topic, and to frame it in a way that best suits their pre-election activities.

Serious topics, such as the new Law on Games of Chance and the proposal to move bookmakers and casinos away from the educational institutions, are once again addressed through insults and political accusations rather than through real debate. The representative of DUI, Arber Ademi, accuses the opposition of protecting the interest of the 'underground', while the opposition considers DUI to be the underground and calls it the 'Sicilian Mafia'.

The political actors continue to collect pre-election points and to be omnipresent in debates on all possible topics, at the expense of real experts and people who should offer an objective photo of the problem and offer real, not political, solutions.

Whose interests are protected by not passing this law? The interest of the citizens or the interest of the underground who deal with games of chance? Everything will be clear to you. Someone persistently wants to protect that monopoly, says Ademi. (**TV Telma, 28 February, 2024**).

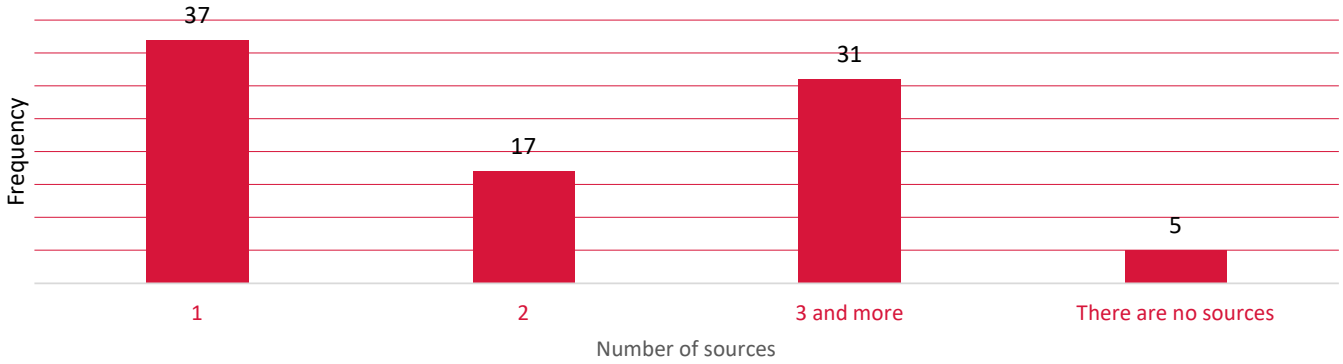
Due to the turmoil in a smaller political party, Alliance for Albanians, their representatives were also quite often present in the programs of the TV stations in February, which can be seen from Table No. 3. Unfortunately, their portrayal is in a negative atmosphere of mutual accusations and insults.

When we talk about impartiality and balance in reporting, things changed very little, and compared to the January report, the situation is almost identical. Also, in February, among the news items analysed with harmful narratives, those with one source dominated - 37 (41.1%), followed by those with 2 (17 or 18.9%) and those with 3 or more sources (31 or 34.4 %). More frequently we noticed news items, in which there are no sources, i.e., t**he journalist is the only source**. All five cases of such news items were noted in the case of TV Alfa, where it is a common practice for the anchor and the journalist to analyse and comment on the events,

instead of presenting them through a journalistic report. As an example, we highlight the speculation of the news anchor on 8 February, with reference to the developments in healthcare:

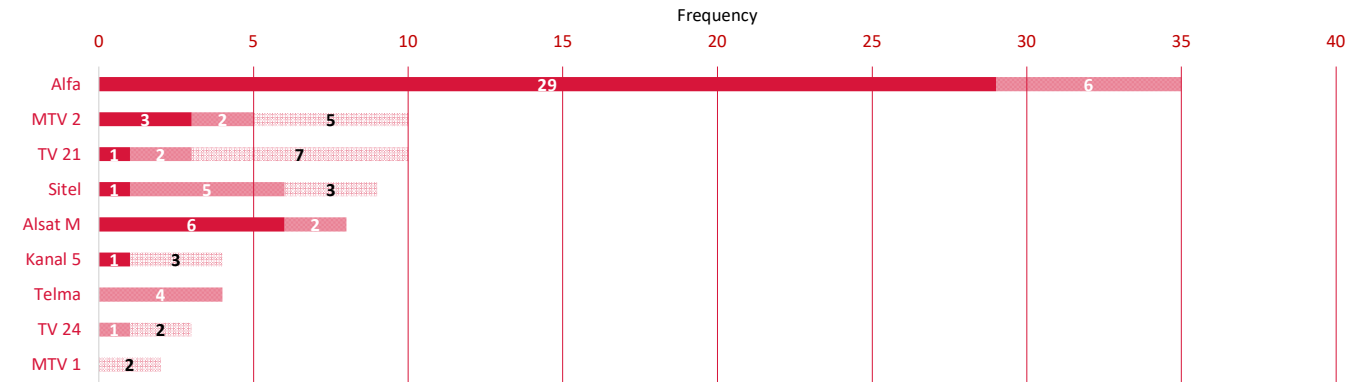
'Namely, managers of hospitals who are under a party directive, i.e. appointed by SDSM and DUI, in fear and panic of accidentally being dismissed from their positions, started to take sick leave, so we can conclude that politics affects the healthcare system as well'. (**TV ALFA, 8 February, 2024**)

Table 31. Distribution of sources for all TV (February 2024)



The situation is similar when the news items are analysed according to the **prevalence of different sides** that were presented. Thus, the one-sidedness in the news item is again noticed, i.e. the presentation of only one side (41 news items or 45.6%), followed by the news items with two sides (22 or 24.4%) and the news items with more sides (22 or 24, 4 %). This is especially noticeable in **TV Alfa's** news items, where in as many as 29 (or 82.9%) of the news items we see only one side, i.e., the other side is not given a chance to share its position on a certain issue. Similar to TV Alfa, the news items with harmful narratives registered on TV Alsat M also mostly presented only one side (6 or 75% of the news items), and only 2 (25%) presented two sides.

Табела 32. Presented sides of the sources, distribution according to TV in February 2024

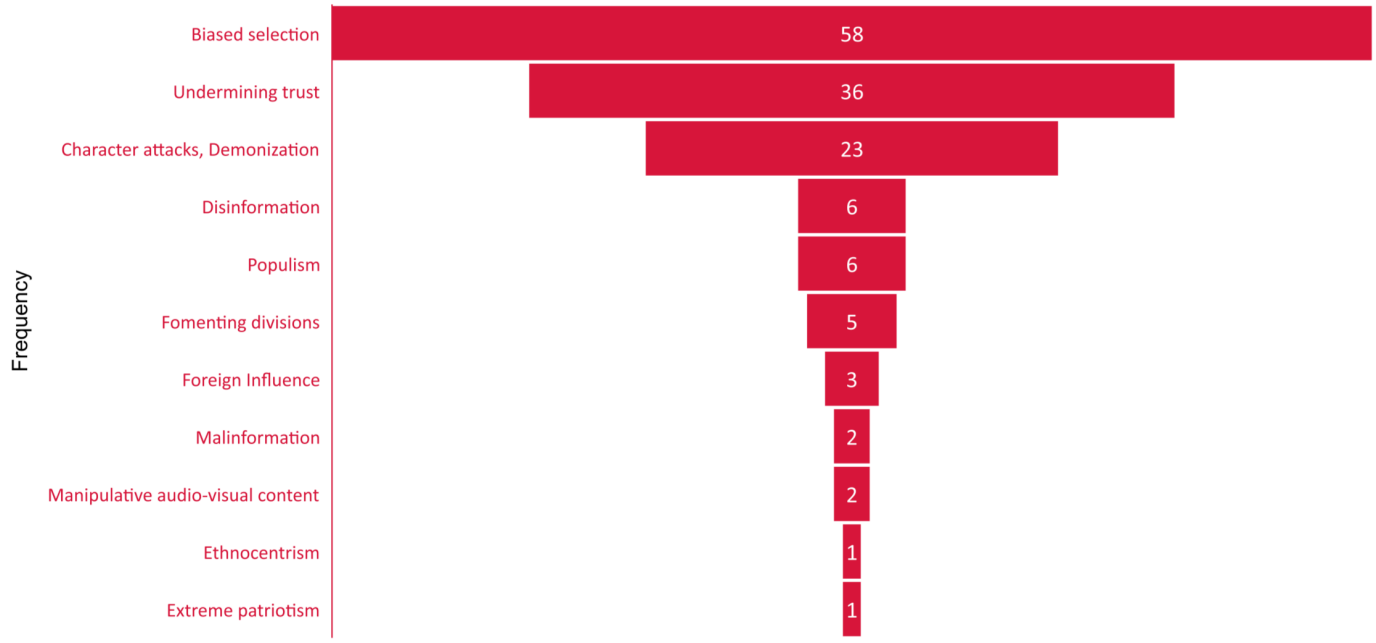


	MTV 1	TV 24	Telma	Kanal 5	Alsat M	Sitel	TV 21	MTV 2	Alfa
Only one side	0	0	0	1	6	1	1	3	29
Two sides	0	1	4	0	2	5	2	2	6
Multiple sides	2	2	0	3	0	3	7	5	0

The most common harmful narratives

The monitoring of the 9 TV stations in February analysed a total of 90 news item that contained harmful narratives. Considering that some of the news items contain two or more harmful narratives, we registered a total of 143 harmful narratives.

Table 33. Frequency of harmful narratives in February 2024



The most numerous among them are biased selection (58 news items), then undermining trust (36 news items) and character attacks or demonization (23 news items). The other harmful narratives are present in smaller numbers.

Behind these harmful narratives, there are usually statements that contain unverifiable findings or findings that are difficult to verify (38 or 42.2%), then the claims of corruption, non-transparency/non-accountability, unprofessionalism, without supporting those claims (32 or 35.6%) and labelling, ridicule and grossly disrespecting other people (22 or 24.2%).

On 12 February, the SDSM MP in the Assembly accused VMRO-DPMNE of being directly responsible for the events in the Alliance for Albanians party, without offering any proof or argument:

VMRO-DPMNE has its footprint on what is happening in the Alliance for Albanians (**TV21, 12 February, 2024**).

The statements of VMRO-DPMNE on this topic do not differ much, this time they are an attack on DUI, the coalition partner of SDSM, but essentially they use the same means, unverified findings and do not contain arguments that will confirm the claims:

Obviously, DUI acts like a registrar in a divorce proceeding, on whom it depends whether someone will be a minister or not.' Whereas the note taker is SDS, which only fulfils the wishes of DUI in order to retain power. In that context, VMRO-DPMNE refrains from this tragi-comedy, which only says that the Government stands on fragile grounds and there will follow electoral debacle. (**TV Sitel, 8 February, 2024**).

This way of attacks without any attempt to argue, metaphors that aim to introduce more drama and intensify the effect on the viewer, and the constant transfer of blame in a time frame context, who first started, and from whom it started, is one of the specifics of the domestic political debate, which is intensifying as the elections approach. This is the reason why so many harmful narratives depend on unverified findings that cannot be proven or allegations of corruption, non-transparency/non-accountability, unprofessionalism, without substantiating those claims.

When the debate heats up, mutual accusations start to become more serious, and the political actors do not have any problem in insulting not only their political opponent, but also anyone who stands in the way of their political agenda.

'Incompetent politician', 'Prime Minister Boaster', 'Minister of Sin', 'Pendant party', 'Servants', 'Sicilian clan' is just a small part of the vocabulary used by the political parties in February in order to insult their political opponents.

Today, the MPs from DUI and their servants from SDSM made the situation with passports even more difficult, - statement of the MP of VMRO-DPMNE, Dragan Kovachki' (**MTV 2, 28 February, 2024**).

Boaster in the Parliament, boaster in the Government, boaster in the police. This is how this man presents himself wherever he appears, - statement by Blerim Seidiu from BESA.' (**TV 21, 24 February, 2024**).

Table No. 34 Attitude of media towards harmful narratives

Indicator	Number of indicators	Number of news items	No. of news items in which only the journalist produces the HN	No. of news items in which only the political actor produces the HN	1. The journalist transmits it without any intervention	2. The journalist clearly points it out, but does not take sides	3. The journalist reports it with condemnation/criticism	4. The journalist reports it with approval	No. of news items in which both are in support	The journalist supports the politician's indicator.	The journalist opposes the politician's indicator.
MTV 1	2	2		2	2						
MTV 2	12	10		12	12						
Kanal 5	7	4		4	4			3	3	3	
Sitel	10	9	2	6		7		1	2	2	
Telma	7	4		7	5		2				
Alsat M	14	8	1	13	11			2			
Alfa	57	40	28	20	2	1	2	24	9	9	
TV21	11	10		11	11						
TV24	5	3	0	5		3		2			
In total	**125**	**90**	**31**	**80**					**14**	**14**	

On 20 February, several media reported the statement of the MP of VMRO-DPMNE, Antonijo Miloshoski, where he reads a list of people who took the exam of the Academy of Judges and Public Prosecutors and are in some way connected with officials from SDSM and DUI.

Members of the wider and narrower families of the state and party officials are not public figures, and have the right to compete for any position, except for those listed in the law as a conflict of interest or nepotism, due to family ties. That means, the disclosure of such information is considered a misuse of information of a private nature and is specifically related to the harmful narrative of malinformation. Although the journalist only conveyed Miloshoski's statement, without intervening in any manner, and they are not directly responsible for creating such a narrative, in such specific cases, they are obliged to protect the privacy of persons, and not to allow their names to be posted. Instead of posting Miloshoski's integral statement, the journalist should have paraphrased it, and removed the part where the persons taking the exam are mentioned.

Such condemnations without arguments, which rely only on hearsay or on previous experiences, further undermine the already fragile trust in the institutions.

This report points out another case, where by deliberately not conveying the full picture of the event or deliberately omitting information, a narrative related to biased selection or undermining of trust is created. This is the example broadcast on TV Sitel on 16 February:

> *Citizens who were stuck in the country received another slap from the authorities. Photographed in Skopje and throughout the country, they have been waiting for months to receive their passports. But that's why our people in Munich, who were photographed two weeks ago, today received the issued documents from Minister Bujar Osmani. (**TV Sitel, 16 February, 2024**).*

In the announcement the news anchor goes a step further in framing Osmani's statement as a 'slap' from the authorities for the citizens who were 'stuck in the country without a passport'. By this way of framing, the presenter wants to impose a thesis that Minister Osmani treats Macedonian citizens living abroad better than the citizens living in the country, who are discriminated. But through the crude wording with a 'slap', the news anchor incites division, unjustifiably implying that the Macedonian citizens living in the country have the right to priority when the country issues personal documents.

The announcement also says that 'our people from Munich' were photographed 'two weeks ago', although Osmani mentions in the video only 25 and 23 January as the dates on which the photos were taken of the citizens whose passports were made (on the day when this news edition was broadcast, 22 and 24 days have passed since those dates, which is more than three weeks. The exaggeration with 'two weeks' is consistent with the tone of the entire news edition, i.e., the announcement that precedes the tone piece by Osmani. From the short press release, one gets the impression that TV Sitel, with its criticism of Osmani, is participating in creating greater confusion about the issue of passports, opening a new confrontation ('domestic' versus 'foreign' Macedonian citizens).

The journalist here develops the criticism in an inappropriate way, presenting their comment as a fact and a framework through which the viewer should receive and interpret the information. Such framing is a common practice in the communication strategies of the political parties, but when it appears in news programs as a product of the editorial policy of a media outlet, it is worth pointing out and reminding about the professional standards of objectivity and impartiality.

In February, similar to the previous months, harmful narratives were mostly produced by the political actors, while the journalists, through their news items, only reported them and provided media space for them. From such a concept, only TV Alfa stands out, where the journalist was most responsible for creating the harmful narrative (in the news item or its announcement). Thus, 28 harmful narratives in the central news editions of TV Alfa were produced only by the journalist, 20 only by the political actor, while 9 were produced in parallel both by the journalist and the political actor.

In one of the announcements, the news anchor of TV Alfa, referring to a Viber message, which is 'circulating on the Internet', without official support for the accusations, without any other evidence, except for a Viber message from an unnamed source, accuses an institution of unprofessional actions.

In a Viber message circulating on the Internet, an employee of an institution, in charge of new employments, informs regularly selected people at an open call - what time they have to appear there just to sign a contract. If they don't respond to a message, they are crossed out without explanation, and others take their place - it is not even known if they passed the tests. (**Alfa TV, 20 February**).

In addition to TV Alfa, in February we see two cases in TV Sitel where the journalist was directly responsible for creating the harmful narratives, and in two other cases they did it together with the political actor. On Alsat M we registered one case where the journalist was directly responsible for creating the harmful narrative, while on Kanal 5 (3 cases) and TV 21 (1 case) the journalist and the political actor created the harmful narrative together.

MTV 1

Regarding MTV 1 in February, we note a record low number of news items containing harmful narratives (2 or only 2.2% of the total number of registered news items). In both cases, the political actor is the one who created the narrative, while the journalist merely reported it without intervention. After December when 10 news items with harmful narratives were registered and 7 in January, we can conclude that we are noticing a positive trend, and awareness among the journalistic team of the first channel of the Public Service, not only not to participate in the creation of harmful narratives, but also to notice them when they are created by the political actors and not to report them.

MTV 2

In February, MTV 2 registered a total of 10 news that contained harmful narratives. Although not so drastically noticeable, in the case of MTV 2 we also note a slight drop compared to December (17) and January (11) news items.

News items that contained biased selection (7) and character attacks (2) appeared most often, and such narratives were mostly created by the political actors, while MTV 2 gave space and posted them. The interesting thing is that as many as 6 news items (60% of the total number) resulted from pseudo-events.

We single out the example from 8 February, in which Naim Bajrami from one of the two factions in the Alliance for Albanians party is quoted:

I congratulate the people of Kumanovo for boycotting and distancing themselves from this politically deviant group. (**MTV 2, 8 February, 2024**).

Through that statement, a message is conveyed to the public that allegedly no one came to the event called by Taravari, although, according to other media reports, this claim is not true. At the same time, the journalist does not question Bajrami's statement and conveys the atmosphere of the half-empty hall during their live call. Meanwhile, after the end of the live call, the delegates fill the hall and the event takes place in a full room.

The journalist must publish accurate, verified information and must not conceal essential data[18]. If the information cannot be confirmed, or it is an assumption or speculation, it should be said and posted. The accuracy of the information should be checked as much as possible.

TV Alfa

Similarly to the previous months, TV Alfa broadcast by far the most news items containing harmful narratives (40 or 44.4% of the total number of news items). If MTV 2, and especially MTV 1, shows a decreasing trend, TV Alfa shows an increasing trend (26 news items in December and 31 in January). A very large number of these harmful narratives were created by journalists/editors, who in the announcements of the central news, in a biased and non-objective way, attack the ruling coalition of SDSM and DUI, often using insults, demonization, attacks of unprofessionalism and corruption without showing arguments, etc. As many as 28 of the harmful narratives in the central news were produced by the journalist/editor, and 9 by the journalist and the political actor.

In the announcement of 12 February the news anchor says:

The main culprits for the chaos with the personal documents are none other than ex-Prime Minister Kovachevski and his Minister of Interior Spasovski. **(Alfa TV, 12 February, 2024).**

In this way, in many of the announcements, the news anchor decides to pack reality for the viewer in one sentence and takes on the role of deciding who is right and who is wrong, who is telling the truth and who is lying. This way of simplifying reality is not in line with professional standards, and the viewer deserves to hear the information from the sources and see all sides in order to make an informed decision. Also, professional journalism is not and must not be a subjective commentary on the events around us, but an objective and impartial investigation of the facts.

The most common harmful narratives in TV Alfa's news items are biased selection (32 news items), undermining of trust (19), character attacks (6) and populism (6). A characteristic case of biased selection is the informing about the regular activities of the members of the government, based on their party affiliation. For example, in the 8 February report, Fatmir Bitiqi is criticized for attending a party event together with the president of SDSM, Dimitar Kovachevski, during working hours, in the role of Deputy Prime Minister. The journalist goes one step further, i.e. in the demand for greater accountability of public officials, he conveys the answers to the journalist's questions, both from Kovachevski and Bitiqi. However, in the same context, and in the same month, the media, with a completely different tone, informs about the additional Deputy Finance Minister Elena Petrova (appointed by the opposition VMRO-DPMNE), who on 16 February during working hours held a meeting with companies from the Sveti Nikole region and sent party messages:

In the talks with the companies, we agreed on the new concept of VMRO-DPMNE for encouraging economic growth, on measures to encourage foreign investments but with fair and equal conditions for functioning with domestic companies. **(Alfa TV, 16 February, 2024)**

In this instance, the media outlet shows no will to demand accountability from public officials, as in the previous case.

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

TV Kanal 5

In February, only 4 news items with harmful narratives were registered at this TV station, which is also less than January when a total of 10 news items were recorded. In the annotated contents, multiple sources are noted that are cited precisely, and only one news item is with only one side, while all the others include three or more sides.

In the monitored news items, it is usually the political actors who created the harmful narrative, although in certain cases, such as the example we cite and the statement of the political analyst, Risto Nikovski, the journalist should have reacted and condemned such a narrative, which is based on the prejudices of ethnic basis.

As an Albanian, he thinks that such a thing is not in his domain of responsibilities, and I guess that if it was a celebration of the UCK, he would probably be there first. (**TV Kanal 5, 4 February, 2024**).

TV 21

During the monitoring in February, a total of 10 news items with harmful narratives were noted. Most of them were related to character attacks and demonization (5), as well as biased selection. In all cases, it was the political actors who created the harmful narratives, while the journalist just reported them without any intervention. There can be noted very high number of news items containing insults to political opponents. Although the journalist was not the one who created them, they should have not broadcast them in the way they were expressed. An example is the statement of the representative of the VLEN political coalition, Izet Medjiti, who calls the political opponent from DUI the 'Sicilian mafia/clan':

'We urgently ask the Sicilian Clan to desist from 'massacre' of our people.' (**TV 21, 28 February, 2024**).

Sitel TV

A total of 9 news items with 15 harmful narratives were noted on TV Sitel in February. Most of them were related to biased selection (8) and undermining of trust (5). Almost all, except for one news item, had two or more sides, and the sources in all of them were precise.

Although, in the majority of these news items, the harmful narrative is produced by political actors, there are also two cases where the harmful narrative is created by the journalist, and two where it is the product of both the journalist and the political actor.

In the section on harmful narratives, the example is pointed out in which the journalist, through the framing of the message, determines the direction in which the viewer should think or the way in which they should understand the events.

In this section, the interview in the central news, broadcast on 12 February, with Caretaker Minister Toshkovski regarding the problems with the change of personal documents is highlighted. At the beginning of the conversation, the anchor addresses *Toshkovski: You succeeded in raising the alarm yesterday that there will be a serious problem with driver's licenses, i.e., that they will not be valid from tomorrow, i.e., you managed to get legal changes made today.* With this introduction to the interview, Toshkovski is presented as a 'saviour', and a favourable tone is created. During the conversation, the screens in the background of the studio show photos in the form of a collage of documents, and one of the central elements, which is constantly seen while the caretaker minister is in the frame, is a passport cover with the old name of the country. The inscription on which you can see large letters 'Republic of Macedonia' is standing next to Toshkovski's head every time he is in the frame.

The way in which the whole topic is framed, and in which the caretaker minister is presented as a saviour in the difficult situation, is not in accordance with the standards of balance and objectivity. But there is another interesting point here that has not been covered so far, and that is the visualization of the news item or how the optical elements are used in the framing of the subject. By placing the part of the photo that says 'Republic of Macedonia' right above the head of the caretaker minister, an image is created that he is the Republic of Macedonia, that the title is related to him and the views of his party. That illusion created by the image (intentionally or unintentionally more complex) in the viewer creates or strengthens certain emotions and attitudes, although it is done in an implicit, not so noticeable way.

TV Alsat M

In February, 8 news items were noted on this television, with a total of 14 different harmful narratives. The most common is the damaging narrative associated with undermining trust (6) and claims of foreign influence (2). Half of these news items (4) were created from pseudo-events, and the majority (6 or 75%) presented only one side. In most of the analysed news items, the harmful narrative is created by the political actor, while in one case it is the journalist.

On the subject of the Law on Games of Chance, we highlight the statement of the representative of the VLEN political coalition, Izet Medjiti, who sees the situation as legal changes in favour of Serbia and Russia. In this way, Medjiti not only introduces Serbian and Russian influence into this debate, but accuses DUI as a party that works for their interests.

The authorities allow the organisation of games of chance in the underground.' The law will only close some casinos, to open the way for other casinos in the Serbian underground, which means yes to Russia, through Serbia. (**TV Alsat M, 28 February 2024**).

TV Telma

In February, 4 news items with harmful narratives were recorded in the central news of TV Telma. Most often, these were news items that featured harmful narratives related to biased selection (2) and character attacks or demonization (2). In all cases, the harmful narrative was created by the political actor, and the journalist just reported it without intervention, except in 2 cases when they reported it with condemnation or criticism.

In a report broadcast on 28 February, the Deputy Prime Minister in the Government, Fatmir Bitiqi, talks about the Law on Strategic Investments and claims that the opinions on the law were posted on the official websites on time and all deadlines were respected:

The system contains all opinions, with dates much earlier. From the State Attorney's Office from 23 January. Some 20 days before the laws are sent to the Assembly. But someone didn't want to see them.

But the journalist checked the information and concluded that not all details were reported correctly, so he concludes: *On the website of the Assembly it is stated that the draft laws on the strategic projects were adopted on 24 January, one day after the opinion of the State Attorney's office was received, but without the opinion of the Commission for the Protection of Competition. Bitiqi has other dates, claims that they were sent to the Assembly on the 12th of this month (February).* This is one of the examples of journalistic verification of the political actors' claims (**Telma TV, 28 February, 2024**).

TV Telma also had broadcast the speech of the MP of VMRO-DPMNE, Antonijo Miloshoski, from the Assembly, in which he reads the names of the candidates who will take the exam at the Academy for Judges

and Prosecutors. Regardless of the fact that some of them are in family relations with some of the SDSM and DUI party officials, as well as all other citizens, they have the right to apply for any job, even for a judge or prosecutor. In this case, the journalist should not have violated the privacy of the candidates and the part in which Miloshoski mentions the names of these candidates should have been omitted.

TV 24

During the monitoring in February, 3 news items were observed at TV 24 that contained harmful narratives. Most of them were related to character attacks and demonization. In all cases, the harmful narrative was created by political actors, and journalists reported it clearly highlighting (3) or approvingly (2). We highlight the statement of Blerim Saidiu from BESA, who mocks the Caretaker Prime Minister and political opponent Talat Djaferi:

'You, as a self-proclaimed Einstein, committed a legal offense yesterday, as you appeared in state institutions without notice.' (**TV 24, 24 February, 2024**).

2.3 SUMMARY

Key features of online media reporting in January and February 2024

The new year 2024 was launched by the online-media by 'bombarding' the public with the largest number of news items with harmful narratives created, above all, by political entities from all levels of government. In the eight days of analysis in **January**, as many as **240 were determined, and in February, in seven days of monitoring - 211** informative contents with harmful narratives. Compared to previous reports, January is the record month: December – 207, November – 215, October – 154, September – 209 news items.

In January, as many as 330 indicators were noted in these 240 news items (words, sentences, paragraphs, titles of news items, parts of interviews). In January, the focus was on claims of corruption, non-transparency/unaccountability, unprofessionalism, abuse of office without attempting to substantiate those claims as well as unverified findings (or findings that are difficult to verify) as a basis for accusing political opponents, much less labelling, ridiculing and grossly disrespecting other persons (media workers, political opponents, public office holders...), i.e. to undermining trust in institutions (114 posts) and biased selection (104 posts), and only then character attacks, demonization (55 posts). **These narratives were mostly posted by the portals Republika and Kurir, followed by A1on and Vecer.**

Contextually, and already ascertained in the previous analyses, these are news items with a genre structure mostly composed of two 'hybrid' forms, press releases (of political parties) and speeches of politicians (192 news items in total), with one source of information (213 news items), mostly accurate (209 news items), but news items dominated by one-sided information (217 news items), and covering a pseudo and/or current event (200 news items), almost without an author (name and surname or initials of the journalist or 213 news items), and visually supported by archival and current footage. These are not professional journalistic standards. In the news items, domestic politics dominates thematically (160 news items) with a focus on the formation of the caretaker government and the upcoming parliamentary and presidential elections, but also the judiciary and the Public Prosecutor's office, as well as the change of citizens' personal documents with the new name of the state in accordance with the Prespa Agreement.

The conclusion remains that **the main creators of the harmful narratives are the political actors, in this monitoring period, mostly the collective ones, (rst of all VMRO-DPMNE, and then SDSM, DUI and the Government/authorities, and from the individuals Hristijan Mickoski and Dimitar Kovachevski** as the most

represented subjects in the portals through party press releases, statements, views, interviews. Online media outlets are open to receive their stories on the news pages regardless of the rhetoric offered, and without any interventions (especially when it comes to party press releases), on the principle of copy-paste journalism, if that is journalism at all. But often, through the method of taking parts of texts, or appearances of political actors in other media and reshaping them in two or three new news items, they engage in multiplying precisely the harmful narratives. At the same time, paradoxically, the topic is domestic politics, and the information offered is two or three short paragraphs and one photo of party press releases, views, statements of certain political entities and nothing more. As a field for mutual 'equal' competition of political entities with harmful narratives, which it is not.

In February online media continued to post news items with harmful narratives at an unabated pace. The monitoring determined 211 news items with a total of 330 indicators of the presence of harmful narratives (words, formulations, sentences) focused on biased selection, character attacks and demonization of a certain (political) person and the undermining of trust in state institutions. The topic is predominantly domestic politics, with special emphasis on the pre/campaign for the presidential (scheduled for 24 April) and parliamentary elections (scheduled for 8 May), the pre-election regroupings and divisions in the Albanian political parties, the change of citizens' personal documents with the new name of the state, the economy, crime and corruption. The media and journalists were also in focus, exposed to strong attacks and criticism from politicians, and it is they who have a very significant role in the pre-election.

As generators of the spread and multiplication of the largest number of harmful narratives stand out **Kurir, Republika and A1on**, narratives that are predominantly created by political actors through the press releases of political parties and the speeches and statements of politicians. This is where the non-professionalism of the media originates, upgrades and builds with one-sided, uncritical reporting, the frequent use of precise but one source of information, but also the 'framing' of the news items as pseudo-events (from press conferences, statements, views of political entities and parties) planned to attract media attention, in which the author of the news items is usually absent.

Both individual and collective political actors participate equally in the construction of harmful narratives. This time at the top of the list is **the Government, VMRO-DPMNE and its president Hristijan Mickoski, as well as SDSM and its president Dimitar Kovachevski**, and far behind them, DUI and the smaller political parties such as Levica, as well as the parties from the opposition bloc of the Albanians. The portals usually directly download and post what is 'offered' to them, especially when it comes to the press releases of political parties, while the statements, views, statements of politicians taken from their public appearances (at press conferences, interviews, debate shows, debates in Assembly) cut and reshape them, i.e., they single out one/more issues/problems from them and post them for public reading, usually using quoting or paraphrasing their words. In that way, by making a choice, what from whom, from which political entity they will take, they directly/indirectly participate in the creation of harmful narratives.

Overall, the picture is the same, the actors are the same, the topics are the same, the headlines and texts are the same, but with a noticeable manipulative visualization, the same rhetoric has been unchanged for months, with already accepted negative words, comparisons, metaphors, labels, directed at political opponents, the institutions, the Government. It is as if there are made clear two/three most frequently exploited harmful narratives, accusations of political opponents without verified findings, labelling, ridicule, attacks and gross disrespect of other persons and undermining of trust in state institutions. But in such an 'irreconcilable' competition of political entities who is better and who is worse, the 'hostage' is not only the media but, above all, the citizens.

Key features of tv stations reporting in January and February 2024

In the reporting of the TV stations in the first two months of 2024, there is an increase in the news items with harmful narratives. Compared to the previous months (September – 76, October – 66, November 69, December 87), in January and February there are noted 96 and 90 news items with harmful narratives, or on average, 12 news items per day in January and almost 13 news items in February. Similar to previous months, in the news items with harmful narratives the main actors were usually the largest political parties in the country or their official representatives, while the areas and topics that appear most often, similarly as in the previous analyses, are related to domestic politics and mutual party accusations on topics that are current at the moment.

The analysis in January and February also noted positive things that should be singled out and highlighted. One of them is that in all the news items analysed, not once was there any speech that insults a specific group or justifies hate speech against a specific group, based on national or ethnic origin, sex, gender, sexual orientation, gender identity, belonging to a marginalized group, etc.

In countries with a variety of divisions, including ethnic and religious divisions, harmful narratives such as hate speech or insults based on otherness can further polarize, affect trust, and even cause various conflicts. The fact that political actors and the media do not use this type of harmful narratives and it is not part of their narratives, especially in the pre-election period, is a very positive and encouraging sign.

According to monitoring in January, biased selection (with 72 recorded cases) and undermining of trust in institutions (49) are the most frequent harmful narratives that we find in news shows in January. Political actors, and sometimes journalists, were mostly responsible for that. The monitored actors do so without attempting to substantiate their claims, accused of corruption, lack of accountability, unprofessionalism or abuse of office. Also, the number of news items containing insults and character attacks or demonization (21), where political opponents are called by derogatory names or are insulted, is quite high. Giving space to such narratives negatively affects the political debate in the country, which is increasingly reduced to insults instead of arguments.

The analysis showed that mostly harmful narratives are created by the political parties, while the media only allow them space in their news shows, passively broadcasting them and thus enabling them to reach as many citizens as possible.

As previous reports have repeatedly stated, the journalist's role is not only to broadcast the statements of political actors, considering to offer a balanced approach. The main duty of a journalist, as indicated by the first item of the International Federation of Journalists' Global Charter of Journalists' Ethics, is to 'respect the facts and the public's right to know the truth'.[19] In that process, as the introduction of this Charter states, the journalist's responsibility to the public is much greater than the responsibility towards the authorities or employers.

19 Global Charter of Ethics for Journalists, IFJ, accessed 18 February 2024,https://www.ifj.org/fileadmin/user_upload/Global_Charter_of_Ethics_EN.pdf

On the other hand, at one television station (TV Alfa), since the beginning of the monitoring, we see frequent cases where the journalist in the report itself or in the press release is directly responsible for the creation of the harmful narrative. At the same time, the journalist skilfully manipulates the perceptions of the viewers, placing views that are close to the audience and strengthening their already built points of view or beliefs. With the expressions 'we all know', 'we are all witnesses of', etc. an image is created that such attitudes are confirmed and generally accepted. In such cases, when the views of the journalist coincide with those of the viewer, the latter receives support for his views and does not require additional arguments, does not have a critical approach and does not require objective and balanced journalism. Such an example is the press release in the news on TV Alfa, where the journalist explains which party is doing well and which one is not, regardless of what they have to say.

The authorities are trying to compromise the local authorities from VMRO DPMNE and accuse them of unprofessional work, when in fact the situation on the ground and the facts in some of them show the opposite. (**Alfa TV, 15 January, 2024**).

In the news items with a harmful narrative, we mostly see one-sidedness, or in almost half of them (41 or 48.8%) only one side is presented, which attacks, accuses without arguments or insults, and the other side did not get a chance to respond to such a narrative. Such news items are further problematic and contribute to establishing a harmful narrative, which no one can oppose.

The narratives that we analyse in these months, created by political actors, but also by journalists, are more like fictitious stories that are common in novels or movies. In the plot of our local socio-political stories, we also see binary narratives of 'good guys' and 'bad guys', and as McLaughlin says, citizens suddenly find themselves at the centre of this political drama, in which the role of the main the saviour is the political actor.[20]

Such a drama, full of conflicts and uncertainty, with the struggle of 'bad' against 'evil', especially during an election period, attracts and excites the public much more than the essential discussion of political issues and policies[21]. The media must not allow their news and debate shows to resemble reality shows of the 'Big Brother' type, in which political actors will unapologetically insult and accuse each other without any arguments, however attractive this may be to a certain part of the audience.

Freedom of speech is everyone's right, including politicians and public figures, and the journalist should ensure their access to the media space. But this right must in no case mean a free license to lie, to make unsubstantiated accusations and malicious gossip, to insult and label, to incite division or violence against any particular group.

If political actors have already forgotten the principles of correct and decent political communication, good journalism should intervene.

In February, again the largest number of news items was recorded for TV Alfa (40 or 44.4% of the total number of news items), which is almost half of the news items we registered in February.

20 McLaughlin, Bryan, and John A. Velez. 'Imagined Politics: How Different Media Platforms Transport Citizens Into Political Narratives.' Social Science Computer Review, vol. 37, no. 1, 2019, pp. 22-37. DOI: 10.1177/0894439317746327.

21 McLaughlin, Bryan, and John A. Velez. 'Imagined Politics: How Different Media Platforms Transport Citizens Into Political Narratives.' Social Science Computer Review, vol. 37, no. 1, 2019, pp. 22-37. DOI: 10.1177/0894439317746327.

Apart from the large number of news items with harmful narratives, TV Alfa is also specific due to the fact that the largest number of harmful narratives (28) were created by journalists/editors or simultaneously by both journalists and political actors (9).

Similar to the previous reports, **in February** we established that the main political parties get a disproportionately large amount of space, at the expense of all the others. What is striking is that the political actors from SDSM, VMRO-DMNE and DUI talk about every social issue, framing it in pre-election package, and trying to score some more points with the electorate. Not infrequently, they do this through a variety of harmful narratives, which include undermining trust in institutions, biased selection of information, disinformation, insults and demonization.

This is not a new phenomenon and has been noted in almost all previous OSCE/ODIHR reports following elections and election campaigns. The report from the last parliamentary elections held in 2020 states: *Private media mostly focused on the main political parties and, to a lesser extent, on the smaller parliamentary parties, while the visibility of non-parliamentary parties was very low.*[22]

In several news items that we pointed out in this report, it was obvious that the political actor, but frequently also the journalist, deliberately did not convey the entire picture of the event and deliberately omitted information that refutes their position. Also, in several examples, it has been shown that the visualization, i.e., the integration of visual elements into the discourse, can influence the creation of a certain perception, but also harmful narratives. Here we will also add elements of framing certain topics (such as the topic of travel documents), in a manner that it becomes a topic for political bickering and scoring pre-election points.

February was marked by the statement of the president of SDSM, and former Prime Minister Dimitar Kovachevski, who, speaking at a press conference, insulted and accused the media of serving a political party, only to then, as he says, return to SDSM to give them back the freedom they sold themselves. Although it comes in a pre-election period, such a statement is not expected, especially if you take into account the international reports that evaluate the freedom of the media, and which in recent years evaluate the situation in the media sphere in this country positively and on the upward trend.

The report of the Mission to assess the situation with media freedom issued by the International Press Institute and the Association of Journalists of Macedonia[23], notes, among other things, that *recent years have seen the development of a culture of condemnation of attacks on journalists by government officials, which is widely seen as a factor helping to discourage possible future attacks.* The Report also states that at the meetings with President Stevo Pendarovski and Prime Minister Dimitar Kovachevski, it was emphasized that they are ready to discuss all challenges related to media freedom and independent journalism, and the President clearly emphasized his readiness to be *'an ally and defender of journalists in their mission to bring the truth to citizens and promote freedom of speech.'*[24]

22 Early parliamentary elections, July 15, 2020 - ODIHR Special Mission for Election Evaluation, Final Report.https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/0/a/471672.pdf. Accessed 18 March, 2024.

23 Report: Media freedom in North Macedonia: progress on glass legs. https://znm.org.mk/wp-content/uploads/2023/11/%D0%9C%D0%9A-Fact-Finding-PFM-Report-251023-web-final.pdf. Accessed 18 March, 2024.

24 Report: Media freedom in North Macedonia: progress on glass legs. https://znm.org.mk/wp-content/uploads/2023/11/%D0%9C%D0%9A-Fact-Finding-PFM-Report-251023-web-final.pdf. Accessed 18 March, 2024.

The case of the attack on the independence of the media and journalists coming from the president of the party in power reminds of some different times when such cases were common.

Verbal abuse and insults by public officials against journalists are unfortunately becoming more frequent and becoming a more worrying topic, not only in Macedonia and the region, but in the whole world. The latest Reporters Without Borders report on media freedom in the world for 2023 highlights the increasing aggressiveness of authorities in many countries against journalists both on social networks and in reality[25].

Experts list several different reasons, which are crucial for politicians and officials to dare to abuse their power and publicly attack and disparage media professionals. One of those reasons is the emergence and popularity of populist world leaders who, in recent years, with great ease trample on the freedom of the media and on the public stage settle accounts with journalists, using words that could very rarely be heard in public discourse in the past. The success of this political model, which goes unpunished, and at the same time scores points with a part of the public who approves of this narrative, is the reason why many politicians and officials in the Western Balkans region have begun to replicate and use it.

The line is crossed when heads of state throw verbal abuse at media professionals just for doing their job,' said Reporters Without Borders Secretary General Christophe Deloire. 'How can journalists function normally, if at the head of the state that should guarantee their safety, is a person who belittles, harasses and threatens them, opening the way for attacks on the media that go unpunished,' says Deloire[26].

The vice-president of the Foundation for Freedom of the Media, Kirstin McCudden, connects one of the reasons for the appearance of such verbal abuses on journalists by politicians to the culture of 'everything is allowed' on social networks, in which without any responsibility or punishment there is used hate speech, insults, slander, etc.[27] According to her, this kind of communication with voters, and the use of extremely populist discourse without limits on social networks, is now also seen in public addresses. This is also shown by our monitoring of the websites and social media profiles of political parties, where we discover a large amount of harmful narratives, insults, accusations, demonization of political opponents, but also of all those who are not part of the camp and have different views and opinions.

Unfortunately, attacks on journalists also occur in a period when trust in the media is declining, so some politicians believe that they will score political points with the public if they directly attack media professionals.

Instead of being part of a process in which they will jointly contribute to increasing citizens' trust in institutions, including trust in journalism and the media, politicians in Macedonia constantly undermine trust in these institutions through their work and publicly expressed words. In support of this thesis is the fact that in February, 40% or a total of 36 of the registered harmful narratives in the central television news were the narratives that undermine trust in institutions.

25 2023 World Press Freedom Index – journalism threatened by fake content industry, https://rsf.org/en/2023-world-press-freedom-index-journalism-threatened-fake-content-industry?year=2023&data_type=general Accessed March 18, 2024.

26 Report by Reporters Without Borders, Leaders who publicly threaten journalists, official page of UNHCR, https://webarchive.archive.unhcr.org/20230518210402/https://www.refworld.org/docid/55af45a640a.html Accessed 18 March 18, 2024.

27 Izadi, E. And Farhi, P. (2022). How it became normal for public officials to attack journalists. Washington Post. https://www.washingtonpost.com/media/2022/04/28/villanueva-los-angeles-sheriff-politicians-attack-journalists/. Accessed 18 March, 2024.

Finally, in building trust (in the media and institutions) the media themselves play a key role, which must not be just a platform on which politicians can freely spread their harmful narratives, attacks without arguments, disinformation and insults at any time, but will oppose such narratives, they will notice and condemn them.

Institute of Communication Studies

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

НЕ ВЕРУВАЈ ПРОВЕРУВАЈ! #користифакти

British Embassy Skopje

UKaid from the British people

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

Bimonthly report
(January - February 2024)

Institute of Communication Studies

ШТЕТ-НА

НЕ ВЕРУВАЈ ПРОВЕРУВАЈ! #користифакти