# DETERMINING HARMFUL POLITICAL NARRATIVES

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# Introduction

The sixth report **Determining Political Harmful Narratives (HARM-TIVE)** is a sublimation of the data from the monitoring of communication practices of the political actors in April 2024 in which harmful narratives were identified. Additionally, the report includes an analysis how these harmful narratives were addressed in the central news editions of nine television stations and 11 online media outlets.

The specificity of the April 2024 report is that the monitoring was conducted during the pre-election campaign period for the presidential and the parliamentary elections. The first round of voting for the presidential elections was on 24 April 2024 and the second on 8 May, concurrently with the parliamentary elections.

The Institute of Communication Studies (ICS) underscores that the candidates for president of the state are not subject to this monitoring.

For the purposes of this research, the websites and the Facebook pages of ten political parties that are represented by at least two MPs in the Assembly are monitored: Alliance for Albanians, Alternativa, DUI, Democratic Movement, VMRO-DMPNE, Levica, LDP, New Social Democratic Party, SDSM, Socialist Party. The profiles of the leaders of the political parties, as well as the profiles of the President of the Caretaker Government of the RNM, the deputies of the Prime Minister and the ministers in the Government are also monitored on Facebook.

The media sample includes the following 11 online media outlets and 9 television stations. Online media outlets: Lokalno; Nezavisen; Sloboden Pechat; A1on.mk; MKD.mk; Republika; Kurir; Almakos; Tetova sot; Nova TV; Vecer.mk.

Televisions: MTV 1 (public); MTV 2 (public, in Albanian language); TV Alfa (private); Kanal 5 (private); Sitel TV (private); TV 24 (private); Telma (private); Alsat M (private, in Albanian language); TV 21 (private, in Albanian language).

Similarly, as in the previous reports, the content and the scope of the harmful narratives propagated by the political actors, the intensity, the topics and the subjects towards which the negative messages are directed are empirically captured here. 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 was obtained by a combination of several methods and techniques: quantitative-qualitative analysis through monitoring - observation, monitoring and determining the presence of pre-defined indicators (14 in total), which are correlated 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 dynamics for monitoring the content of the political actors is every consecutive third and fourth day of the month, and regarding the media every fourth day of the month. More details on the methodological framework, samples and monitoring dynamics, as well as details on the entire research process are available at: HARM-TIVE.

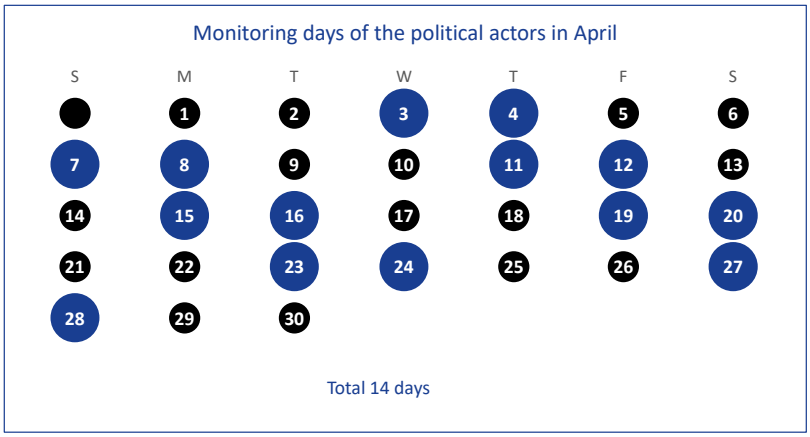
The research **Determining Political Harmful Narratives (HARM-TIVE)** has been conducted by the Institute of Communication Studies (ICS) within the framework of the project **Use Facts: Fact-Based Journalism for Raising Awareness and Countering Disinformation in the Media Space in North Macedonia**,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

Regarding the April monitoring it is characteristic that on the one hand, the trend for reduction of the harmful narratives on the television stations has continued. **There were identi(ed 55 harmful news items**, a decrease compared to March (79) and the smallest number until now. On the other hand, there has been an increase of the harmful content on the websites and the Facebook pages of the **political parties and their leaders (from 142 posts in March to 176 posts in April).** In **online media outlets** in April there were identified **261 posts containing harmful narrative, which is a record increase** in comparison to the previous months (February 211, March 224).

The three most frequent harmful narratives by the political actors, online media and TV stations, similar to previous months, are **biased selection, undermining trust in institutions, and character attacks.** It is noticeable that in online media in April, there is a mild increase in the harmful narratives **extreme patriotism and nationalism,** and **ethnocentrism** in comparison to the previous month, **while the spreading panic and fear harmful narrative has increased in the same period in all analysed groups.**

# 1. Monitoring of the communication practices and narratives of the political actors through their web sites and Facebook profiles

**Subject of monitoring:** Websites of political parties and Facebook profiles of political actors
**Month:** April 2024[1]




The monitoring in April 2024 showed that the communication of the political parties and their leaders was focused on the ongoing campaigns for the presidential and parliamentary elections that took place simultaneously, with the first round of voting for the president of the state taking place on 24 April. During this period, political actors frequently communicated with citizens through direct meetings, town hall meetings and rallies. The political parties were the more vocal actors in both campaigns, with the rhetoric mostly focused on domestic politics, and the main topics discussed were the fight against corruption and crime, national interests, responsible work, European integration and care for citizens. Politicians promoted their political offer as better than that of political opponents, frequently using populist narratives, criticizing and denigrating opponents, as well as nationalism and ethnocentrism. A total of **176 posts with a harmful narrative were** recorded on the websites and Facebook pages of political parties and their leaders in April, which is an increase of 34 posts compared to the previous month. Of these, 69 were published only on Facebook, 62 were published only on websites and 45 were published on both communication channels. Hence, it can be concluded that the trend of more frequent harmful communication through Facebook compared to websites and repetition of the same posts on both channels continued. However, unlike March (when 36 harmful posts were recorded), in April there is an increase in the dynamics of harmful narratives on websites.

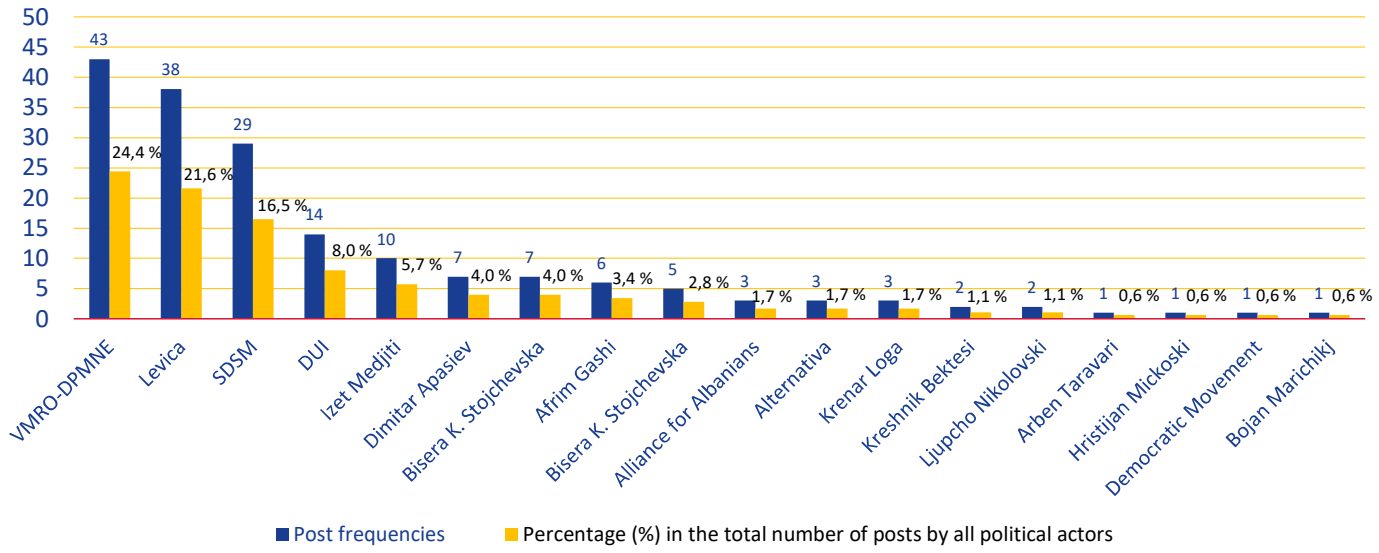
1 The dynamics for monitoring the content of political actors is 'every consecutive third and fourth day of the month'

**VMRO-DPMNE**, continues as in the previous months to be the political party with the most identified harmful narratives (43 posts or 24.4 percent of the total number of posts with harmful narratives by all political actors), which is the same number of harmful posts as in March. Unlike the previous months, **Levica** in this round of monitoring takes the second place with **38 posts** with harmful narratives (21.6 percent). SDSM, which in the past months of monitoring was regularly ranked second, in April was in third place with **29 posts** with harmful narratives or 16.5 percent of the total number of harmful posts by all political actors. The transition of Levica from third to second place is generally due to the reinforcement of pre-election rhetoric with attacks on all major parties. Actually, one of their main promises in the campaign was that 'with 10 MPs', they will be the dam for the 'corrupt' decisions of the other major parties in the Assembly. On the other hand, with SDSM the novelty in April are harmful narratives from three party members who are officials in the Caretaker Government.

With **DUI,** the increase in harmful posts continued during April (14) and again, as in the previous month, there was an increase in harmful narratives on the Facebook pages of DUI officials in the Caretaker Government. Among the opposition parties of ethnic Albanians in the country, united in the pre-election coalition Vredi (Alb. Vlen) whose presidential candidate was Arben Taravari, there were more posts with harmful narratives on the Facebook pages of the leaders of the parties in the coalition and a slight decrease in posts with harmful narratives on the websites of Alternativa and Democratic Movement. As in previous months, the monitoring for April showed no posts with harmful narratives on the website and Facebook pages of the LDP, New Social Democratic Party and Socialist Party, as well as on the pages of their leaders.

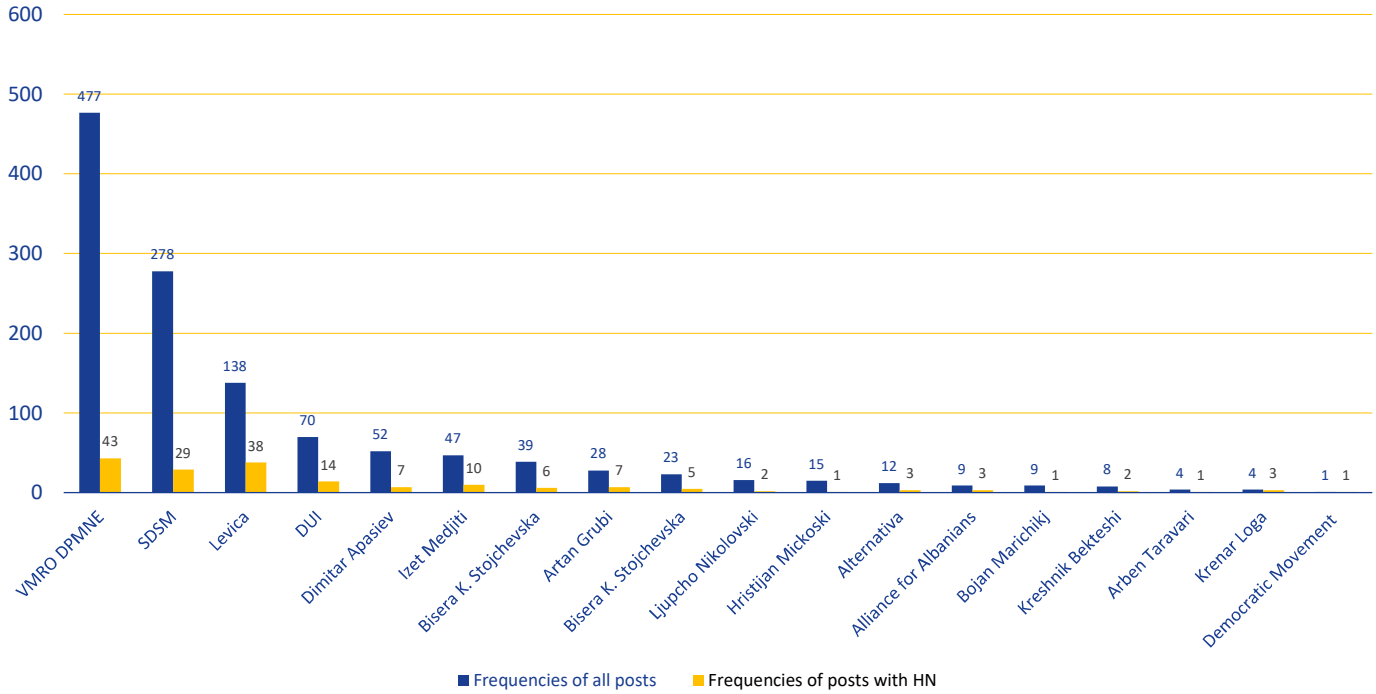
Equally, no harmful narratives were identified by the leaders of SDSM Dimitar Kovachevski and DUI Ali Ahmeti and one harmful post was noted by the leader of VMRO-DPMNE, Hristijan Mickoski. In April with ten posts among the party leaders, the leader of the Democratic Movement and part of the Vredi coalition Izet Medjiti is on the top of the list. He is followed with seven posts by Dimitar Apasiev from Levica, whereas the leader of Alternativa, Afrim Gashi has six posts containing harmful narrative.

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




Additionally, if we consider the total number of posts by political parties, VMRO-DPMNE, SDSM, and DUI show almost the same percentage of harmfulness, while Levica shows an increase in the percentage of harmfulness. Therefore, it can be concluded that Levica has not only increased the amount of communication in the run-up to the elections, but the harmfulness in their communication has also increased.

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




Days with the largest number of identified harmful narratives among political parties are 7 April (the arrest of journalist Furkan Saliu), 8 April (when the topic of health dominated on the eve of International Day of Healthcare and the announced protest of healthcare workers, as well as the posts regarding the burned billboard with a message by presidential candidate Taravari) and 11 April (when the Freedom House report for 2023 was published, but there were also several cross-party accusations by SDSM and VMRO-DPMNE).

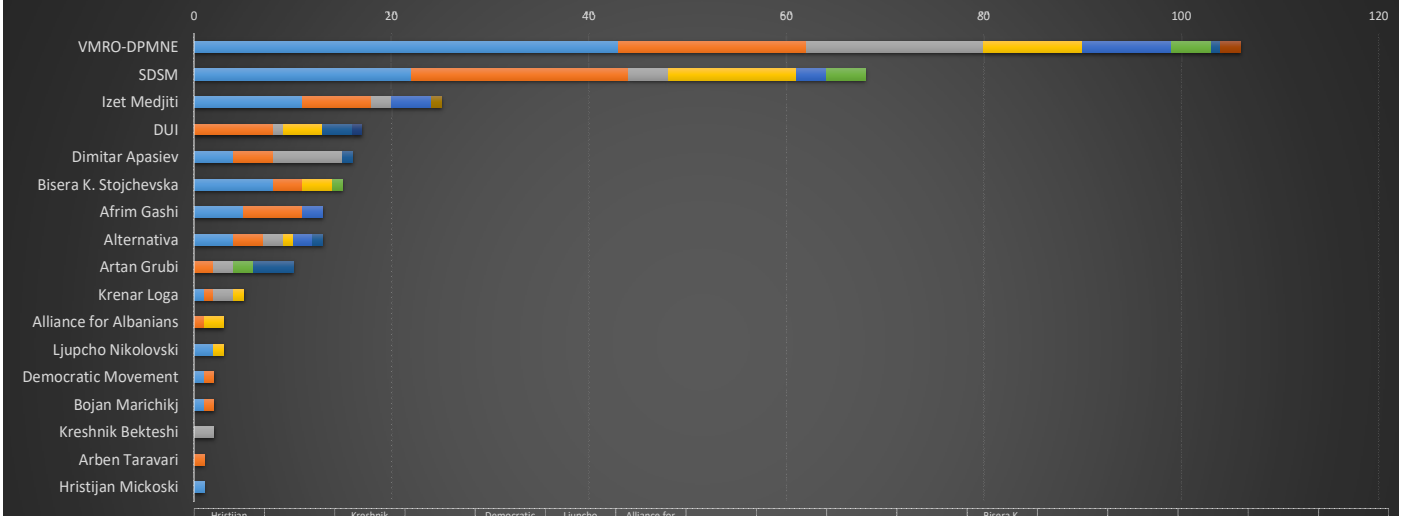
The most common type of posts with harmful narratives among political parties remains press releases. This month, the number of press conferences has decreased, but the number of harmful speeches has increased significantly, which is due to intensified campaign field activities, town hall meetings, and rallies, as well as an increased number of reactions as a result of frequent attacks towards political opponents. Similar to the previous month, there is a significant number of harmful posts that are published in the form of video materials - 'reels' as well as edited video clips that are intended to criticize political opponents.

**The most common theme** for which harmful narratives have been identified **is domestic politics** (148 out of 176 posts or 84.1 percent), while crime and corruption are represented by about four percent, economy and foreign policy are represented by about two percent, and healthcare and other topics have one percent prevalence. It is characteristic that domestic politics continuously appears as the main topic in the creation and dissemination of harmful narratives during all months of monitoring.

When it comes to the types of harmful narratives, political parties in April, as before, frequently made biased selection of information (which could mislead the public to wrong conclusions) and developed harmful narratives to undermine trust in institutions by making unsubstantiated claims of corruption and abuse of office. The third most commonly identified harmful narrative is the demonization of political opponents through severe attacks and labelling. Harmful narratives for inciting socio-political divisions were noted almost equally often, but compared to March, a reduced number of harmful populist narratives can be highlighted. In terms of populism, Levica stands out whereas in its rhetoric there is noted an element of inter-ethnic intolerance, and in two cases it turns into hate speech. This month there is an increasing number of harmful narratives that spread panic, fear and insecurity, mostly from

Levica, SDSM and VMRO-DPMNE. Harmful narratives about negative foreign influences are observed with less intensity than before, but this time two harmful narratives about conspiracy theories were also noted with VMRO-DPMNE. Ethnocentrism and nationalism can be identified in DUI, which is mostly aimed at VMRO-DPMNE and their leader Hristijan Mickoski, as well as through the promotion of their own party as the only representative of Albanians in Macedonia. The nationalism of Izet Medjiti, i.e. the Vredi coalition, is represented through the messages they send to DUI in which they promote themselves as the only option that rightly cares for the Albanians in Macedonia, which promotes Albanian interests, instead of the ruling DUI.

**Table 3. Prevalence of harmful narratives in the posts of political actors (April 2024)**




| | Hristijan Mickoski | Arben Taravari | Kreshnik Bekteshi | Bojan Marichikj | Democratic Movement | Ljupcho Nikolovski | Alliance for Albanians | Krenar Loga | Artan Grubi | Alternativa | Afrim Gashi | Bisera K. Stojchevska | Dimitar Apasiev | DUI | Izet Medjiti | SDSM | VMRO-DPMNE |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Biased selection | 1 | | | 1 | 1 | 2 | | 1 | | 4 | 5 | 8 | 4 | | 11 | 22 | 43 |
| Undermining trust | | 1 | | 1 | 1 | | 1 | 1 | 2 | 3 | 6 | 3 | 4 | 8 | 7 | 22 | 19 |
| Character attacks, demonization | | | 2 | | | | | 2 | 2 | 2 | | | 7 | 1 | 2 | 4 | 18 |
| Fomenting divisions | | | | | | 1 | 2 | 1 | | 1 | | 3 | | 4 | | 13 | 10 |
| Populism | | | | | | | | | | 2 | 2 | | | | 4 | 3 | 9 |
| Spreading panic, fear and uncertainty | | | | | | | | | 2 | | | 1 | | | | 4 | 4 |
| Foreign influence | | | | | | | | | 4 | 1 | | | 1 | 3 | | | 1 |
| Conspiracy theories | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | 2 |
| Hate speech | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Extreme patriotism | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | 1 | | |
| Ethnocentrism | | | | | | | | | | | | | | 1 | | | |

## 1.1 Communication practices of political parties and their leaders

Political parties in Macedonia in the pre-election period, without exception, used rhetoric of self-promotion when communicating with the public. It is dominated by platitudes that they are the saviours of the Macedonians, or, the Albanians, and that they are the genuine protectors of the national interests of one or the other nation. Arguments follow about who is 'good' and who is 'evil', who is pro-European integration, who is close to foreign influences and the cherry on top is the debate over the question of who is more honourable, that is, who is in favour of a real fight against corruption.

## Social Democratic Union of Macedonia - SDSM

During the pre-election period, the Social Democratic Union of Macedonia - SDSM largely maintained the rhetoric that they are the option that offers citizens prosperity, stability and membership in the European Union. They mostly communicate about topics from domestic politics, European integration, and the accusations are mainly aimed at VMRO-DPMNE and allegations of fake polls commissioned by this party.

In their public appearances, the president of SDSM, Dimitar Kovachevski, as well as senior officials of the party communicate that their political party has an offer for the citizens, that they have ideas, vision, concrete projects, successful negotiations with the EU and a better standard of living for the citizens. Their main political opponent, towards whom the harmful narratives are most often directed, remains VMRO-DPMNE, the party's leader Hristijan Mickoski and the presidential candidate Gordana Siljanovska-Davkova. Other frequently mentioned actors are SDSM (in all 30 posts), VMRO-DPMNE (in 26 out of 30 posts), Stevo Pendarovski (in 10 out of 30 posts), EU (in 11 out of 30 posts). SDSM, the party and the leader continue to portray themselves as oriented towards the EU (16 posts), defenders of the people (2 posts), accountable (1 post), defenders of national identity and justice, as well as saviours of the people (one post each). They continue to label VMRO-DPMNE as 'DPMNE' (8 times), and less frequently with the pejorative name 'VMRO-MVRO' (2 times). No other labels are used for the leader of VMRO-DPMNE and for their candidate for president.

From a certain party activity or topic, several media products are designed in order to maintain relevance in the public. For example, when holding party rallies or certain other election activity, there are live broadcasts, press releases, videos and speeches, photographs, news articles on the website, posts on social networks with texts, short videos (reels). For certain topics that the party considers to be of greater importance, various communication activities are carried out, such as a press conference of a high-ranking party official, a statement or the distribution of media materials in order to keep the topic current for several days.

The pillar of SDSM's communication messages during the election period was that they are the pro-European option for the state, and the coalition they led was 'Coalition for the European Future' while their main political opponent VMRO-DPMNE is against building good neighbourly relations and continuing Macedonia's path to the EU. By using a populist narrative, an attempt is made to heat up the emotions of the electorate, by using a method of biased selection, i.e. selecting elements that are known as bad decisions or scandals from the past rule of VMRO-DPMNE in order to show that it is a party that cannot bring stability and prosperity to Macedonia. SDSM's rhetoric that VMRO-DPMNE is the option that would return society back to the VMRO-DPMNE regime, which is often called the 'regime' or the 'regime past', alluding to VMRO-DPMNE's rule until 2016, is often noticed. It was also often mentioned that 'VMRO-DPMNE cannot be changed', that it is 'the same party/regime of Nikola Gruevski', which is one of the key messages in the campaign.

In the communication of SDSM in the pre-election period, less frequent use of the constitutional name of the state 'Republic of North Macedonia' or the abbreviated version 'North Macedonia' is noted, while only the term 'Macedonia' was used more frequently in the public appearances of party officials.

SDSM called on the electorate to mobilize and unite the progressive forces, that there is no going back, that SDSM offers projects and a good neighbourly policy. In an address by SDSM leader Dimitar Kovachevski published on 28 April on the website citizens are urged *not to allow the deceptors from the White Palace of VMRO to manipulate that they governed better*, citing cases that were known to the public for scandalous spending during the time of VMRO-DPMNE, such as the 'Skopje 2014' project, the restriction of media freedoms and control over public administration and police actions during student protests. Such a discourse, in addition to containing attacks on the political opponent, can encourage insecurity and spreading panic among citizens about the future that comes with a certain party in power.

In another address by SDSM leader Kovachevski published on 27 April it is claimed that *if VMRO-DPMNE comes to power, it will end our EU prospects, it will also shut down the independent media and put an end to the independent judiciary, it will put an end to the democratic state in which today everyone can freely express their opinion*... which encourages divisions, but also spreads fear and uncertainty among citizens about their future. It is said about the political opponent (VMRO-DPMNE) *Think about how the party led the state when it had the opportunity to be in power. Remember who ruled the country and who ruled as a monarch and saw the country as their personal property. Who made difficult but positive and rightful decisions for our future, and who stole from the future for personal interest and here we see today - for nothing but their own, personal enrichment... The fire that these days we see being set by VMRO - DPMNE and DUI following the old recipe of 2016 can very easily ignite tensions that we have successfully overcome and left in the past. Something we have been able to advance in the last 7 years to a much higher level than it was before and we see it at every step*. With such rhetoric, an attempt is made to undermine the trust in the political opponent that they are not a credible option that can govern the state and its resources well, and with the frequent reminder of the former rule of VMRO-DPMNE, which was evaluated as negative by international reports, an attempt is being made to motivate the electorate not to give their trust to the opposition.

This kind of discourse is also noted in a statement by a senior party official, press release published on 16 April regarding the presidential elections, stating that *the election on 24 April is either hope and a European future with Pendarovski, or hopelessness and going back with Siljanovska.* In this way, the candidate for president who was supported by VMRO-DPMNE is labelled as an extension of the 'White Palace', and that *we do not need a return to isolation and uncertainty, but progress and membership in the EU. Citizens are fed up with divisions and discord. They want and deserve to live in a European Macedonia, with a European standard of living.*

On a similar line is the example (press release published on 19 April) that *nothing has changed in DPMNE. The DPMNE and Siljanovska rallies have the same choreography from the time when the Hunza people visited us and they were welcomed at the Skopje airport, and the Macedonian citizens were presented as their great heirs. It is the same time of the robbery from Skopje 2014 and the historical engineering of DPMNE... With DPMNE, only a return to isolation and regime, to the dark past of undemocratic processes and far from the EU is possible.*

Given that there are a multitude of statements of this type published on the website, as well as on social media in various formats, it can be noted that it is a planned communication strategy that the party is promoting in the election campaign. The goal is to communicate, through different types of posts, one main pivot message that SDSM is the option that provides national unity in its offer for both the presidential and parliamentary elections, while their political opponent is the opposite of this. In that direction, examples are used that remind the public of the past period of VMRO-DPMNE rule, which was considered unfavourable, and even mentions (press release of 19 April ) former VMRO-DPMNE leader Nikola Gruevski as 'Mickoski's mentor'.

In this manner, the division of 'us-good' and 'them-bad' is encouraged, and fear and insecurity is stimulated with citizens about VMRO-DPMNE's potential Government of the state in the future. Contrary to this, SDSM presents its party as a better option for citizens, which offers national unity, a European future and changes for the better in society.

When the political parties make their offer to the citizens in the elections and invite them to give them their trust, it is necessary that they explain their offer. Using general platitudes like 'European future', 'better standard' without breaking down what they actually mean, in terms of measures, projects, laws, i.e. specific steps that a certain political party plans to take if it forms a Government and governs the country, can be treated only as populist narratives that appeal to the voter's ear.

One of the topics that was addressed through various posts and public appearances is the case of the documents published by the journalist Furkan Saliu, which were claimed to be a copy of the VMRO-DPMNE operational plan for the preparation and conduct of the elections. The documents list 'obligations' for various party officials and leading figures of VMRO-DPMNE for the preparation of the elections. Among the listed activities in the documents are 'providing lists of ill and fragile persons', 'voters' list', 'list of people employed in the public administration in the period 2006-2016', 'creation of 'hubs' for the production of fake news', as well as 'conducting polls' by an institute that will show a significantly higher rating of the opposition party, and then to 'hold debates on the public broadcasting service in which there will be three opposition and a pro-Government analyst' in which the work of VMRO-DPMNE will be promoted.

In the posts by SDSM, it is noted that less space is given to presenting the allegations contained in the documents themselves, i.e. stating what exactly they consider to be the abuse of state resources for the electoral process, but rather contains more labelling and attacks on the political opponent.

In a post by Deputy Prime Minister Bojan Marichikj from 3 April it is said that *this is a scandal of Gruevistic proportions*, that *the fake polls are tailored in the cellars of the White Palace.* It is also claimed that *VMRO-DPMNE is the same old, authoritarian, manipulative with rude, criminal and dictatorial manners and attempts to establish control over public opinion and the freedom of citizens for independent choice in the upcoming elections*. In addition to the labelling, VMRO-DPMNE leader Mickoski is also attacked, in order to equal him with the former leader of VMRO-DPMNE Nikola Gruevski that *the propaganda and disinformation, which Nikola Gruevski used as tools, are now accepted and implemented by Hristijan Mickoski*. While the party remains a *servant to the abuses of the media, the spread of fake news and ordered fake polls, and with that they want to make up for the serious flaws in their election program and the lack of a plan for the country's European future. Citizens will deliver punishment.*

Similar rhetoric can be seen in the post on the Facebook page from 3 April of the minister and high party official of the SDSM Bisera Kostadinovska-Stojchevska who claims that the information presented to the public proves that VMRO-DPMNE is involved in the production of fake polls and fake news. It addresses VMRO-DPMNE in a negative tone by publishing a black-and-white image of the party's emblem with the words 'Headquarters for fake news and fake polls' written on it. The text claims that the allegations made public are *a confirmation that VMRO DPMNE has a whole operating system for the distribution and publication of fake polls and fake news, which seriously jeopardizes the electoral process.* She also urges citizens *not to believe anything that comes out of the White House because the propaganda of VMRO-DPMNE is a reminder of the dark past in which there is no European future and freedom for citizens*.

The post can be categorized as a harmful narrative because it is about allegations that have been made public, and the credibility has not been confirmed by the competent institutions. Although SDSM presented the documents publicly, there was neither an investigation by the Public Prosecutor's Office following the public allegations, nor is it known to the public that SDSM submitted them as a case to the Prosecutor's Office. It also uses a narrative that denigrates a particular group and creates a divide between 'us-good' and 'you-bad'. With the claim that citizens should not trust the 'White Palace' and that *the propaganda of VMRO-DPMNE is a reminder of the dark past in which there is no European future and freedom for citizens*, it is a populist narrative that promotes one's own ideology as better than that of the political opponent.

The use of such public discourse contributes to the reinforcement of divisions in society and the normalization of the low level of political communication, something which holders of public offices and candidates for public offices should pay special attention to. When allegations and suspicions are made about misuse of state resources for party purposes, especially when serious accusations are made that a certain political party aims to corrupt the electoral process, it is necessary to state what the elements of abuse are, then call the competent institutions to take action and deliver the documents that are claimed to show the abuse to law enforcement, i.e. the Public Prosecutor's Office in order to demonstrate the

credibility of the claims and the seriousness of the case to investigate and obtain a legal resolution with a court process and sanctions. Otherwise, if only general statements are made that a particular entity engages in abuse, it can be treated as a populist narrative, unverified allegations aimed at attacking a political opponent and gaining voter support.

Populist discourse is also noted in the 7 April press release by the Minister of Culture Bisera Kostadinovska-Stojchevska in condemning the arrest of the journalist Furkan Saliu, who was detained by the police. In her post, in addition to condemning the arrest of the journalist as an act of limiting media freedoms, Kostadinovska-Stojchevska links the arrest of the journalist to the fact that he published documents showing that VMRO-DPMNE planned to corrupt the election process and that *this is confirmation that the party continues with the same methods of arresting journalists and lynching the media.*

With such a narrative, the party is equated with the state, that is, the Ministry of Interior, where the minister is at the proposal of VMRO-DPMNE in the Caretaker Government, who is labelled as working for the party's interest, because the arrest of the journalist is connected with the publication of documents that showed a plan for an alleged abuse by VMRO-DPMNE. When presenting information about allegations of improper operation, it is necessary to present substantiation of those allegations. Otherwise, public officials put themselves at risk of serving populist narratives and using statements that only harm public discourse.

Labelling and attacking the political opponent is also noted in the communication of messages on the occasion of the anniversary from 27 April, 2017 and the storming of the Assembly. The main communication message sent by the posts is to remember the violent attack and not to repeat it. There have been posts on the party's website and social media, as well as by senior party officials. Examples include posts such as 'The participants of 27 April are thugs, not defenders of the Constitution as Siljanovska and Mickoski say','27 April is a bloody reminder what the regime brings, let's not let it happen again' 'Marichikj: 27 April is a strong reason to stand up against the onslaught of the old-new regime', 'Kovachevski: Never again regime, we did not give up on 27 April, we will not give up on 8 May either', 'Mihailoski: We did not give in.' We stood firm against it, guarding our democracy and our peace from the blindness of hatred and the spectre of civil war', 'We must never forget and never let 27 April happen again', 'Let's not allow ourselves to face scenarios that we have already seen in the past in our country', '27 April is a strong reason to stand up against the onslaught of the old-new regime'.

In addition to the critical discourse condemning the act of storming the Assembly, the VMRO-DPMNE party is attacked in the posts. In a press release on the SDSM website on 27 April it is said that *27 April is a bloody reminder of the DPMNE regime that we must not allow to be repeated, that the thugs also had support from Hristijan Mickoski, who was in front of the Macedonian Assembly that day. Instead of an apology and condemnation, Mickoski is standing up for the convicted criminals of Bloody Thursday.* At the same time, it is pointed out that nothing has changed in 'DPMNE' and that *it is the same party that wants to trample on freedom, on democracy, to reckon with dissenters, to spread hatred and division among citizens.* In this manner, the aim is to make a difference and division between 'us-good' and 'them-bad', while encouraging fear, insecurity and panic among citizens from the return to power of persons, during whose time storming of the Assembly took place and the governing was assessed as a period of high profile corruption and restriction of media and human freedoms according to relevant international reports.

Similar statement is noted by Minister Bisera Kostadinovska-Stojchevska from 28 April in the capacity of candidate for MP, with condemnation of the storming on 27 April in which she states that *blood flowed in the Assembly, and they talk about freedom and democracy*. And she adds that SDSM is different from VMRO-DPMNE because it does not avoid facing problems and responsibility, *in the biggest economic and energy crisis VMRO-DPMNE blocked the Macedonian Assembly, blackmailed, demanded early elections, only for power and personal interests. We go around the country and see how those who voted for them are no longer allowed to talk to us. Is this the kind of Macedonia we want? Trapped again, silenced again, scared again. This is the same-old, bad VMRO DPMNE.*

The statement is another example of SDSM's communication in which the political opponent is labelled, allegations are made of their irresponsible work, it is claimed that they blocked solutions in the interest of the citizens, while promoting their own political option, the party, as better than the political opponent, which works better for the interests of the citizens and makes a division between 'us-good' and 'them-bad'.

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

DUI founded its campaign for the presidential and parliamentary elections on the thesis 'Yes for Europe, no for Russia', promoting itself as the bearer of the European idea in Macedonia. Before the elections DUI established a coalition with several smaller political parties under the name 'European Front.' In the public appearances of DUI leader Ali Ahmeti (press release of 19 April), as well as other high officials from the party, the European Front is promoted as 'an alliance of progressive forces' that 'guarantees sustainability, stability, equality and integration.'

In addition to the message 'Yes for Europe, no for Russia', the second key communication message of DUI is that it presents itself as an option that protects the interests of Albanians in Macedonia. The party is critical of the Albanian opposition, which it attacks as insufficiently worried about the interests of Albanians and does not represent the majority of Albanians in the country. In doing so, they make accusations that the Albanian opposition serves malign foreign influence, i.e. Russian influence, thereby indicating that they are not advocates for the interests of Albanians, and among their main targets is Izet Medjiti, who is the main opponent and informal leader of the Vredi coalition.

In addition to the Albanian opposition as the main political opponent of DUI, in the election campaign there was also a sharpened rhetoric towards VMRO-DPMNE, more precisely towards its leader Hristijan Mickoski, especially after his frequent statements that VMRO-DPMNE will not enter into a coalition with DUI, that DUI is a corrupt party and that it is time for it to go into opposition.

In one of the 7 April DUI press releases it is said that Vredi are *at the service of the pro-Russian agenda, it continues its efforts to divide Albanians through fake news and slander, always at the service of VMRO and Levica; Izet Medjiti and other derivatives of Moscow want at any cost to present Albanians as a criminal and corrupting factor in North Macedonia; Medjiti and several Albanian MPs aligned with the Russian agenda did not vote for the Law to shut down gambling.*

In another post, a press release from 12 April, the leader of Vredi Izet Medjiti is blamed, that *corruption has a name, Izet Medjiti and the municipality of Chair.* At the same time, they inform *Medjiti and other derivatives of Moscow that the DUI and the European Front are in coalition only with the citizens.* It is also claimed that the municipality of Chair has been turned into the illegal property of two or three people who, *fearing the next loss, are hiding behind the anti-European and pro-Russian policies of VMRO-DPMNE.*

Accusations that they work for Russian interests are also present in DUI's statements aimed at VMRO-DPMNE and Mickoski. In one of the DUI statements from 16 April it is claimed that *Mr. Ali Ahmeti has not lost a single election and so it shall be until Mickoski joins the pensioners in both SDSM and VMRO, who at one time wanted to destroy DUI and the leader of the Albanians, Mr. Ali Ahmeti... the citizens on 24 April and 8 May will seal the victory of DUI and the European Front, showing their place once again to Mickoski, VMRO, as well as to the Albanian opposition already aligned with the Kremlin centres.*

In another DUI press release from 19 April it is said that *VMRO and Mickoski are officially declaring a coalition with Apasiev's Levica party and Dimitrievski's ZNAM, two parties closely connected to Moscow and various pro-Russian circles, and known for their anti-Albanian positions.*

While in a press release from 20 April aimed at VMRO-DPMNE leader Hristijan Mickoski, there is accusation that *Mickoski and VMRO are publicly demanding a Macedonia without Albanians. He even openly calls on all Macedonians to unite against Ali Ahmeti and DUI. At the rally in Kratovo, Mickoski asked for the unification of all Macedonians so that the Albanians do not get a single MP in the 3rd constituency... We call on the Albanian opposition to come to their senses and not become a tool of the Russian agenda proclaimed by VMRO.*

The claim that 'Mickoski and VMRO-DPMNE want a Macedonia without Albanians' is a reach for nationalism, and with the demand that the Albanian opposition come to its senses, an attempt is made to divide between 'us-good' and 'you-bad', as well as encourage a feeling of insecurity and fear among citizens.

A significant proportion of statements with harmful narratives that come from higher DUI officials belong to Artan Grubi, who often publishes harmful rhetoric on his Facebook-profile. His communication often contains political discourse full of irony, cynicism, but also ridicule of political opponents, i.e. the leaders and supporters of the Vredi coalition. Grubi's public discourse is not always identical to the discourse promoted by DUI and the European Front, but it is Grubi's individual approach to hard propaganda in his own way, which increases political polarization among the Albanian community. The party's propaganda is strengthened by an ethnocentric narrative, which is also drawn from the Albanian ethno-national folklore.

In a post from 20 April in which he calls for the attendance of the DUI rally on 21 April, the Albanian opposition is accused of not reacting to the statements of Mickoski, VMRO-DPMNE and Levica because *they don't dare because they told them: Shut up, I don't want to hear your voice! Macedonia only to the Macedonians, to VMRO and Levica, it might be WORTH*[2] *for Vredi, but it does not cross the line of the Front, the front for equality, the front for integration, the European front. Go out to the square, take everyone you know with you, invite everyone, let the song of Shkurte and Ilir resound*[3] *together with our voices from the centre of Skopje in the ears of those who do not want to hear it together with their mercenaries in the 'Albanian' opposition. Sunday, 21 April 20:00 hrs., Macedonia Square, Skopje.*

Such rhetoric aims to encourage strong emotional feelings that glorify the Albanian ethnicity, and promote DUI as a defender of the interests of the Albanians, as a greater fighter for the rights and status of the Albanians in Macedonia than the Albanian opposition, which it labels together with VMRO-DPMNE. Emphasizing that there is a potential from Russia for malign influence in the country, DUI is promoted as the bearer of the

2 WORTH is used as a word pun because the acronym of the coalition of the Albanian opposition parties VLEN (in Albanian) means 'worth' and is spelled Vredi in Macedonian language [translator's note].

3 Ilir Shaqiri is a singer of patriotic songs from Kosovo. The song 'Mora fjalë (Alb.)/ 'I got words' (Eng.) is a very popular Albanian song in Macedonia, Kosovo, Albania and is sung at many celebrations, public holidays and is like a second anthem for Albanians, and is especially heard when Albania plays football.

European idea. Such populist discourse, which aims to promote DUI as a political option, simultaneously carries the risk of encouraging further ethnic division between Macedonians and Albanians, but also within the Albanian community itself through harsh labelling and vilification of political opponents.

In a video published on the Facebook profile of Artan Grubi from 27 April it is said that *Russia has no place in our homes, in our quarters, in our neighbourhoods, in our country, but not even in our region and continent. We need a strong European Front to face the installations of pro-Russian policies in our country to ensure our Euro-American affiliation.* VOTE 4 🗣! NO Russia, YES Europe! This is another of the numerous examples with which DUI is promoted as the European option for the country, in contrast to other political actors, who, if they came to power, would turn the country towards Russia, encouraging division and distinction between DUI as the good option and the rest as an unfavourable option for citizens.

The labelling of VMRO-DPMNE as a pro-Russian option in the country is also present in a press release from 22 April for the DUI rally, in which it is said that *the European Front dealt a strong blow to Mickoski, his partners, exponents of Russian propaganda, who were told that they cannot split the people oriented towards the horizon of Europe!*

In connection with the announcement of poll results for the elections in a post from 19 April by Artan Grubi it is said: *I don't want to hear from you! Fake polls from your usurped offices do not even convince your members, let alone the citizens who are determined for the European Front! The European holiday on Thursday, the day after the elections, will be the best poll for the great victory of European citizens who oppose the servants of the pro-Russian, anti-Albanian VMRO-Levica. VOTE NO Russia, YES Europe!*

Posts of this type can be found at almost every event that DUI has as part of the campaign, whether it is a rally, town hall meeting with citizens, the opening of an election headquarters or another public event. DUI in its posts promotes itself as the party that is a pro-European option against its political opponents who without substantiated findings are accused of working for Russian interests, as well as that they are being corrupt, while the rhetoric of party officials contains ethnocentric and nationalist elements. Holders of public offices and persons who are candidates for public offices and aim to lead the state need to pay special attention to the discourse they use in their communication to the public. Inflammatory speech, ethnocentrism and nationalistic statements that can be politically useful for mobilizing the electorate can simultaneously encourage further divisions in society and create intolerance between communities. Politicians have a responsibility to work to reduce, not increase, tensions.

## Alliance for Albanians, led by Ziadin Sela

With the divisions in the political party Alliance for Albanians into a wing led by Ziadin Sela and a wing led by Arben Taravari, Sela's wing moved into a coalition with DUI, that is, with the European Front. Their statements are mostly critically directed at the parties of the opposition bloc of the Albanians. The noted posts are related to the party activities of the European Front and the statements are in line with the DUI party officials. In the posts on the occasion of the anniversary of 27 April 2017, Ziadin Sela's bravery when the storming of the Assembly took place is highlighted, and the posts are accompanied by a photo and video.

One example is when Alliance for Albanians - Sela's wing is attacking the parties from the Albanian opposition that *they renounced the EU membership only to satisfy Mickoski who confirmed the shame of the Albanian opposition which is ready to make any compromise with the fate of the citizens* and also renounced *the condition for constitutional amendments, which also means the renouncement of the membership of the country in the European Union. They are ready to return the state to isolation only to be the servants of VMRO and Mickoski and thereby subjugate the Albanians, Turks, Roma, Bosniaks.*

Krenar Loga communicates affirmatively about his party and the European Front coalition and is critical towards the Vredi coalition. On his official Facebook profile as Minister of Justice, content related to his party, rather than his work as a minister, is mostly published. In the posts, one senses the criticism he has towards the Albanian opposition, and the Eurocentric narrative dominates, that is, the path to the EU for the country's future. He uses harmful narratives when it comes to events, topics or questions of a pre-election nature, that is, denigrating the Albanian opposition with a tendency to portray it as anti-European and close to VMRO-DPMNE, and therefore pro-Russian, because monitoring showed that in the last month, apart from the parties Levica, Macedonian Concept and United Macedonia, VMRO DPMNE has also been criticized for pro-Russian orientation.

In a press release on the occasion of the anniversary of 27 April, Krenar Loga published a text with photos of party officials and activists of the Alliance for Albanians on his Facebook profile. The posts highlight the key role of Sela on the occasion of the events from 27 April, when the Alliance for Albanians was part of the majority for the election of the President of the Assembly, i.e. interpreted in the post as *the president of the Alliance for Albanians, Ziadin Sela, turned North Macedonia towards the EU and NATO.* The text says that *the mob that carried out the violent invasion was denying the rights of Albanians... violently protesting with nationalist, Albanophobic and anti-European content,* and that *they had orders to lynch to death the bravest MP, Ziadin Sela. But the invincible Ziadin Sela finally turned North Macedonia, which was under Russian influence, towards the European path.* The photos show the leader of the Alliance for Albanians Ziadin Sela and other party officials carrying banners with slogans: 'First Albanian President!', 'First Albanian Prime Minister', 'First Albanian President of the Assembly', 'Law on the Use of Languages', 'Kosovo in the Constitution'.

The post contains nationalist rhetoric, which is used to promote one's own party, and is framed in a context that is important for the whole society. The violent act of 27 April was critical for all citizens and institutions in society, and was not only directed against the Albanian community. The case had a court resolution, and the allegations contained in the post were not proven. In this case, the political actor uses an event of wider social significance to promote his political party and his ideology, that is, his own party goals. Additionally, with the slogans on the banners, there is a risk of encouraging further division between the communities in Macedonia, especially between the Macedonian and Albanian, especially since the constitutional and legal framework does not provide for ethnicity among the office holders.

In another post from 28 April he directly addresses Dragan Kovachki, holder of the candidate list in Constituency 3 of VMRO-DPMNE. The reaction comes after Kovachki's statement in which he calls Loga a 'bell boy from the Alliance'. In the post, Loga addresses Kovachki: *Disrespected Mr. Kovachki,* he calls him *incompetent colonel,* as well as: *I know your intellectual capacity, an unreformed staff who, fortunately, in a NATO member country has no prospects and no possibility of obtaining a security certificate, which unfortunately for you, the long-dreamed-of position of Minister of Defence becomes unachievable* 😉*.'* While he names the persons who are on the candidate list of the European Front as 'Suleiman Baki (a proud Turk of this country), Djevdet Sadiku (a proud Albanian from your North Macedonia). In the post, he also promotes his political option as better than that of his political opponent, because it offers a European perspective to the Macedonian society.

Narratives that contain unfounded claims, personality attacks, and contain a narrative without explaining why one political option is better than the other, do not contribute to the quality of political communication and promote a low culture in public discourse.

## VMRO-DPMNE

Similarly, as in the past months, the identified harmful narratives of VMRO-DPMNE are mainly aimed at SDSM and the presidential candidate for a second term, Stevo Pendarovski, but also at DUI, emphasizing the 'criminal power of SDS and DUI', while presenting themselves as saviours and defenders of justice and the people. This direction of communication from the largest opposition party in the country continues as one of the main pillars of their pre-election campaign for both the presidential and parliamentary elections, where they call on the citizens to vote for them and thereby take back the country captured by the 'criminal and corrupt Government' of 'DUI and SDS', mirrored in the slogan of the campaign 'Macedonia is yours again'.

Out of a total of 447 posts in April, 43 posts with a harmful narrative were identified (the same number as in March). Of these, 32 were published only on the party's website, and 11 were published on both the website and the Facebook page. Compared to the previous month, there is a slight increase in the percentage of harmfulness, but it still remains significantly reduced compared to previous months (the percentage of harmfulness from the total number of posts in April was 9%, March 5.4%, February 21.6%, January 27.7 %). In addition, this month a harmful narrative was identified on the Facebook page of the party leader Hristijan Mickoski, unlike in March when there was none.

In the identified harmful narratives of VMRO-DPMNE, the most frequently mentioned in a negative tone are SDSM called 'SDS' and 'DUI servants' (22 times) and Stevo Pendarovski called former president (17), and immediately after that, the Government of SDSM and DUI (11), DUI (8), Ali Ahmeti (8), Dimitar Kovachevski (6), Asaf Eisin, called a 'rascal' and 'creator of forgeries and fake news' (6), Artan Grubi (5), and Furkan Saliu (3). In a positive tone, the party is mentioned in all posts, and the candidate for president of VMRO-DPMNE, Hristijan Mickoski, Gordana Siljanovska is mentioned five times and Freedom House is mentioned three times in a neutral tone, as a source of information. When talking about the Government, VMRO-DPMNE usually refers to it as 'the authorities' or 'the authorities of DUI and SDS'.

In April, VMRO-DPMNE in their public communication again often used unfounded claims about the corruption of the ruling parties in the country, less often harshly ridiculed and labelled, defamed political opponents in order to create divisions and discords and deliberately omitted information. With that, they developed harmful narratives with biased selection of information that can lead the public to wrong conclusions, as well as for undermining trust in institutions and demonizing political opponents, with Pendarovski in focus. Less often they insulted and defamed political opponents and used unsubstantiated claims that they were manipulated by behind-the-scenes (secret) powerful groups, thus developing harmful narratives of conspiracy theories, alleged negative foreign influences in the country and spreading panic, fear and insecurity.

The forms in which the posts with harmful narratives of VMRO-DPMNE are packaged are mostly press releases and speeches from pre-election rallies, especially by the leader Hristijan Mickoski, while the less frequent press conferences and statements are usually by other representatives of the party.

In April the most common topic is domestic politics again (in 30 posts or 69.8 percent of the posts with a harmful narrative), while crime, corruption, health and economy were discussed less often. The focus is on pre-election narratives with criticism of the corrupt governance of SDSM and VMRO-DPMNE, attacks on Pendarovski and accusations of Asaf Eisin's questionable participation in his campaign, the incident with journalist Furkan Saliu and the Freedom House report.

In general, the harmfulness in the pre-election rhetoric of VMRO-DPMNE aimed at the ruling parties SDSM and DUI, especially after the first round of presidential elections, can be seen in the example of press release from 27 April on the website of VMRO-DPMNE, from a speech by Dragan Kovachki, the leader of the candidate list for MPs in Constituency 3, from a rally in Kochani. The press release begins with the title to *Kovachki to Ahmeti: You will have to return the money with which you bribe, the people in Constituency 3 are hard-working, honest, dignified, the total opposite of a criminal like you, on 8 May the citizens will wipe you out and send you to the opposition,* and ends with *Kovachki said in the end that on 8 May the greatest evil of Macedonia, Kovachevski and SDS, should be defeated.*

As in these striking opening and closing messages, the text is rich with unsubstantiated allegations of corruption and crime and attempts to bribe voters, thus making biased selection - *Let's not give them another 4 years to steal. Kovachevski gave Macedonia to Ali Ahmeti just to stay in power, he allowed Macedonia to become a state of crime and corruption, Macedonia of poor citizens, Macedonia where the economy is at the bottom...These days I hear that they are doing massive bribery, threatening and blackmailing...they send Krenar Loga the bell boy from Alliance in Delchevo and Berovo...',*as well as severe labelling that leads to the demonization of DUI leader Ali Ahmeti, SDSM leader Dimitar Kovachevski and the president and candidate for a second term Stevo Pendarovski, - *Kovachevski is just an ordinary servant to Ali Ahmeti, and Stevo Pendarovski a mute observer... Aliii, there is no place here for criminals like you and the rascal Grubi...*

By inciting discord and divisions, the pre-election populist narrative of the party develops, according to which VMRO-DPMNE is on the side of the impoverished and humiliated people, and SDSM and DUI are the elite working for personal interests - *We are in alliance with the people, with this Macedonian people who raised their voices against the crime of SDS and DUI. We are in alliance with farmers, with workers, with health workers. VMRO-DPMNE is an ally to the pensioners, VMRO-DPMNE is an ally to the youth, to the educational workers, to the cultural workers... They provided for themselves and the next generations, while the people suffer and barely make ends meet, those from SDS and DUI have become owners of shopping centres, of million companies... IT IS ENOUGH!!!!*

In April, the negative narrative towards Stevo Pendarovski continues, i.e. indecent attacks that he is a corrupt servant to the parties in the executive power. In a press release from 12 April on the website of VMRO-DPMNE, which contains a photo and an excerpt from a speech by the vice-president of the party Aleksandar Nikoloski at a meeting with citizens in Gevgelija, one can notice the harmful narrative of the party targeting Pendarovski, presenting him as a 'source and supporter of corruption in Macedonia' and as a dishonest person . - ...*he is an extreme hypocrite and a man who likes to say that he is honest and not corrupt, but this same one who pretends to be honest and incorrupt has been avoiding answering the questions I ask him for a good month now ...For example, I have not heard him say a word about the smuggling that is happening here at the border crossing in the organization of the highest structures of SDSM and DUI. What kind of honest man is he who allows his campaign to be financed by your stolen public money? Sorry, but that's not fair. That is why I can say that Stevo Pendarovski is a source and supporter of corruption in Macedonia and is far from an honest person.* In addition to unfounded allegations of corruption, the message also notes a conspiracy theory about alleged smuggling at a border crossing organized by SDSM and DUI, as well as financing Pendarovski's campaign with stolen people's money.

The Freedom House Report[4] for the country is reflected in the harmful posts by VMRO-DPMNE in April. For example, in an online post from 11 April - and the party's Facebook page from Timcho Mucunski's press conference, the Freedom House report is used to conclude that the current Government is corrupt and criminal and needs to change: - *The EU and the US are constantly making every effort to help us by financing various programs, transferring experiences and knowledge, but at the same time they show a serious determination to sanction, as was the recent case with the publication of the black list of the USA, which included a large number of politicians from the Government.* However, in the presentation of the information from the report, a biased selection is made, that is, the information that politicians from the opposition have been put on the black list is omitted. Leader Mickoski also uses this report in his speeches, for example in a statement from his speech published on 12 April on the party's website from a rally in Tetovo where he says *At the rallies, Stevo Pendarovski and SDSM will not say anything about the Freedom House report. And while he learned an empty and oft-repeated phrase that he did not have a single black spot in his career, the report of the American Freedom House says that the country where he is president is heavily criminalized, and journalists who write about crime are under pressure from the authorities,* where again a biased selection of information is presented from the crime report which is attributed at the expense of the president of the state, while it is not a conclusion related to the content of the report.

Similarly, in a press release from 3 April on the party's website, economic indicators are selected biasedly, with which a narrative is created that the economic situation has never been worse and panic, fear and uncertainty are encouraged, although the report also notes positive steps (increase in wages, pensions, subsidies in certain sectors, etc.): *With SDS, GDP growth per capita in 7 years is 20%, while in the region over 50%, they showed that they are incapable and cannot lead the country... Because of SDS, every third citizen is poor... For 7 years of power with the SDS, the economic situation in Macedonia is not only not improving, it is getting worse.*

As in the previous month, in April the subject of the alleged scandal with the consultant of SDSM, Asaf Eisin, occurs again and this time it is used as a response to the publication in public of a copy of alleged internal documents from VMRO-DPMNE about planned disinformation campaigns in cooperation with the Macedonian public broadcaster. In a press conference of VMRO-DPMNE spokesperson Naum Stoilkovski from 4 April, published both on the website and on the Facebook page of the party, unfounded claims of corruption and lack of accountability are being made, which develop a harmful narrative of biased selection of information about the case. *The shameless and indecent attitude of the SDS to use fabricated documents to attack media, agencies and VMRO-DPMNE is just another part of the mosaic of the scandal about the foreign questionable consulting of SDS and Stevo Pendarovski by the controversial foreign consultant Asaf Eisin.* In addition, a conspiracy theory is being developed that Asaf Eisin is part of an Israeli power group led by Tal Hanan to 'push fake news, smear campaign and to delay elections or reduce turnout, by forging documents and labelling individuals and agencies through the media...' which works, under illegal conditions, for SDSM and Pendarovski's campaign, so the 'fabricated' document for the planned disinformation campaign of VMRO-DPMNE allegedly came out from here.

In the identified post from 20 April on the Facebook page of leader Mickoski, with photos and text from a rally in Delchevo, a harmful narrative is noted, where, calling for unity, Mickoski, through generalizations and insufficient arguments, accuses about corruption when he says - *Let Kovachevski do it with his tender-deals unity in DUI, I will continue to call for unity because for too long Macedonia has been divided into a hundred pieces.*

4 Freedom House is a non-profit organization based in Washington, D.C. It is best known for political advocacy on issues of democracy, political freedom and human rights. Since 1973, Freedom House has assessed the state of political rights and civil liberties around the world.

With all the unsubstantiated claims of alleged corruption of SDSM and Pendarovski in governing the state and other posts, the largest opposition party spreads harmful narratives of biased selection of information and demonization of political opponents, thus undermining trust in institutions and in the electoral process. In addition, by intensifying the rhetoric of denigration of political opponents and divisions and discord between the bad, incompetent and criminal Government, as opposed to the good opposition that will return the state to the citizens, harmful populist narratives are being developed that cause social divisions and spread panic and insecurity.

## Vredi (Vlen) coalition

During the pre-election period, the Democratic Movement led by Izet Medjiti, the Besa movement led by Bilal Kasami, Alternativa by Afrim Gashi and the Alliance for Albanians - the wing led by Arben Taravari have joined in the Vredi (Vlen) coalition.

The focus of the bloc of opposition parties of the Albanians remained the criticism of DUI and the European Front coalition. There is a narrative where DUI is portrayed as a collaborator of Serbia against Kosovo and additionally as a party with anti-European engagement. The labelling continues this month, for example: 'the corrupt DUI Government', the 'corrupt DUI', the 'DUI Lottery', the 'Ahmeti clan', etc., and in this month the most frequent posts with harmful narrative are noted with the political actor Izet Medjiti - 10 posts, which is a significant increase from last month when three harmful posts were noted. Accusations and labelling are mostly without providing precise, credible sources, that is, the political actor is the only source.

In the post on the occasion of the release of the Freedom House report, in which Macedonia is categorized as a 'hybrid regime', Alternativa on behalf of the Vredi coalition commented in a statement from 11 April that the poor results are proof that the 'corrupt DUI Government is leading the country into an abyss', noting that corruption is present among DUI officials starting with the leader Ahmeti and his family. DUI as a political opponent is vilified, it is presented as it does not work for the benefit of the citizens, while its own ideology and coalition are presented as defenders of the people's interests, oriented towards the EU. They also state that this *DUI streak will end on 8 May. Albanians have decided that the country needs changes. They know that changes and progress come with the victory of the Vredi coalition.* With this type of statements, unsubstantiated allegations are presented for the political opponent, because the decline in the democratic conditions that are evaluated in the report of Freedom House do not refer only to the DUI political party. They are an assessment of the conditions in the country that depend on the complex picture of the rule of law, responsible management of public resources, media freedoms and other factors.

Bujar Osmani, the candidate of DUI for the president of the state, is targeted in one of the critical posts. Alternativa in a statement from 15 April on behalf of the Vredi coalition says that he is *the super master of corruption in this country and that he and his party still have a few days left until they are removed from the scene, to pave the way for the pro-European and non-corrupt option* and that *he is pretending to fight against Russia and protect Europe, and the only thing that he can be proud of is corruption.* At the same time, they present their party as a defender of the people's interests, and that DUI, through Bujar Osmani, *is hiding under the European flag* and that *he and his party have a few more days left until they are removed from the scene, in order to pave the way for the pro-European and the non-corrupt option.*

Through these narratives, an attempt is made to debunk DUI, which is promoted as a European option for citizens, does not work for the interests of Albanians, but for its own corrupt interests. In that direction, the candidate of DUI Osmani is also attacked as a 'super master' of corruption, and that with the departure of DUI from power, corruption will also be removed, and the path will be opened for responsible politicians. At the same time, in the narrative, apart from unsubstantiated claims, accusations of irresponsible work and attacks on the political opponent, no facts and arguments are offered in support of the thesis offered by Vredi, while encouraging the division of 'us-good' and 'them-bad.'

Izet Medjiti in a post from 12 April attacks DUI that the propaganda *machinery of Goebbels' DUI was launched!.... And again with Chair and Chair local people, because, as they say, we care where we hurt! I am not surprised by the slanderous constructions of Gruevski's friends and Menduh Thaci's team, because they are the result of the panic of the defeat that will declassify them from politics on 24 April and 8 May. But for you dear residents of my Chair, for you citizens of the municipality that Goebbels deliberately and strategically isolated from any Government investment, I have an obligation to say a few words: Goebbels' megaphones from DUI speak about me and Chair because they know very well that it is here, in their former stronghold, that their final political defeat and dethronement will take place. That's why Chair has become a thorn in their side and a target in every attack they undertake!*

Medjiti ended the message with a call to the residents of Chair, that the election day is approaching, and Chair *has always known how to be on the right side of the political developments of the Albanians from North Macedonia. This political maturity, through voting, will be received as a message by Goebbels from DUI along with his megaphones and pawns on election day. Until then be at ease and be patient - IT'S WORTH IT*[5]*. Yours, Izet.*

In this post, in which Goebbels is mentioned four times, the political opponent is projected to be prone to Nazi propaganda techniques. The political opponent is attacked for being weak and unable to win, so low blows are used. In this way, the ruling party is belittled and slandered, and by developing a populist discourse, division is encouraged that the political option Vredi is better than the opponent.

Similar to the previous months, in the most intense pre-election month, the accusations of (non)cooperation with Serbia and Kosovo, interpreted in the context of the interests of the Albanians, were not missing from the Albanian political actors. In a post from 7 April in which the OSCE plan for the north of Kosovo is commented, Afrim Gashi comments that Minister Bujar Osmani does not work for the interests of the Albanians, but for the interests of Serbia. In the post shared by the spokesperson of Kosovo Prime Minister Albin Kurti, Gashi says that *Bujar's plan for the north of Kosovo was for the Albanians to leave and the Serbs to enter. His name is Albanian, but his actions are Serbian. Do not believe Ali Ahmeti's spokesman, but read Albin Kurti's spokesman.*

Afrim Gashi also shares a statement from 8 April by Bilal Kasami criticizing DUI that they and their European Front supported Serbia against Kosovo. The post is used to point out that the Albanian opposition is the defender of the interests of the Albanians, while DUI falsely presents itself as working for them. Albanians are urged to vote for them because by voting for Vredi they are also voting *for North Macedonia in the EU, Albania in the EU, Kosovo in NATO and in the EU; for the Albanians to be united in Europe; by voting for Vredi you are voting against DUI, against Serbia and against Russia!*

5 The use of the word WORTH is a word pun. The name of the coalition in Albanian is 'Vlen' and in Macedonian 'Vredi'. Its meaning is 'worth', or 'it is worth it.' (Translator's note)

Examples promoting one's own ideology as better than that of the political opponent, such as the above, need to be supported by facts and examples, just like criticism of political opponents. In addition, a discourse that encourages favouritism towards other countries is also unproductive because it can encourage divisions in society, especially in a multi-ethnic society like the Macedonian where people who are part of the peoples of neighbouring countries live.

## Levica

The Levica party and its leader Dimitar Apasiev in April continue to present themselves as saviours and defenders of the people and identity, while attacking and criticizing SDSM, VMRO-DPMNE and DUI. Given the pre-election period, Levica allocates more space for populist promotion of its views, program and candidates. Before the first round of voting for the presidential elections on 24 April, more frequent promotions of the candidate Biljana Vankovska can be noticed, while afterwards the communication focuses exclusively on Levica's parliamentary offer. While in all identified posts with harmful narratives of the leader Apasiev, character attacks and demonization of political opponents can be noted, the critical tone in the communication on the website and Facebook page of the party is more moderate. However, the general analysis shows that the rhetoric of attacks on the ruling parties and VMRO-DPMNE reinforces, with an emotional charge, offensive labels and words, as well as speech of inter-ethnic intolerance and examples of hate speech.

Out of a total of 138 posts on the party's website and Facebook page (on the monitored days), harmful narratives were identified in 38 (16 harmful Facebook posts and 17 harmful website posts, and 5 posts that are repeated on both communication channels). A total of 52 posts were noted on the Facebook page of the leader Dimitar Apasiev, of which harmful narratives were identified in 7.

Narratives of biased selection and undermining of trust in institutions are frequently noted in the identified harmful posts by Levica this month, but harmful narratives of character attacks and demonization of political opponents, incitement of social divisions and populism are also often noted. Narratives about alleged negative foreign influences from the 'West' as well as the spread of panic, fear and insecurity with 'Albanization', 'Bulgarianization' and 'wars' are less frequently noted, and hate speech was noted twice. On the Facebook profile of the leader Apasiev, rude labelling and character attacks on political opponents are often noticed, but similar to the party communication, attempts at biased selection and undermining of trust in institutions, as well as criticism of 'slavery to America' have been noticed.

The form in which the posts with harmful narratives by Levica are packaged is diverse, from standard press releases, reactions and press conferences to statements, interviews, podcasts and video reels, as well as the transmission of news from foreign media[6], with a significant increase in communication from pre-election campaign field events and meetings, which is the most frequently represented form this month. Of the seven identified posts with a harmful narrative on the Facebook profile of the leader Apasiev, 6 are short reactions and one is a video reel of his speech at a pre-election rally. In addition, it is frequent practice for him to broadcast press releases from the party or its local branches.

6 politika.rs, danas.rs and sinistraineuropa.it

The most common topic in the posts by Levica, in which harmful narratives are identified, is domestic politics (34), then the economy (2), and once they posted about the topic of crime and foreign policy. Most of the time, they communicated on the topic of criticism of the behaviour and policies of VMRO-DPMNE, SDSM and DUI and criticism of the work of the local Government. DUI is mainly blamed for crime, and SDSM is blamed for the bad foreign policy of the state.[7] Harmful posts from the Facebook profile of the leader Apasiev also refer to domestic politics with criticism of the governance of the state.[8]

This month too, a very large number (217) of actors mentioned in posts with harmful narratives by Levica is noted. All posts mention the party and most of them also mention the presidential candidate Biljana Vankovska. The next most frequently mentioned are SDSM called 'SDS', 'fake social democrats', 'bourgeois party', VMRO-DPMNE called 'fake opposition', 'bourgeois party', 'fake patriots', and 'millionaires', DUI and SDSM are called 'mobsters', and DUI are named as 'UCKs', 'neoballists' and 'secessionists'. Furthermore, people from the party such as Amar Mecinovich, Borisav Krmov, Jovana Mojsoska are mentioned, and in the mention of political opponents, Maksim Dimitrievski is labelled as a 'newly composed patriot', Sanja Lukarevska from SDSM as an 'impersonal politician', the leader of VMRO-DPMNE Hristijan Mickoski as 'the most uncharismatic leader', the candidate for president from VMRO-DPMNE, Gordana Siljanovska-Davkova as 'Goga', Ramiz Merko - 'the eternal mayor from DUI, and Aleksandar Stojkoski - 'head of the urban mafia, founder of the Kosovarization of Gjorche Petrov'. Thus, on the Facebook profile of the leader of Levica Apasiev, one can see negative labels for the mentioned actors: Stevo Pendarovski - 'Shizo', Dimitar Kovachevski - 'Tache', 'flabby', Timcho Mucunski 'incompetent, favoured child, shallow', Hristijan Mickoski - 'Zhmicko', and the focus is on SDS, DUI and DPMNE, which are called 'usurping and criminal parties'.

As before, a characteristic element in the posts with harmful narratives by Levica and the leader Apasiev are the hashtags, and especially with Apasiev, the harmfulness and labelling can be observed in the hashtags, but this month the hashtags focus more on slogans and messages for promotion during the pre-election campaign.[9]

7 In the selected posts, the main topic is specified as: presidential elections 2024, the behaviour of VMRO-DPMNE, criticism of the mayor Merko and DUI, the overtime operation of the highways built by Bechtel and Enka, construction of residential buildings in Gjorce Petrov and the behaviour of the Mayor, the agreement with Bulgaria and the inclusion of Bulgarians in the Constitution, criticism of Maksim Dimitrievski, construction mafia in Ohrid, the Framework Agreement, criticism of the ruling parties for running the country, post-election coalition after the 2024 parliamentary elections, the fire in the Universal Hall, the detention of the journalist Furkan Saliu, The Constitution, external influences on Macedonia, leaving NATO, nationalization of strategic companies, foreign investments, inter-ethnic relations, the victims of the 2001 conflict. A secondary topic has been selected for 6 posts: DUI, political situation in the country, criticism of the mayor of Ohrid Kiril Pecakov, foreign policy, attitude towards the West and the East, constitutional amendments, the agreement with Bulgaria.

8 The specific topics are - The accusations of false polls of VMRO-DPMNE, the Constitutional Court for the initiative to assess the legality of overtime work according to LLR, the TV duel Mickoski-Kovachevski, presidential elections 2024, Pendarovski and the debates of the presidential elections 2024, criticism of the Mayor of Aerodrom Timcho Mucunski, SDSM's election video, internal organization of the state.

9 Hashtags on Levica's Facebook page: #WarCrimesDon'tGetOld, #Levica, #IncorruptibleInParliament, #NoGovernmentWithoutLevica, #Vote5, #ParliamentaryElections2024, #RedWave, #Constitutency2, #ReturningtheNation'sDignity, #VankovskaForPresident, #Fight, #Vankovska.
Hashtags on Dimitar Apasiev's Facebook page: #ElectionsAreOurRevenge, #Schizo, #StrumicaRally, #TacheZhmicko, #CongratsOnSlavery.

In a video reel from 23 April on Levica's Facebook page, from a speech by the leader Apasiev in Veles, one can note the general rhetoric of the party in the pre-election, attacking SDSM, VMRO-DPMNE and DUI and their candidates, as one 'broad coalition', through harmful narratives with unfounded allegations of crime and corruption, harsh and insulting labels and inflammatory inter-ethnic speech: *These Siamese twins, these bourgeois parties of SDS and DPMNE, led by Stevo and Goga, are anti-people parties, they are business oligarchies of millionaires who have no contact with reality.' That's why the broad coalition is not just a hashtag, it's turbo operative ... They pretend to be the Government, they pretend to be the opposition, and their Government is the UCK, those who carved at our Mavrovo workers. Both bourgeois parties serve them...*

Ethnic intolerance and incitement of inter-ethnic discord and divisions in the communication of Levica can also be observed in the press release on the party's website of 8 April, which contains a statement from a rally in Tetovo, - *President Apasiev, in his powerful address to the citizens of Tetovo, said that it was time to put an end to the DUIZATION and ALBANIZATION of Macedonia, for which the Macedonian political elites who serve the UCK are mostly to blame.*

It is problematic that the inflammatory and harsh speech, as well as the demonization in the criticism of political opponents, is developing into hate speech by Levica this month, as for example in a Facebook post on Levica's profile from 7 April which contains text and edited video content with messages regarding the coalition in the current elections, with the title: *LEVICA DOES NOT ENTER COALITION WITH CRIMINALS AND TRAITORS - THE FIRST TARGET OF LEVICA IS SDS AND THEN THE FAKE PATRIOTS FROM DPMNE*. The narrative continues in the text - *...Because these social democrats are not Leftists. These are two bourgeois parties plus the DUI mafia plus the oligarchs... As long as DPMNE declares during the day that Levica is in coalition with the SDS, and in the evening, SDS declares that Levica is in a coalition with DPMNE - it is clear that Levica has no common ground with these schizophrenic parties,* while the messages in the edited video say - *Levica will destroy SDS and will settle accounts with DPMNE.*

Also, the next day on 8 April in a statement from the party's website for the promotion of the presidential candidate Biljana Vankovska, one can notice hate speech and incitement of discord and divisions, as well as spreading panic, fear and insecurity: *Our class and political enemies are the fake social democrats-quislings from SDS and the fake patriots-millionaires from DPMNE together with their unifier – the secessionist DUI'*

In addition, in the promotion of a video clip for Levica's parliamentary elections campaign, in a Facebook post from 24 April, there is populist narrative of the party that presents itself as the saviour of the people and identity – 'The Incorruptible in the Parliament' - against the 'criminal and vassal' parties of the Government and VMRO-DPMNE is noted. The messages from the promotional video use unsubstantiated claims of corruption, which make biased selection and undermine trust in institutions, as well as populist formulations that denigrate political opponents and cause discord and divisions in society - *Let's put an end to stealing people's money! Let's reset the system! With a double-digit number of MPs, we will be the biggest dam for their crimes, harmful laws, sale of public goods and vassal policies.'*

In a Facebook status from 3 April Apasiev is using the topic's momentum with the published internal VMRO-DPMNE campaign documents to attack and smear the party - *DPMNE Vmroids caught in the act, with their panties down. For months, they rigged polls in their favour and in favour of ZNAM (to marginalize Levica), through the institute of their servant Vlajko. And that on the Public Broadcasting Service - MTV! But AAVMS is currently not of this planet, it is busy cutting Levica's money for political advertising. This is DPMNE. Not yet in power, they start with the wickedness. So don't let them mislead you again. Be smart and don't give them more than 50 MP seats, because they will screw you up.* The post is full of inappropriate speech and unethical communication, and attacks on VMRO-DPMNE, but also ZNAM, Vladimir Bozhinovski, MTV and AAVMS, which undermine trust in the mentioned institutions and persons, without respecting communication based on evidence and sufficient arguments.

In addition, this month Apasiev and Levica are also targeting the mayor from VMRO-DPMNE, of the Municipality of Aerodrom Timcho Mucunski, for whom in Apasiev's Facebook post from 16 April, a press release from Levica-Aerodrom is broadcast criticizing the mayor's work, including a video of a snake found in the lawns. In the short status of the shared post, Apasiev criticizes Mucunski on a personal basis and thus develops a harmful narrative of demonizing the political opponent: *The incompetent TIMCHO is worse than Zlatko Marin! Favoured child, shallow, only with a facade on it.'*

With the leader of Levica Apasiev, the trend of short offensive Facebook statuses with inappropriate labels in the form of hashtags continues, targeting the leaders and candidates of other political parties, such as *Stevo accepted the DEBATE, but did not go!? #Schizo* or *If the duel of slackers ended, I can also play the GOBLET DRUM.🎵#TacheZhmicko.* In addition to political opponents, Apasiev does not spare other institutions and social actors. On Apasiev's Facebook profile, from 3 April a short status was also noted with the news that 'the Constitutional Court did not initiate a procedure for the amendments to the LLR in connection with the working hours of the Agreement with Bechtel and Enka', in which Apasiev attacks the Constitutional Court and undermines trust in the institution, by alluding of negative American influence: *As with Prespa, the Constitutional Court once again SUCKED IT to the Americans.👅#CongratsOnYour Slavery.'*

## 1.2 Monitoring of official communication channels of Government officials

During the election campaign, it is noticeable that the Facebook profiles of the ministers in the Government who were simultaneously candidates in the electoral process were actively used to promote their activities within the campaign, thus misusing official Government communication channels for personal promotion and party purposes.

With the Minister of Foreign Affairs, **Bujar Osmani**, it is noticeable that most of the posts are related to his candidacy for president of the state, as well as posts for the promotion of DUI and their campaign. In addition to different video posts for each day of the campaign and from each location where he held a rally, meeting with citizens or conversations and debates, there are also video posts in a family atmosphere with holiday greetings, a recommendation of a book that should be read, the environmental initiative for 'Green Macedonia', visits to a kindergarten and the Museum of Tetovo University, debates on keeping young people in Macedonia, visiting the 'graves of fallen martyrs in Ljuboten' or laying flowers on the grave of another martyr. The monitoring established that the occasional posts from his sphere of work and interest - diplomacy, were mainly about protocol activities, about the initiative for a Resolution on Srebrenica and about supporting Kosovo for membership in the Council of Europe.

On the Facebook profile of the Minister of Culture **Bisera Kostadinovska-Stojchevska**, there is also communication for the purposes of the election campaign. In terms of harmful narratives, the use of populism can be noticed, a discourse with which one's political option is highlighted as better than that of the political opponent. In one post from 20 April from the rally in Ohrid, she talks about pensions increase, says *that only with SDSM there is a European future, there is no time to return to the dark past of DPMNE.* The press release states that VMRO-DPMNE, when it was in power, did not show any care for the state, culture, workers, or pensioners. As well as that the citizens will decide on the European future on 8 May. It is similar case in the press release from the rally in Struga from 19 April where, in addition to promoting the successes of the Government's work so far, it is also said that the people of *Struga will make the right choice in the parliamentary elections, they will vote for SDSM and the Coalition for a European Future.*

On the Facebook profile of the Minister of Agriculture, Forestry and Water Management, **Ljupcho Nikolovski**, there are posts about the successes in agriculture. In one post from 4 April from his visit to Sveti Nikole, which is not marked either as an activity of the Minister of Agriculture or as a party official, it is said that *from a forgotten region at the time of VMRO, today the East is developing, we are investing in new roads, new investments, local infrastructure, better education, children's kindergartens, health services*. In another post from 23 April from a rally in Zelenikovo it is said that *we proved that not everyone is the same. That we can and know how to lead the country better. Farmers know that with us they don't have the pressures and threats of the regime's past, but the subsidies are increased, timely and for the first time paid in advance.*

The posts use biased selection, deliberately do not convey the full picture, and use populist discourse to promote one's own ideology as better than that of the political opponent, while using general statements to say that conditions are better without giving specific data.

In addition to the above examples, the Minister of Justice **Krenar Loga** intensively used his official Facebook profile as the Minister of Justice to communicate statements and views of the Alliance for Albanians led by Sela, that is to promote his party. Criticisms of the Albanian opposition, criticisms of VMRO-DPMNE can also be found on the profile. The posts are texts, photos, video clips or links to his media appearances or to the leader of the Alliance for Albanians Ziadin Sela.

## SUMMARY

The report on the public communication of political actors for April 2024 covers the political parties and their officials who were part of the electoral process. In addition to the fact that parliamentary and presidential elections were held in Macedonia, the presidential candidates were not subject to monitoring, according to the research methodology that focuses on parliamentary political parties.

During April, 176 posts with harmful narratives were noted with the political parties, which is an increase compared to the previous months (February – 136, March 142). VMRO-DPMNE, as in all previous months, is the political party with the most identified harmful narratives (43 posts or 24.4 percent of the total number of posts with harmful narratives of all political actors). Unlike the previous months, this time Levica is in second place with 38 posts with harmful narratives (21.6 percent), and SDSM, which in the past months of the monitoring was regularly ranked second, in April it was in third place with 29 posts with harmful narratives or 16.5 percent of the total number of harmful posts of all political actors.

Political parties in April, as before, most often biasedly selected information (143 examples) and developed harmful narratives to undermine trust in institutions (115) by presenting unsubstantiated claims of corruption and abuse of office. A third commonly identified harmful narrative is the demonization of political opponents through denigration and labelling (51). It should be noted that in April there were 15 posts containing the harmful narrative 'spreading fear and panic' which is an increase compared to March when there were 6 such posts.

Political actors who are part of the electoral process are subject to different rules for public appearances, which are regulated by the Electoral Code and which are different from the rules of the game when it is not a pre-election period. The participants in the election process also sign the Code for Fair and Democratic Elections which obliges them to ethics in appearances and responsible behaviour. However, it was evident that the majority of political actors do not respect the Code. In addition, there is a legal framework that governs several aspects of the electoral process, and political actors, in addition to having responsibility in public appearances, also have an obligation to be careful not to disrupt its implementation or misuse public resources for the purposes of the campaign. The State Commission for the Prevention of Corruption monitors possible misuse of office space and equipment or of official vehicles for the purposes of the election campaign.

In that context, official Government communication channels such as Facebook profiles are also a resource that should not be used for campaign purposes. It is necessary to make a clear distinction between party communication channels and those of the institutions. The monitoring this month, as in the previous ones, notes that no distinction is made and official communication is misused in the interest of party activities. In addition, in the posts by ministers, besides using one communication channel for both party and Government activities, it is noted that in the messages they send, no distinction is made between the party they represent and the Government in which they work, hence the fact that the political parties are part of the Government as a larger body of several political actors, and thus equalling the party with the state.

The public communication of political actors in April is focused almost entirely on the electoral campaigns for the presidential and parliamentary elections. The increased use of populism in the public discourse of political actors continues, there is an increased use of ethnocentric and nationalist rhetoric and accusations of serving foreign interests at the expense of people's interests.

Nationalist rhetoric and glorification of the interests of one's own ethnic community is a convenient communication strategy for mobilizing the electorate, which stimulates strong emotions for the sense of belonging and identity, especially in a multi-ethnic society like the Macedonian, where there is a history of sensitive inter-ethnic relations, and political parties mostly have a monolithic body of members and supporters in terms of ethnic communities. Among the Albanian political parties, both from the Government and from the opposition, this is already a known strategy of approach, but in this electoral process it is noticeable that resorting to nationalism was used by both VMRO-DPMNE and Levica.

Political actors should refrain from using nationalist rhetoric in their public communication. In a multi-ethnic society like Macedonia, where inter-ethnic relations have been a fragile topic for years, politicians need to be careful in their public appearances not to use speech that can further fuel tensions between citizens, as well as speech that can encourage fear and a sense of jeopardy.

The interests of one's own ethnic community are also promoted through narratives of closeness or cooperation with Serbia and Kosovo (through Prime Minister Albin Kurti), especially when it comes to Albanian parties. DUI showed a new aspect in relation to foreign influence by including the thesis about Russian malign influence in the country and mutual accusations with the Albanian opposition about who works for Russian and who for Albanian interests and for Macedonia's membership in the EU. Among the Macedonian parties, mostly opposition VMRO-DPMNE and Levica accuse the ruling SDSM of being servile to Bulgaria's demands, of not protecting Macedonian national interests, and of selling the name of the state, while SDSM accuses the Macedonian opposition parties of not working for European integration and that they are susceptible to Russian influence.

Foreign influence in the Macedonian society is a sensitive topic that needs to be carefully addressed. Politicians who have the responsibility to lead the country or aspire to lead the country, and point to foreign influence in the country, need to specify the spots where the influence is and where the danger is in order for the citizens to be clear about how the elections are connected with voting for a certain political option with the choice between the EU and Russia, in order for citizens to be adequately informed to make the right choice when voting. At the same time, it is necessary to make a distinction that when talking about malign foreign influence, it is not generally about the influence of states, societies, or against the culture and people of a state, but about certain non-democratic means used by certain foreign states to achieve its goals of influence in certain spheres in other societies. Those tools of influence can be the support of certain political actors who share the ideology of certain political leaders to come to power, in order to form strategic partnerships for the realization of broader political goals. Therefore, political actors need to specify the spots of influence, in order for the citizens to understand how foreign influence manifests itself, what values it promotes and what mechanisms it uses. Otherwise, political platitudes, populist theses are used that can be relativized and dismissed as scoring points in daily politics.

Almost all parties present themselves as saviours and defenders of the people from political opponents who are working to destroy the state. Accordingly, an increase in the percentage of harmfulness in the total number of posts on the websites and Facebook pages of political parties can be noted this month. Out of a total of 1703 posts in March, only 8.4% were harmful, while out of a total of 1230 posts in April, 14.3% were harmful.

The main actors and narratives remain unchanged. SDSM directs harmful narratives to VMRO-DPMNE. The European Union for Change, now expanded and united in the Vredi coalition, mainly targets DUI, which retaliates with the same measure and occasionally targets VMRO-DPMNE as well. DUI's focus on VMRO-DPMNE increased after frequent statements by the leader Hristijan Mickoski and senior party officials that DUI will not be their partner in the future Government, that they are a corrupt party and it is time for them to go into opposition. The main opposition party VMRO-DPMNE, apart from DUI, usually directs its harmful narratives towards SDSM. Levica directs harmful narratives towards SDSM and DUI as ruling parties, as well as VMRO-DPMNE.

SDSM presents itself as the sole option for a European future, DUI as pro-European, against the harmful Russian influence and that it represents the true values as the defender of the people. VMRO-DPMNE promises to defend national interests, restore national dignity and return the state back into the hands of the citizens, through a determined fight against corruption. The Albanian opposition united in Vredi presents itself as a better option than DUI being on the side of the Albanians, a fighter against corruption and a protector of the interests of ordinary people. Levica continues to promote itself as the only political option that is not corrupt and intends to protect national interests.

Political actors both on the websites and on Facebook profiles often use rhetoric in which allegations of corruption, irresponsibility, unprofessionalism are presented, which are used as a basis for accusing political opponents, betrayal of national interests, serving foreign influences, undermining trust in institutions, biased selection of data that leads to wrong conclusions and encouraging socio-political divisions among the public. With Levica, for example, populism and inciting discord and divisions sometimes develops into hate speech and inflammatory speech about inter-ethnic relations in the country.

Populism and its wide application allows politicians to use it intensively in political communication, especially in the election period when promises are made about a wide range of issues, and the question of what is actually achievable is rarely asked. But when citizens do not have an accurate picture and there is no essential evaluation of what is plausible and what is not, from the promises and commitments of politicians, they cannot have the complete picture, and thus make a clear and honest choice when practicing their democratic right to vote when they have to choose the political option that should represent them and make decisions on their behalf.

Rhetoric in the pre-election period significantly contained labelling, insults and intolerance, thus not respecting the principle of ethical communication. 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.

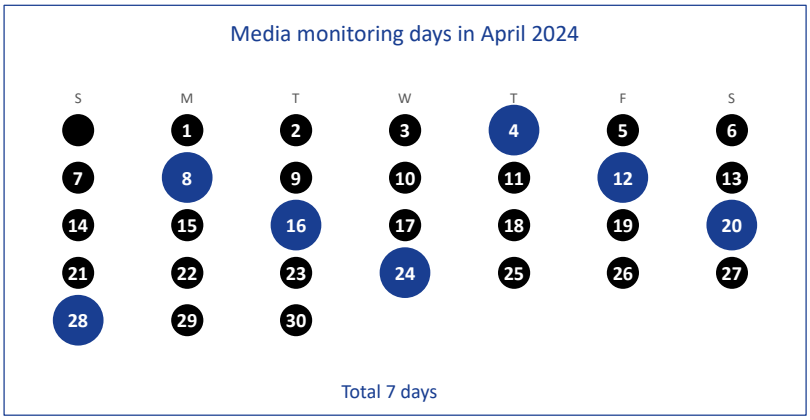
The publicly spoken word by political actors has a significant impact in public discourse because it sets the standards in public communication. Therefore, it is necessary for politicians in their communication to respect the principle of evidence-based communication. Manipulative speech, which includes disinformation, misinformation and malinformation, can seriously affect democratic processes and elections, by creating and spreading lies, attacks on individuals, which can result in a decline of trust in the electoral process and in institutions. Hence, it is important that politicians and public officials share only accurate and verified information in their communication.

Politicians receive the trust of citizens to be their political representatives at the head of the state, in the executive and legislative branches of power. The decisions they make and the policies they create affect the everyday life of the citizens, and in that direction, during the electoral campaign, politicians need to direct their communication to the citizens, and not only to the political opponents. A discourse that does not deconstruct the political offer for citizens, but focuses mostly on mutual attacks on politicians and the spread of harmful narratives, can prevent citizens from drawing a clear picture of the offer by political actors and shift the essence of the debate in the electoral period, which should have a significant focus on issues of public interest that relate to improving the standard of living of citizens.

# 2. Monitoring of the media reporting on the political actors

The monitoring during the pre-election campaign in April revealed different trends in the posts with harmful narratives on TV and in the online media space. It is notable that the reporting rules during the electoral process to which the TV stations are subject significantly contribute to the reduction of the harmful narratives. On the other hand, the so-called self-regulation, i.e. the lack of precise rules for the online media space, results in a record-breaking increase of posts with harmful narratives during the pre-election period.

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



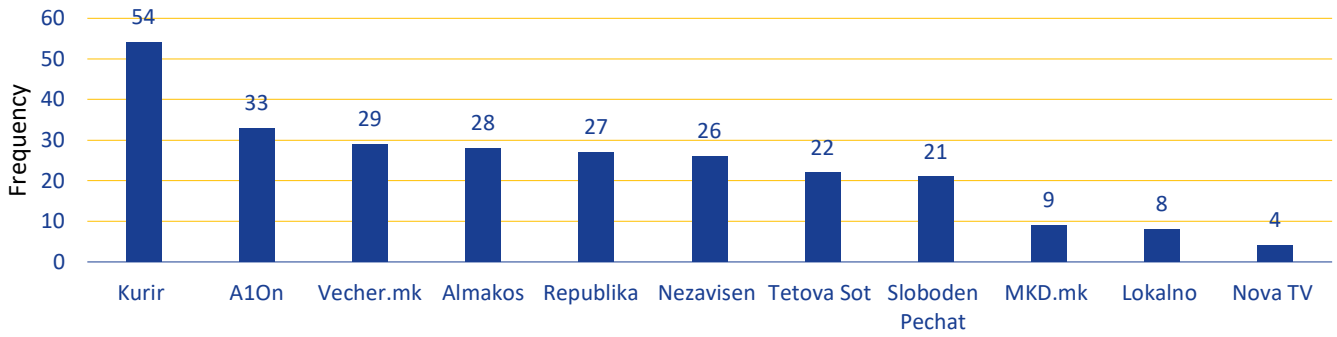

April can be defined as a month of political campaigns, primarily due to the double elections, both presidential (officially started on 4 April) and parliamentary (officially started on 18 April), followed by abundant activity of the political entities in the public communication space and their daily media coverage. This was confirmed by the findings of the monitoring, where the electoral campaigns were the key and almost the sole topic of information. The focus was on the presidential candidates, their programs, the presentation and the mutual confrontation before the public, as well as the first round of voting for the president of the state. Concurrently, the political parties that already promoted their election programs, focused on their promises for EU integrations, for changes and reforms in all spheres of life, the economy, education, health and the fight against crime and corruption, emphasizing who didn't/did what, and will do in the next mandate, but also on mutual attacks, discredits, labelling, disparagements. This time, again, the media and the journalists were the target especially the case of the detention of a journalist and the initiation of a criminal procedure against him. The analysis of the online media (performed seven days a month) identified **261 news items with harmful narratives**, the highest number since the beginning of the research (September - 209, October - 154, November - 215, December - 207, January - 240, February - 211, March - 224) to date, compared to the TV stations with 55 such news items identified, which is a surprising discrepancy. However, this difference is due to the strict legal criteria for the broadcasters (TV stations, radio stations) to cover the elections compared to online portals that are left in an open unlimited space and only within the media self-regulation. The portals published the most news items with harmful narratives on 4 April (47) at the start of the election campaign, and the least on 24 April (17 news items) on the day of the presidential elections, and in the evening with the publication of the initial unofficial results.

In terms of content, most analysed news items with harmful narratives are the hybrid genre forms, the reported speeches of the politicians (111 news items, i.e., 42.5%) and the broadcast press releases of the political parties (62 news items, i.e. 23.8%) which together with the posted Facebook statuses of the political entities and their statements (8 news items, i.e., 3.1%) make up 2/3 (or 69.4%) of all analysed news items with harmful narratives. Reports (40 news items) and news/news with statements (25 news items) are far less numerous, while the analyses, comments, interviews are rare and sporadic, but they are also focused on the politicians and the political parties. As expected, as in the previously monitored months, the largest number of these news items have precise sources (246 news items), and rarely imprecise or unclear ones. At the same time, the online media mostly reported one-sidedly, that is, consulted only one side (232, or 89.2%) and had only one source (222 news items, or 85.1%). The motive for the publication of the news items was mostly pseudo-events, i.e., the press-conferences of the parties or the statements of the political actors (75 news items, or 28.7%) as well as the current events (64 news items, or 24.5%) and announced events (53, or 20 .3%).

## Frequency of harmful narratives in online media

The portal with the largest number of news items with harmful narratives in April was Kurir (54 news items), which in the previous months (February and March) was also at the top of the list, followed by A1On, Vecher.mk, Almakos, Republika. In this monitoring round, again Nova TV has the lowest number of news items with harmful narratives (4 news items).

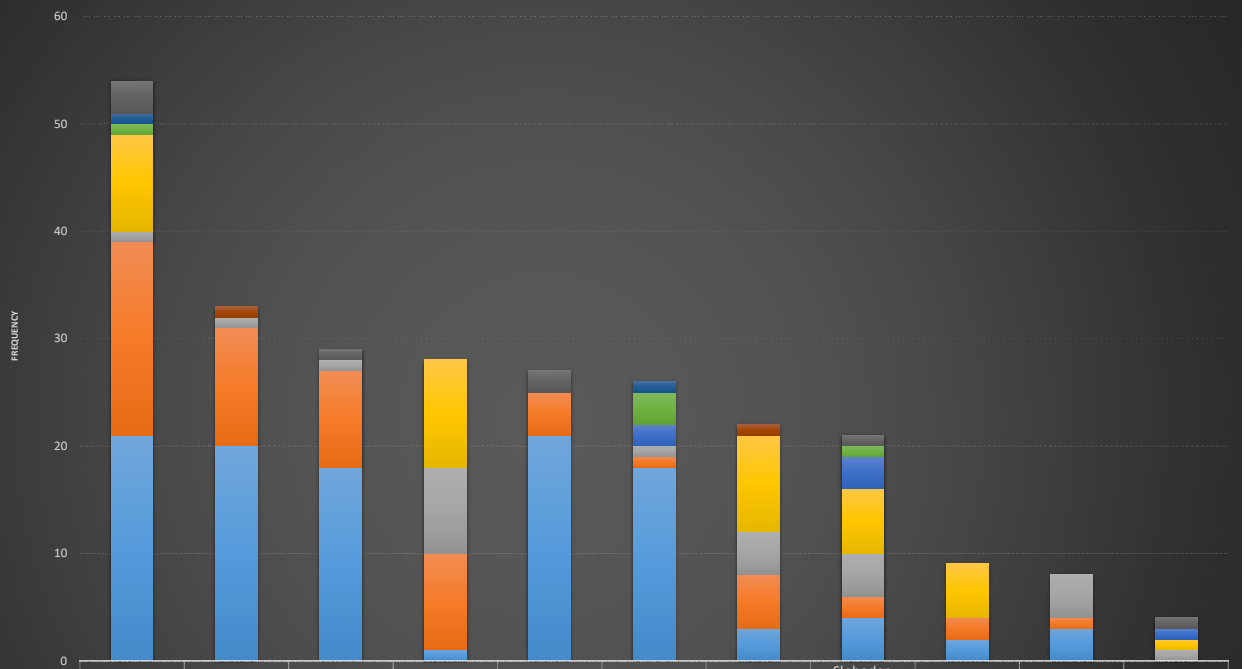
Table 4. News items with harmful narratives




In terms of the genre, the structure of the news items with harmful narratives predominantly consisted of the reported speeches of the politicians, their Facebook statuses, interviews given for other media and press conferences, followed by (with almost half the number) the press releases of the parties, compared to the previous monitored months where the political/party press releases had the primacy. The portals have allocated the most space for the politicians (and their parties), as the most active participants in the campaign, for the promotion of their ideas and programs, but also for attacks, insults, and labelling of the political opponent. This especially applies to Republika (all 27 news items) and Nezavisen (in 19 out of a total of 26 news items), while on Kurir both genre forms are almost equally represented (21 speeches and 18 press releases), and on Vecher.mk (18 speeches, 9 press releases) and A1on (20 speeches, 11 press releases), in addition to the most speeches by politicians, half of them are press releases of the parties. Kurir is mainly focused on monitoring and informing about the activities of the president of VMRO-DPMNE, Hristijan Mickoski, less on the party itself and its members (the Vice President, Aleksandar Nikoloski, MP Dragan Kovachki), and incidentally on SDSM and the president of the party, Dimitar Kovachevski. It is similar on Vecher MK and Republika, where the most space was given to the speeches (at rallies, press conferences) of the president of VMRO-DPMNE, Hristijan Mickoski, as well as to the MPs and the candidates for MPs in the constituencies, and significantly less to VMRO- DPMNE, SPM, the Vredi coalition and DUI. The president of VMRO-DPMNE, Hristijan Mickoski and the members of the party are also the most represented. On A1on, followed by SDSM and some of its members.

On Nezavisen, in addition to Hristijan Mickoski, almost equal space is given to the president of SDSM, Dimitar Kovachevski, and sporadically to the party VMRO-DPMNE, SDSM, DUI and the Vredi coalition. In this monitoring cycle, the number of reports has doubled compared to the previous monitored months, but, by default, most of them are on Almakos, followed by Tetova Sot, Kurir, Sloboden Pechat and MKD.mk.

**Table 5. News items with harmful narratives according to the genre structure in April 2024**




| | Kurir | A1On | Vecher.mk | Almakos | Republika | Nezavisen | Tetova Sot | Sloboden Pechat | MKD.mk | Lokalno | Nova TV |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Other | 3 | | 1 | | 2 | | | 1 | | | 1 |
| Interview | | 1 | | | | | 1 | | | | |
| Commentary | 1 | | | | | 1 | | | | | |
| Analysis/commentary | 1 | | | | | 3 | | 1 | | | |
| Analytical reportage/news item | | | | | | 2 | | 3 | | | 1 |
| Report | 9 | | | 10 | | | 9 | 6 | 5 | | 1 |
| News/news with a statement | 1 | 1 | 1 | 8 | | 1 | 4 | 4 | | 4 | 1 |
| Broadcast press release | 18 | 11 | 9 | 9 | 4 | 1 | 5 | 2 | 2 | 1 | |
| Broadcast speech of a politician | 21 | 20 | 18 | 1 | 21 | 18 | 3 | 4 | 2 | 3 | |

This was followed by the occasion for the publication of the news items, where in addition to the largest number of pseudo-events (75 news items, or 28.7%) such as the press releases of the parties, press conferences, statements, reactions of the political entities created to attract media attention, are the current (64 news items, or 24.5%) and the announced events (53 news items, or 20.3%), i.e., events which took place or were to take place, and which related, above all, to the announced or held rallies/meetings of the political parties/politicians with the citizens in the cities of the country within the caravan of the presidential and parliamentary elections. Thus, the most numerous were the pseudo-events on Tetova Sot (21 news items out of a total of 22), Republika (21 news items out of a total of 27) and MKD.mk (7 news items out of a total of 9), the current events on Nezavisen (18 news items out of a total of 26), and the announced and current events on Kurir (27/13 news items out of a total of 54) and Vecher.mk (16/7 news items out of a total of 29). On Almakos, the most numerous were the current and the currently planned events (9/14 out of a total of 28), while on A1On, the most numerous were the social events (25 news items out of a total of 33).

An essential topic in all online media was the domestic politics (in 239 news items, or 91.6%), translated into the campaigns for the presidential and parliamentary elections. It is even unique in some of them, such as Nezavisen, Lokalno, and MKD.mk, where all analysed news items with harmful narratives were related to the electoral political campaign. Rarely and incidentally, with two to three news items, foreign policy, economy, judiciary and crime follow the main topic on all other portals, Almakos, Vecher mk, Republika, Kurir, Tetova Sot, A1on, Sloboden Pechat.

In terms of the content, narratives dominate with which the political opponents, their programs, their personality, values, previous work are attacked and accused, regardless of whether the posted information is correct or not; public office holders, media workers, civil activists are labelled and ridiculed; words, formulations are used that denigrate certain groups of people and incite division into 'we, us' and 'you, your'. The portals select which political speeches will be published and by which political entity. What is characteristic, compared to the previous dominance of short press releases of the parties or positions/ statements of the political entities, this time the reported speeches of the politicians, are richer by scope/ content and visualization/photos, video recordings, but, by default, without the author of the news item and signature under the posted photos. At the same time, the practice of creating multiple news items from the same event was not left out; however, this time, instead of quoting or reiterating parts of interviews of politicians from television shows, parts of the speeches of the political actors at rallies/gatherings were used. A few characteristic examples:

On **Kurir**, the news items with harmful narratives (a total of 54) were concentrated on 4 April (14 news items), the highest number not observed on any other portal of all analysed and in other monitored days. The monitoring determined that almost half of them (6 news items) refer to one event, the big rally of VMRO-DPMNE in front of the Government building in Skopje and the beginning of the election campaign. VMRO-DPMNE's call to the citizens was published first *The last battle for Macedonia starts today, at 20:00 in front of the Government, for the changes that are in your hands*, and several hours later another call of the party with another title *his is our common battle, to restore hope and bring future - everyone in front of the Government at 20:00* was published. In the evening, a detailed report of the address of the president of VMRO-DPMNE, Hristijan Mickoski, from the 'great public gathering' and a video of the entire meeting followed. Three more news items were reported after that, with excerpts from Hristijan Mickoski's address from the rally. One of them was *Pendarovski should publicly say whether he will not boycott the second round, after losing the first one* aimed at the presidential candidate and the current president of the state, where Hristijan Mickoski qualified Stevo Pendarovski as an analyst without integrity, 'Stevo is a loser'. The second one was, *The source of the Government's negative campaign is a rascal from Israel, he falsifies documents. He made the same offer to me, but I kicked him out of the office and told him he will bear consequences for that, now he works for SDS*, where Mickoski points to SDSM, which does not have a serious program, nor results and desperately resorts to a negative campaign, to fabrication and falsification of documents. The third one was, *Kovachevski gave the state to DUI. Five officials decide about everything in the state, and all the others are second-class citizens*, pointing to Kovachevski who gave the state to Ali Ahmeti 'on a platter', and SDSM is DUI's 'lackey', and sold out, ruined and destroyed the state. **(Kurir, 4.4.2023).**

The other analysed portals also reported on the rally/gathering. **Vecher.mk** published three news items, the first one was the call of VMRO-DPMNE for the rally *The last battle for Macedonia starts today, at 20:00 in front of the Government, for the changes that are in your hands*, followed by the news item *The source of the negative campaign of SDSM is a rascal from Israel. He made the same offer to me, but I kicked him out and told him he will bear consequences for that* which was completely taken from the press release of the party VMRO-DPMNE. The third news item, *Kovachevski gave the state to DUI, FIVE PEOPLE DECIDE ABOUT EVERYTHING, THE OTHERS ARE SECOND CLASS CITIZENS*, which was identical in content to the news item on Kurir **(Vecher.mk, 4.4.2024).** Republika also published the two calls of VMRO-DPMNE to the citizens at 20:00 in front of the Government at a 'big national rally'. Later, in the evening, in the news item *Mickoski: A victory as big as a mountain is coming!* he informed about the start of the campaign for the presidential elections by presenting their candidate, Gordana Siljanovska-Davkova, however, in the text that follows, the words of the president of VMRO-DPMNE were 'people are coming to get what is theirs', that they went through many hardships, that they (the opponents) 'wished they were gone' but they 'stand proud and upright', that Kovachevski gave the state to Ali Ahmeti, but nothing about the what presidential candidate Gordana Siljanovska Davkova said. The fourth news item *The negative campaign of SDSM originates from a Balkan rascal paid with people's money, who also offered me to falsify documents*

*for the Government* with an emphasis and a message from Hristijan Mickoski that VMRO-DPMNE will be focused on an offer, a plan to get out of the crisis, that Macedonia will develop, prosper, 'it will once again belong to its citizens' **(Republika, 4.4.2024).**

**MKD.mk** conveyed the party press release of VMRO-DPMNE *The last battle for Macedonia starts today* with which they invited *all citizens to come to the plateau in front of the Government at 20:00 at a big national rally and tell the Government that its time is over*. In the evening, after the rally, another news item followed *Siljanovska Davkova: we will join the EU only if we become a normal state by practicing the values*, in which half of the content was from the address of the presidential candidate Gordana Siljanovska Davkova, and the second half was from the address of the president of VMRO-DPMNE, Hristijan Mickoski, pointing out that *the people are coming to get what is theirs, what has been taken from them*, and that they should *take it away from a hundred officials from DUI and their lackeys from SDSM*, and Kovachevski's problem is that *he gave the state to Ahmeti on a platter* **(MKD.mk, 4.4.2024).**

**A1on**, on the other hand, with the news item *Kovachevski gave the state to DUI, five officials decide about everything in the state, and all the others are second-class citizens*, with one sentence repeated Hristijan Mickoski's statement at the rally about Kovachevski and SDSM as lackeys of DUI, who are prepared *to pay any price just to keep their seat, without asking how much this sale of Macedonia costs*, and after that he stated a number of qualifications that they ruined the state, there is no system, there is no state, they made conspiracies, they had secret meetings, they hatched plans to destroy VMRO-DPMNE, and *now (it is said) they started packing their things in the Government and started destroying materials*. **(A1on, 4.4.2024).** At the end of this series of news items from the VMRO-DPMNE rally in front of the Government in Skopje, we noticed a slightly different approach in informing of Sloboden Pechat about the same event. In the news item *ELECTION CHRONICLE: First day of the campaign – Forward or backward?* the portal makes a review of the presidential campaign of all seven candidates for president of the country with short quotes from their speeches, but it also conveys the statements of the two leaders of the parties Levica and VMRO-DPMNE, the only ones present at the rallies, the meetings with the citizens, with photos of the presidential candidates. At the end of the news item, the author/journalist informs about the following activities of the caravan of the presidential candidates. And this is where the story ends **(Sloboden Pechat, 4.4.2024).**

## Political actors in the analysed news items

The news items with harmful narratives abound with numerous political actors in all analysed online media. The most numerous are those with two (57, or 21.8%) and three (57, or 21.8%) actors. This month, the individuals, i.e., the politicians dominate, and the collective, i.e., the political parties are far less numerous. Cumulatively, the president of VMRO-DPMNE, **Hristijan Mickoski,** is at the top, followed by the presidential candidates Stevo Pendarovski and Gordana Siljanovska Davkova, and from the **collectives, VMRO-DPMNE** is at the top, followed by DUI and SDSM.

Media representation of the political entities, regardless of whether they are individual or collective, is different from portal to portal. However, the actors are mostly quoted and talked about in the context of the topic being reported on, especially on Almakos, Republika, Lokalno, Nezavisen, A1on and Nova TV. They are followed by Tetova Sot, Kurir, MKD.mk and Sloboden Pechat, that quote, paraphrase and talk about the actors in the context of the topic. Only Vecher.mk, as before, talks about all the actors represented in the news items in the context of the topic and all of them are negatively evaluated by some other actor. Thus, the most present politician in the analysed news items, the president of VMRO-DPMNE, Hristijan Mickoski, is exclusively quoted on Republika, quoted and paraphrased on Kurir, A1on and Sloboden Pechat, while Nezavisen quotes him and talks about him in the context of the topic. On the other hand, Kurir mostly quotes and paraphrases VMRO-DPMNE (from the press releases of the party), Republika quotes and talks about it in the context of the topic, while Tetova Sot, Almakos, Lokalno, Nezavisen, A1on and Sloboden Pechat mostly talk/write about the party in context of the topic.

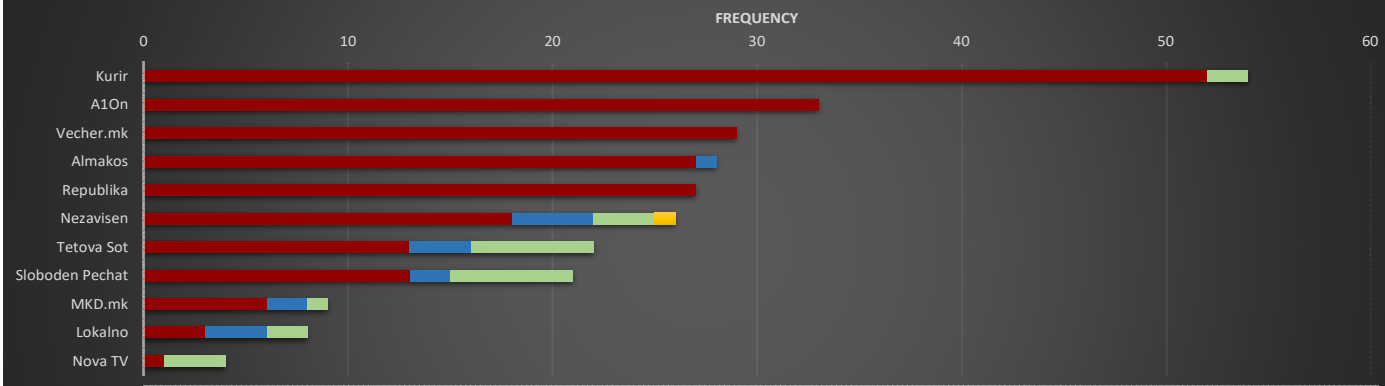
The attitudes towards the political actors, as in the previously monitored months, are mostly neutral, without qualifications and taking sides by the journalists, yet negative, one-sided when they are directed by other political actors, while, as expected for an election campaign, the political actors do not criticize themselves, and when they evaluate themselves, the evaluation is either positive or neutral. On Kurir and Republika, the journalist is usually a neutral observer and recorder of all the activities of the political entities in the election race, and the negative attitudes are left to other political actors, addressed especially towards SDSM, DUI and Stevo Pendarovski. The case is similar on Nezavisen, A1on and Sloboden Pechat, where the journalist uses neutral words towards the politicians and the political parties, while negative attitudes (from others) towards Hristijan Mickoski, VMRO-DPMNE, DUI and Stevo Pendarovski dominate. On Lokalno and Almakos, the journalist has a neutral approach to all actors mentioned in the analysed news items, while others have negative attitude, on Lokalno towards SDSM and VMRO-DPMNE, and on Almakos towards DUI and VMRO-DPMNE On Tetova Sot and Vecher mk, no attitudes from the journalists were detected, however, the negative ones dominate, on Tetova Sot, they are primarily towards VMRO-DPMNE, and on Vecher they are towards SDSM, DUI, Stevo Pendarovski and Ali Ahmeti. This tendency to remain neutral, not to express an opinion, an attitude, especially during a period of double elections, i.e., the preoccupation of the media/portals with the election race and noting all appearances, gatherings, rallies or party press releases of the participants in the campaign, full of harmful narratives towards the political opponent, does not inform the public and the voters about the problems and the proposals of the political candidates. Everything comes down to 'said', 'emphasized', 'underlined'. An objective journalist, if they do their job well (with facts and verifiable conclusions), cannot remain a neutral observer.

## Journalistic (un)professionalism

Continuously, from month to month, the online **media inform unilaterally**, and this time it was noted in 232 out of a total of 261 (or 89.2%) analysed news items. Such are all the analysed news items (with harmful narratives) on Vecher.mk, Republika, A1on, while on Kurir, Almakos and MKD.mk, one or two news items were incidentally noted with two/more consulted sides. On other portals, such as Tetova Sot, Nezavisen and Sloboden Pechat, the number of news items with two/more sides ranges from five to seven such news items.

At the same time, **reliance on one source of information** is often a constant in reporting. In fact, 222 such news items (or 85.1%) have been identified. On Vecher.mk, Republika and A1on, all analysed news items were like this, while on Almakos, there was only one news item with two sources, and on Kurir, there were two news items with three or more sources. On the other portals, Tetova Sot had 9 news items (out of a total of 22) with two/three and more sources, Nezavisen had 7 such news items (out of a total of 26), and Sloboden Pechat had 8 news items (out of a total of 21) with two/three and more sources.

**Table 6. Number of sources per online media outlet (April 2024)**

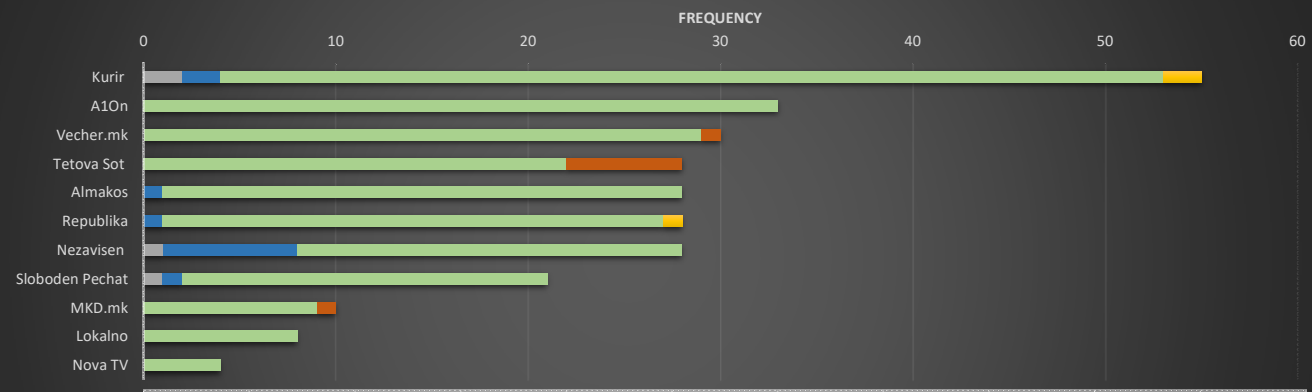



| | Nova TV | Lokalno | MKD.mk | Sloboden Pechat | Tetova Sot | Nezavisen | Republika | Almakos | Vecher.mk | A1On | Kurir |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| One | 1 | 3 | 6 | 13 | 13 | 18 | 27 | 27 | 29 | 33 | 52 |
| Two | | 3 | 2 | 2 | 3 | 4 | | 1 | | | |
| Three or more | 3 | 2 | 1 | 6 | 6 | 3 | | | | | 2 |
| No sources | | | | | | 1 | | | | | |

The absence of the basic principle of journalism for every information (current issue) that is placed in the media, to consider at least two sides, two sources, i.e., the reliance of online media almost exclusively on only one source, corresponds to the dominance of two genre forms, the speeches of the politicians and the press releases of the parties. This is followed by the motive for the publication of the news items, where the pseudo-events, the actual and the announced events dominate (i.e., the press releases of the parties, statements, reactions of the politicians and the political parties on the meetings and the rallies with citizens) which together comprise 3/4 (192 news items or 73.5%) of all analysed news items. These figures are present throughout all monitored months which inevitably raises the question of the basic function of online media. Are they information portals, as they define themselves, or portals conveyors of speeches, positions, statements, press releases of the political entities and the political parties. In addition, most of them, in addition to the name, add attributes such as 'first to know', 'closer to the culture, information, events, the world, politics', 'news on the go', 'no compromise for the truth', 'reflection of the truth', 'quick and different', 'accurate and true information'.

The figures are almost identical in relation to the sources in the analysed news items as in the previous monitored months. **The most numerous are the news items with precise sources** of information (246 news items), while the unclear ('as we find out', 'from our sources') and imprecise ('as they say in...', 'we were told in...') sources are rare. Of all the analysed portals, A1on, Lokalno and Nova TV use exclusively precise sources of information, while Almakos, Vecher.mk and MKD.mk, in addition to the precise sources, each have one either imprecise or source from another media, and Republika and Sloboden Pechat have two unclear/imprecise sources or sources from another medium. Kurir, which has the most news items with harmful narratives, in addition to the dominant precise sources, has two unclear, imprecise sources, as well as sources from another media. An exception is the portal Tetova Sot which has the most sources from other media (in addition to the dominant precise ones), as well as Nezavisen with the largest number of imprecise sources (in addition to the dominant precise ones).

**Table 7. Type of sources per online media (April 2024)**




| | Nova TV | Lokalno | MKD.mk | Sloboden Pechat | Nezavisen | Republika | Almakos | Tetova Sot | Vecher.mk | A1On | Kurir |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Unclear | | | | 1 | 1 | | | | | | 2 |
| Imprecise | | | | 1 | 7 | 1 | 1 | | | | 2 |
| Precise | 4 | 8 | 9 | 19 | 20 | 26 | 27 | 22 | 29 | 33 | 49 |
| The journalist as a source | | | | | | 1 | | | | | 2 |
| Another medium | | | 1 | | | | | 6 | 1 | | |

Again, the **visualization of the analysed news items** was mostly supported by current (168 news items) and archival photos (90 news items). The number of news items with multiple, two or three photos and video, related to the rallies/meetings of the parties with the citizens across the country, especially noticeable on Kurir and Republika, is not small. But, as before, most of them were not marked, although according to the content of the news items, it was clear what kind of event it was about. Kurir, Tetova Sot, Almakos, Republika and A1on had the most current photos, while Vecher.mk and Nezavisen had almost the same number of current and archival photos. Kurir (9) and Vecher.mk (5) had the most videos (in addition to the photos). Perhaps, as a peculiarity is the news item of Republika *Mickoski: A victory as big as a mountain is coming!*

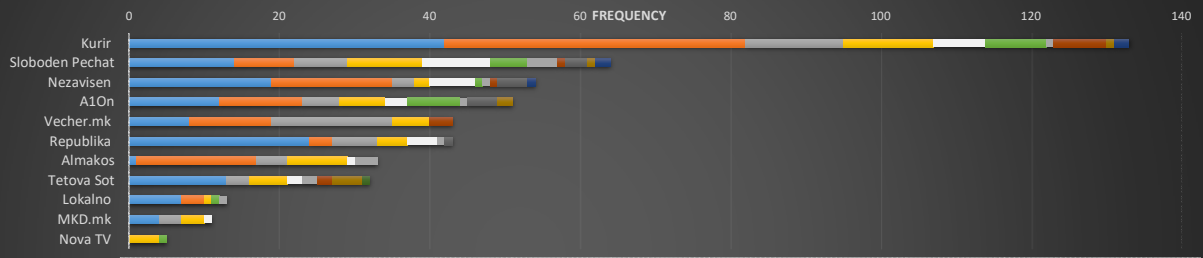
about the 'big national rally' with which VMRO-DPMNE started the campaign for the presidential elections. The news item contained as many as 9 photos from the rally, of Hristijan Mickoski, Gordana Siljanovska-Davkova, members of the party and citizens present at the rally and none of them have been marked. In terms of the content, the entire text was excerpts from Hristijan Mickoski's speech, and not a word was said about the presentation of the VMRO-DPMNE's candidate for president of the state.

## Dominant harmful political narratives

In the serious number of 261 news items with harmful narratives (with as many as 482 indicators - sentences, formulations, paragraphs), the portal Kurir contributes the most (54 news items), followed by A1on, Vecher.mk, Almakos, Republika. The focus was again on the allegations of corruption, non-transparency/ unaccountability, unprofessionalism, abuse of office without any attempt to substantiate the allegations, as well as unverified/difficult to verify findings as a basis for accusing the political opponents (162 cases), labelling, ridicule and gross disrespect of other persons, political opponents, public office holders, media workers (60 cases) permanently present in the entire monitored process, this time the use of words and formulations that denigrate a certain group of people in order to cause division and discord between 'us and you' (60 cases). In other words, news items that undermine the trust in the institutions, select biasedly, attack, demonize a certain person, incite division, spread panic, fear and insecurity.

Online media closely followed the activities of the political actors, filling the media space, above all, with the speeches/parts of the speeches of the politicians (party leaders) full of harmful narratives delivered mostly at the rallies organized throughout the country. Negative rhetoric was most evident at the beginning of the month, with the start of the election campaign, where undermining the trust in the institutions and biased selection, i.e., the selective presentation of data dominated, followed by character attacks on the political opponent and inciting divisions. The most numerous news items on Republika, Tetova Sot, Lokalno and Sloboden Pechat, were the news items in which the trust in the institutions was undermined, on Almakos it was the biased selection, on Vecher MK it was character attacks on the political opponent, while on Kurir, A1on and Nezavisen, it was the undermining of the trust in the institutions and the biased selection. This is shown in the following table:

**Table 8. Prevalence of harmful narratives in the news items in online media in April 2024**




| | Nova TV | MKD.mk | Lokalno | Tetova Sot | Almakos | Republika | Vecher.mk | A1On | Nezavisen | Sloboden Pechat | Kurir |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Undermining trust | | 4 | 7 | 13 | 1 | 24 | 8 | 12 | 19 | 14 | 42 |
| Biased selection | | | 3 | | 16 | 3 | 11 | 11 | 16 | 8 | 40 |
| Character attacks, demonization | | 3 | | 3 | 4 | 6 | 16 | 5 | 3 | 7 | 13 |
| Fomenting divisions | 4 | 3 | 1 | 5 | 8 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 2 | 10 | 12 |
| Populism | | 1 | | 2 | 1 | 4 | | 3 | 6 | 9 | 7 |
| Spreading panic, fear and uncertainty | 1 | | 1 | | | | | 7 | 1 | 5 | 8 |
| Foreign Influence | | | 1 | 2 | 3 | 1 | | 1 | 1 | 4 | 1 |
| Dezinformation | | | | 2 | | | 3 | | 1 | 1 | 7 |
| Extreme patriotism | | | | | | 1 | | 4 | 4 | 3 | |
| Ethnocentrism | | | | 4 | | | | 2 | | 1 | 1 |
| Conspiracy theories | | | | | | | | | 1 | 2 | 2 |
| Hate speech | | | | 1 | | | | | | | |

**Kurir** is a portal with the largest number of news items with harmful narratives (54 news items) and the largest number of posts (133), i.e., sentences, paragraphs, formulations that mostly refer to undermining trust in the institutions and biased selection. For example, in the news item *Kovachki to Loga: How does it feel to be Ali's bell boy, what kind of European Macedonia are you talking about, where trust in the judiciary controlled by DUI is 2%; prosecutors and judges are friends and officials of Ahmeti*, Facebook status of the VMRO-DPMNE MP Dragan Kovachki, in which he shared qualifications about the Minister of Justice, Krenar Loga, that he was an unknown person, just like his work, that if he had not been the Minister of Justice, the public would not have known about him, that he was incapable and he argued this with the extradition of Ljupcho Palevski - Palcho from Turkey, accused of double murder, and asked him how it felt to be Ali Ahmeti's bell boy. What kind of news item was it, news, transcript from a Facebook status, what was its informative function, creation of harmful narratives (**Kurir, 28.4.2024**). Or, the news item *Mickoski to Kovachevski: With you, Macedonia has no European future, with Artan and Ali you got stuck in the mud of your petty interests and rapaciousness*, from the VMRO-DPMNE rally in Berovo. The news item quoted the words of the president of the party, Hristijan Mickoski, who asked the president of the SDSM, Dimitar Kovachevski, how they would bring Macedonia into the European Union when they made it the poorest country in Europe and with the highest inflation, 'they stuck it in the mud', and said that Europe does not accept criminals like them and their Siamese twin DUI, and that the only place that could accept them was prison (**Kurir, April 2, 2024)**.

**A1on** is in the second place according to the number of harmful narratives (33 news items), the most numerous of which were the undermining of the trust in the institutions and biased selection. The news item titled *Mickoski: An Artanoid regime has been created that destroys the country*, referred to the rally of VMRO-DPMNE in Pehcevo, and conveyed the words of the president Hristijan Mickoski about citizens' support of the party to get 61 MPs in the elections, as a basis for a stable Government that would transform Macedonia, as well as for the presidential candidate Gordana Siljanovska-Davkova who was a 'woman fighter and patriot'. According to the title, Hristijan Mickoski talked about an 'Artanoid regime', but nothing was said about it in the text and it was left to the reader to infer what that regime is. **(A1on, 20.4.2024).**

**Republika** published a news item with a similar title *Mickoski: An Artanoid regime has been created that destroys Macedonia, therefore it is important to return the state to the people, and then transform it*, from the same VMRO-DPMNE rally in Pehcevo, however it also lacked an explanation of the 'Artanoid regime' **(Republika, 20.4.2024).** The day before, the portal Kurir published the news item *Mickoski: The current Government brought a cyclical Artanoid hybrid regime. After 8 May, Macedonia will be free again and led by a VMRO-DPMNE's Government* from the VMRO-DPMNE rally in Pehcevo, where Hristijan Mickoski explained that by Artanoid regime he meant 'his mentor' (or leader, teacher who appears for the first time in Greek mythology) *Ali Ahmeti from Zajas, who got Macedonia on a platter from Kovachevski, Zechevikj and the other few politicians in the leadership of the SDSM, who had proven themselves to be the main lackeys* **(Kurir, 19.4.2024).** This qualification of the Government was found in news items on numerous other portals and television stations.

**Vecher mk** is in third place with 29 news items with harmful narratives with a predominance of character attacks on the political opponent and demonization. In the news item: *Victory of the people, the tsunami has risen and hangs over their heads - on 8 May, it will defeat them completely*, from the press conference of Hristijan Mickoski and VMRO-DPMNE after the first round of the presidential elections, the words of Hristijan Mickoski were conveyed (although the video recording of the press conference was also included in the news item) about the victory, about the people who supported them even though they suffered from the Government that attacked them, underestimated them, threatened them, against *a hundred merchants from DUI and SDSM who were the cause of all the suffering, poverty and crime in Macedonia*. Using sports terms, he also said that *the first round of the elections was a yellow card, and it shines*; while the red card must *follow on 8 May,* where a clear victory *over this criminal and corrupt Government* is needed, a qualification that VMRO-DPMNE has been regularly using for the SDSM and DUI Government for months **(Vecher mk, 4.24.2024).**

Hence, there was almost no portal, television station or news agency that would not inform about the press conference, but the different approach in the choice of the title was striking, from the most commonly used one that *the tsunami has risen and is hanging over their heads*, to those that *this is the best result that VMRO-DPMNE has had as an opposition*, *over 600,000 citizens voted against the Government, this is a bigger victory than we expected, we are winning with over 170,000 votes, this Government is falling, this is a revolution of the people, a great victory for the Macedonian people and for the citizens of Macedonia, thank you from the bottom of my heart, Macedonian people...* These were all words of Hristijan Mickoski at the press conference, but the title of the news item was made by the journalist or the editor of the media outlet and the comparison of the victory in the first round of the presidential elections with a 'tsunami' associates the destructive sea wave caused by an earthquake or a volcanic eruption with an incomprehensible threat to human lives. Maybe, precisely because of this, the very next day it was 'refined' as a political tsunami by the leadership of VMRO-DPMNE.

**Republika** had the most news items with harmful narratives that undermine the trust in the institutions. The news item *SDSM has become the lackey of DUI, Ali Ahmeti from his vilayet in Zajas governs Macedonia like some Middle Eastern sheikh, but this is coming to an end, I promise you*, referred to the meeting of Hristijan Mickoski with the citizens of Demir Hisar within the presidential campaign. In terms of the content, the emphasis was on SDSM and DUI, whose leadership brought life for a few, but real hell for everyone else. According to Hristijan Mickoski, SDSM has brought hell to education and agriculture, and DUI governed Macedonia, like Grubi who acquired a lot of property in the big centres or Bujar Osmani who sold, belittled and humiliated Macedonia and gave away the Macedonian identity *like he had inherited it from his ancestors*. He considers Ali Ahmeti the main character in the story, who enjoys the haciendas in Zajas like some Middle Eastern sheikh and rules Macedonia from there. What creates confusion is the qualification (positive or negative) of Ahmeti as a sheikh, if one knows that a sheikh is an Arab ruler, a respectable person who has spiritual authority, and in the Middle East it is usually members of royal families **(Republika, 8.4 .2024).** The same news item, with a shortened title and emphasis on Ali Ahmeti: *Ahmeti governs Macedonia as a sheikh from his Vilayet in Zajas* was published by **Sloboden Pechat,** as well. It also quoted Hristijan Mickoski's words about Artan Grubi, Bujar Osmani and Ali Ahmeti as 'Middle Eastern sheikh' **(Sloboden Pechat, 8.4.2024).** The portal, in the news item entitled *Pendarovski: in VMRO-DPMNE, honesty is the exception, and crime is the rule*, the presidential candidate Stevo Pendarovski, at the meeting with the citizens in Kisela Voda in Skopje, referred to VMRO-DPMNE, stating that the difference between 'us' (SDSM) and 'them' (VMRO-DPMNE) is clear, that SDSM never thought of organizing a violent invasion of the Parliament, dictating verdicts for political opponents over the telephone, arresting on Monday and sentencing to 8 or 15 years of imprisonment on Wednesday. That was what they did and again, if they are in position, they would do the same **(Sloboden Pechat, 8.4.2024).**

In **Nezavisen**, the news items with harmful narratives were concentrated on the undermining of the trust in the institutions and biased selection For example, in the news item: *Kovachevski: We will not arrest journalists* from the rally of the presidential candidate Stevo Pendarovski in Kisela Voda in Skopje (about which Sloboden Pechat informed), it conveyed part of his speech and the speech of the president of the SDSM, Dimitar Kovachevski, aimed primarily at VMRO-DPMNE and their president, Hristijan Mickoski. Kovachevski qualified VMRO-DPMNE as a party without a vision, which abused the media, arrested journalists (the arrest and criminal charges against the journalist Furkan Saliu for allegedly obstructing an official in the performance of their official duty), falsified polls, abused state institutions. Stevo Pendarovski said that not only VMRO-DPMNE lacked vision but they also lacked the courage to make state decisions, pointing to the municipalities led by VMRO-DPMNE which stagnate and are drowning in unresolved communal problems **(Nezavisen, 8.4.2024).** Or, the news item *Nikolovski called Pendarovski a two-faced person*, in which the Vice President of VMRO-DPMNE, Aleksandar Nikoloski, during a meeting with the citizens of Gevgelija, qualified the presidential candidate Stevo Pendarovski, the president of the state at the time, as a man who acted as an honest and non-corrupt man, and in fact he was *the source and a supporter of corruption in Macedonia* and that he had not set foot in Gevgelija for the past 5 years, except when travelling on a holiday in Greece. What

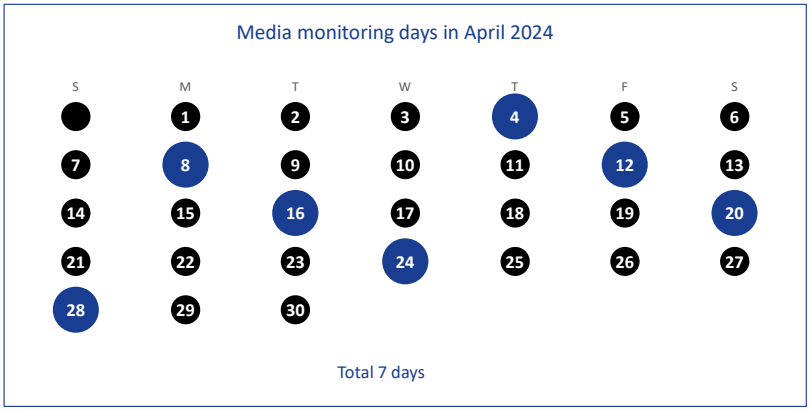
creates a confusion in the news item is the last sentence which reads that Nikoloski was wrong, because Pendarovski was in Gevgelija last year in January when he visited several organizations and associations and walked around the city. **(Nezavisen, 12.4.2024).** The reaction of the presidential candidate Pendarovski was not properly referenced in the text. In **Almakos**, among 28 news items with harmful narratives, the ones with biased selection are the most numerous. For example, the news item *Kovachki threatens Loga: Leave the third constituency. Loga's answer: I will be in every corner of the country*, where Kovachki sent a message to Ali Ahmeti and Artan Grubi that massive bribery, blackmails and threats were being carried out, and that Krenar Loga was a bell boy of the Alliance for Albanians who went to Delchevo and Berovo in order to get one MP in the third constituency. Feedback from Loga to Kovachki followed about his intellectual capacity, due to which he could not get a NATO security certificate and that he could only dream to be the Minister of Education **(Almakos, 28.3.2024).**

## 2.2. Monitoring report for TV stations' coverage for April 2024

In April 2024, the central news editions of nine TV stations were analysed and during the seven days of the analysis (4, 8, 12, 16, 20, 24 and 28 April), 55 news items containing harmful narratives were registered. Since the beginning of the research until now, this is the lowest number of registered news items, with less than 8 (7, 8) news items per day.

The most common are the harmful narratives biased selection (28) and undermining trust in the institutions (24).

## Frequency of harmful narratives among TV stations




The trend of decreasing harmful narratives in the news on the TV stations, which was noted in March (79), continued in April, with the lowest number of recorded news items ever (55). It must be pointed out that seven days were analysed in April[10], however understandably, on the day of voting in the first round of the presidential elections (24 April) due to the election silence, only 2 news items with harmful narratives were registered. Nonetheless, in spite of that, such a small number of news items is positively surprising, especially considering that it emerges at the height of the pre-election campaigns for the presidential and the parliamentary elections. Here, notwithstanding, it must be emphasized that the informing through the

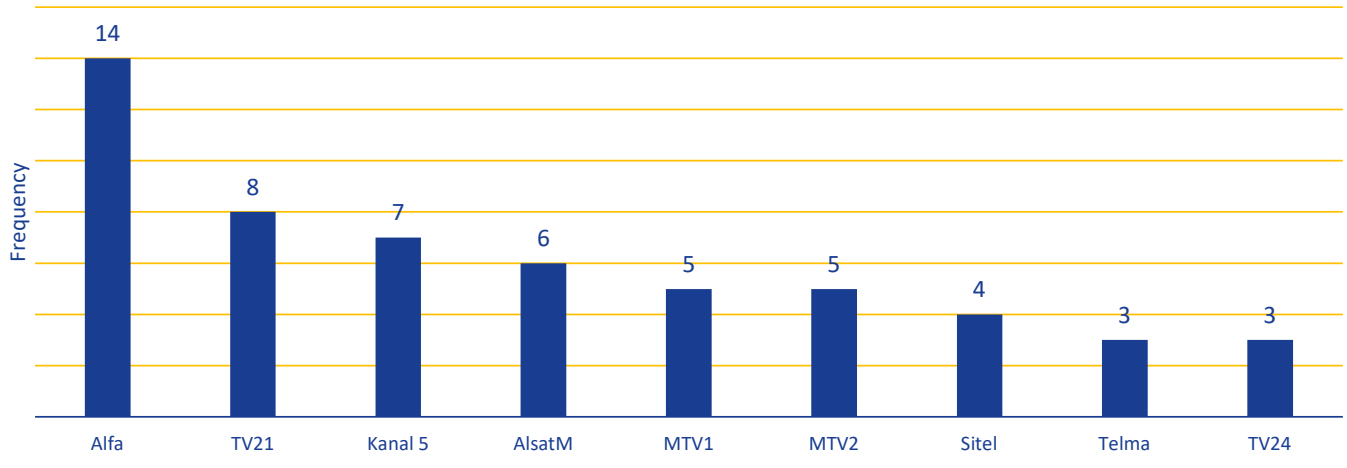
10 According to the methodology, every fourth day of the central news editions of the TV stations is monitored and analysed, which means that in some months seven days are monitored, while in some eight days. Methodology link: https://respublica.edu.mk/istrazhuvanje-shtetna/metodologija/

TV stations during the election processes is not only regulated by the Law on Audio and Audio-Visual Media Services[11], but also by the Electoral Code[12] which prescribes in great detail the conditions and the manners in which the broadcasters, and especially the public broadcasting service MRT, should cover the elections. Accordingly, the Agency for Audio and Audiovisual Media Services (AAVMU), starting from 15 February, 2024, monitors the media coverage of the presidential and the parliamentary elections, as stipulated in the Electoral Code.

It is obvious that such numbers are not the result of a decent political campaign in which harmful narratives suddenly disappeared. This becomes clear if you look at the analysis of the online media, which showed that the political actors do not refrain from insults, characters attacks on the opponents, disinformation and accusations without evidence and arguments, as evidenced by the registered 261 news items with harmful narratives in the online media in the same period.

Such a low number among TV stations is due to the legal obligations they have according to the Electoral Code and the Law on Audio and Audiovisual Media Services and the monitoring carried out by the AAVMS, but also by various international and domestic organisations. It is obvious that the journalists in these media outlets have started to develop a greater awareness of the harmful narratives in the political discourse and do not give them space in the central news editions, as was the case in the previous months. An example of this is the coverage of the party campaigns in the news editions, in which the parts of the speeches of the party candidates that contain insults, unsubstantiated attacks and other harmful narratives are very rarely found. On the other hand, if we look at the entire speeches and videos posted on the parties' websites and social networks and our analysis of these platforms, it shows that the harmful narratives in this period show a trend of growth, not reduction.

Table 9. Prevalence of news items that contain a harmful narrative according to TV stations in April 2024



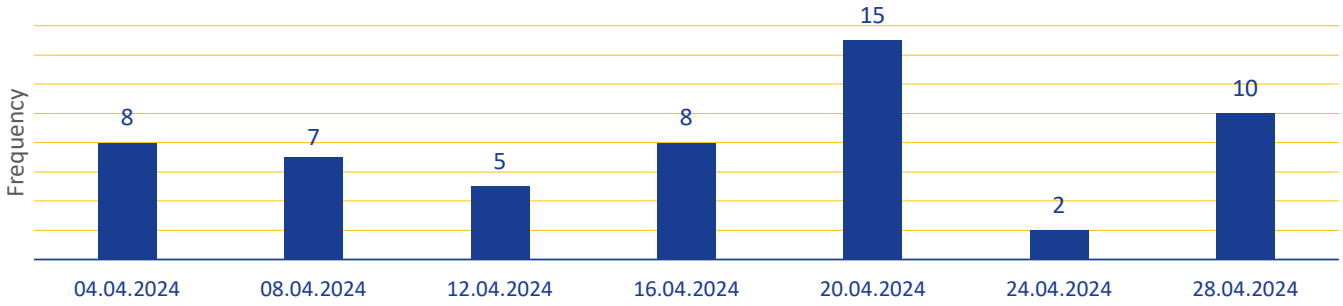

The most news items with harmful narratives were recorded on TV Alfa (14 or 25.5%), but this television also saw a drastic drop (40 in February, 35 in March), which is characteristic of most TV stations in April. There were recorded 8 (14.5) on TV 21, 7 (12.7) on Kanal 5, 6 (10.9) on Alsat M, 5 each on MTV 1 and MTV 2 (9.1 on Sitel 4 (7.3%) and on TV Telma and TV 24 each 3 (5.5%) news items with harmful narratives.

11 Law On Audio and Audiovisual Media Services. https://avmu.mk/wp-content/uploads/2017/05/Zakon_za_audio_i_audiovizuelni_mediumski_uslugi_mkd_1.pdf. Retrieved 16 May, 2024.

12 Electoral Code – Refined text March 2024.https://drive.google.com/file/d/1ZJMruqcNl-yC5VuWSzpfT9BFeKphm5An/view?usp=sharing. Retrieved 16 May, 2024.

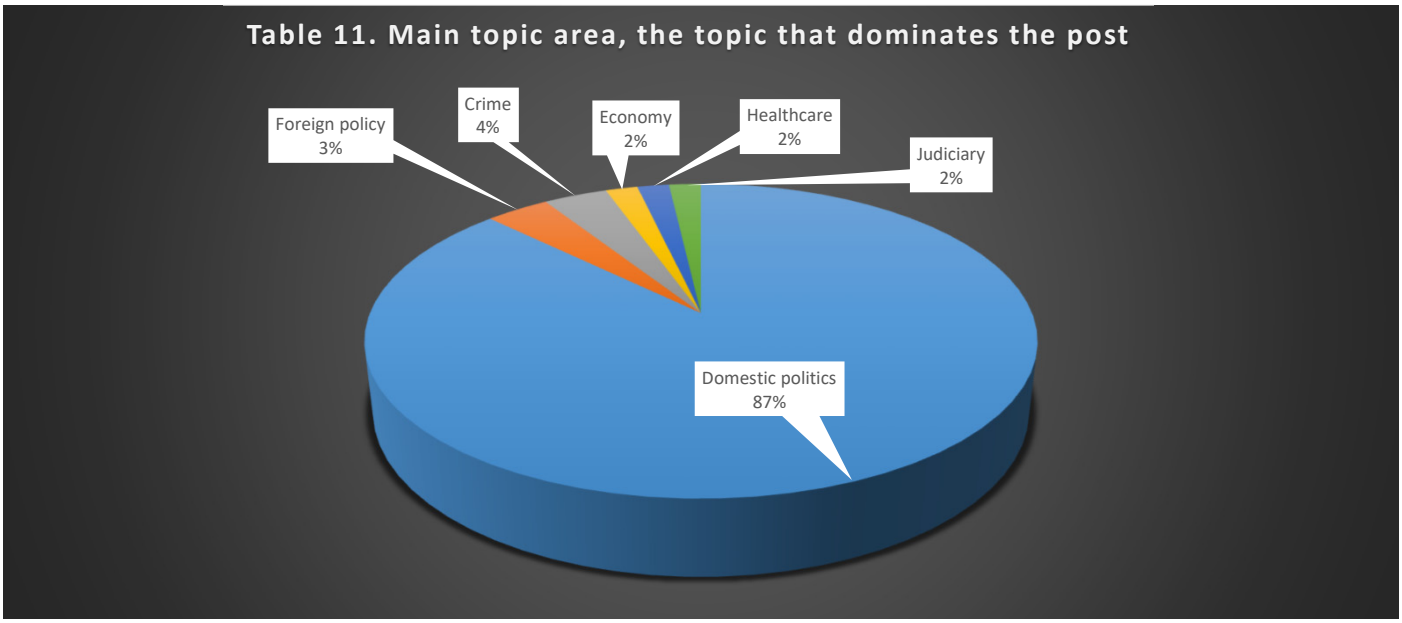
The day with the largest number of such news items registered is 20 April (15 news items or 27.3%), and the day with the least is 24 April (2 news items or 3.6%), which is the result of the election silence.

Table 10. Representation of news items by date (April 2024)




It is not surprising that the largest number of news items 48 (or 87.3%) were related to topics concerning domestic politics and a very small number had a topic from some other area, foreign policy and crime (2 news items each or 3.6%) and 1 news item related to healthcare, justice and economy each.

Table 11. Main topic area, the topic that dominates the post



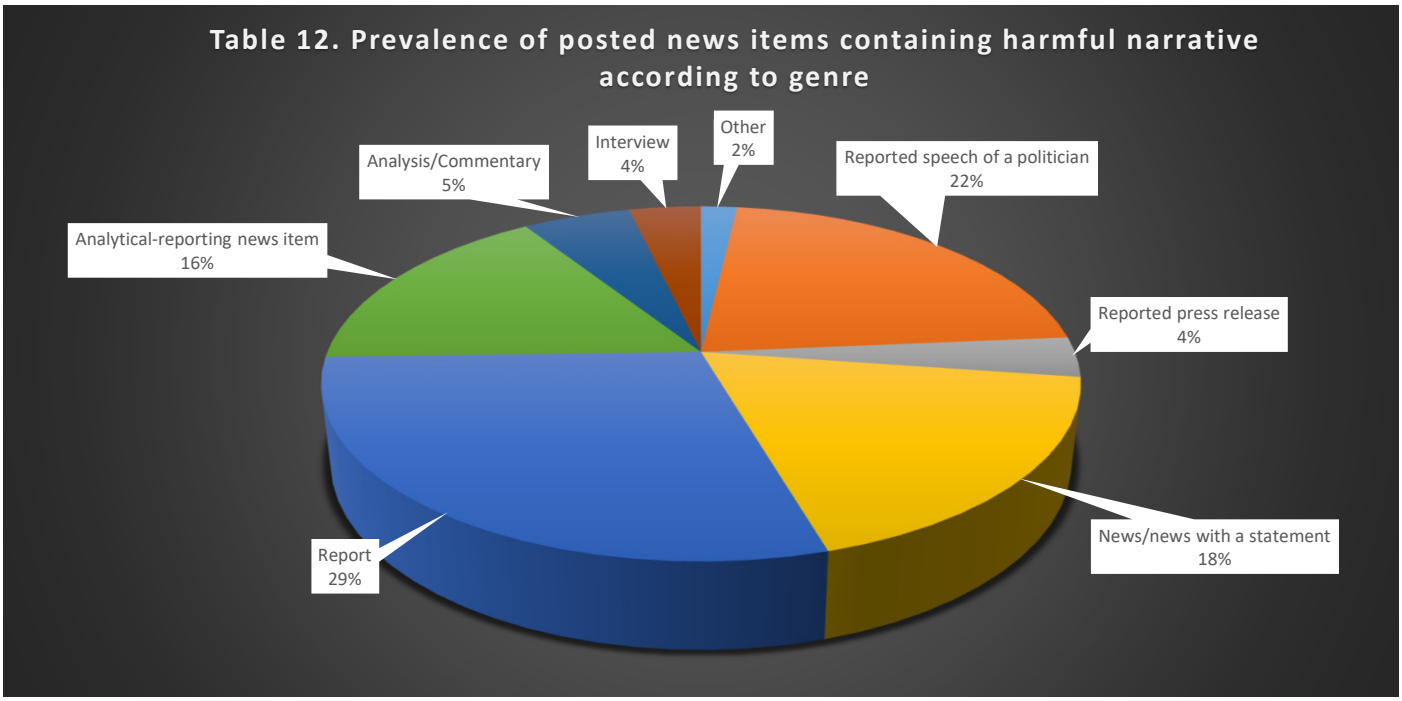

As expected, in April, the month of the presidential elections, everything was related to the elections, so the topics of the news items with harmful narratives were part of the pre-election campaigns of the parties. In their pre-election speeches, the parties often accused of Russian influence, crime, bad governance and non-transparency, crime in the healthcare facilities, irregularities in the electoral process and the party financing.

Unsubstantiated accusations directed towards the opposition parties of links and connections with Russia were present throughout the campaign. SDSM and DUI frequently used Russia for intimidation, rarely offering any evidence or indicators that the opposition actually had ties to this country. An example of this is the statement posted by the European Front led by DUI on 20 April, in which it warns the opposition coalition Vredi to break away from Russian influence and finally to join the European path:

'We call on the Albanian opposition to come to its senses and realign with the pro-Europeans and not become a tool of the Russian circles in the country...' **(TV 24, 20 April, 2024).**

Via this narrative, it is emphasized that the ruling party DUI is on the right side, on the European side, and that its policies are in the direction of the country joining the European Union. On the other hand, the opposition parties in the Vredi coalition chose the side of Russia, (although they did not manifest it in any way), and they still have some time to change their minds and get back on the right track.

The most common genre is the report (26 or 32.9%), while in second place are the news items with the reported speech of a politician (12 or 21.8).



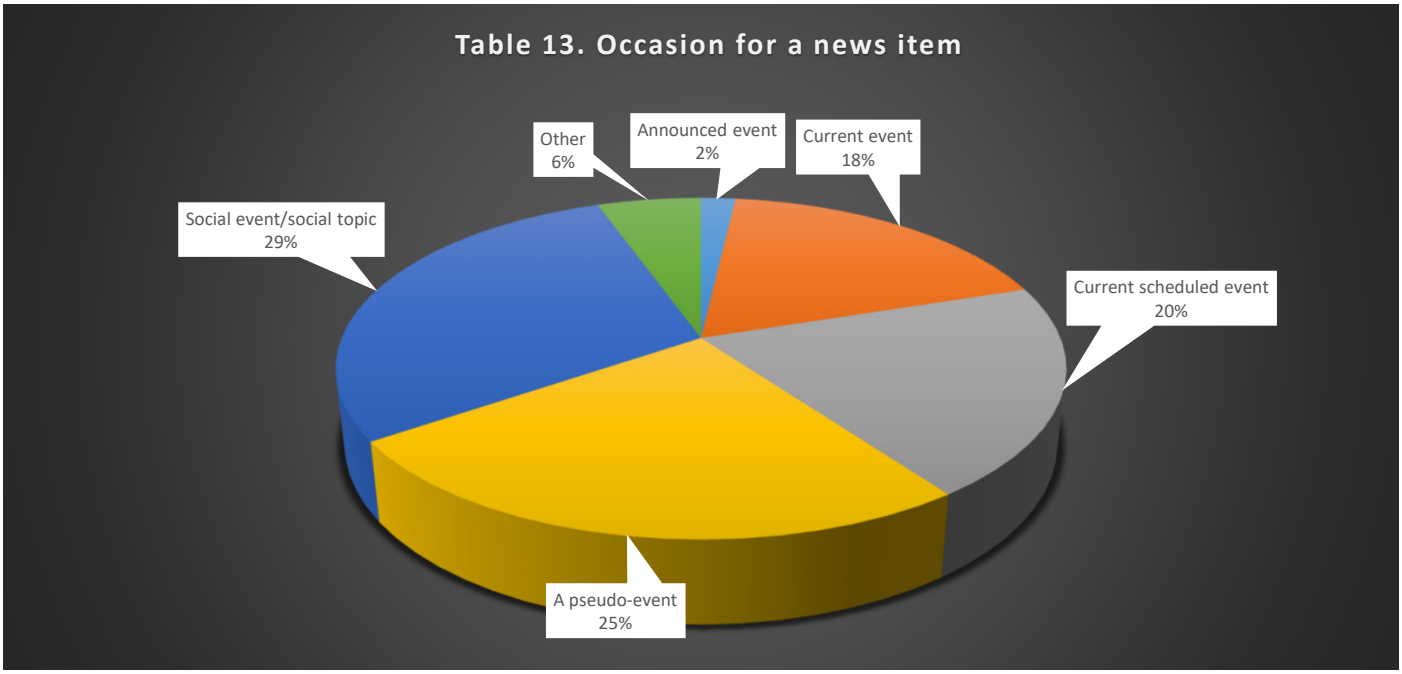

The basic journalistic genre the news (10 news items or 18.2%) and analytical-report news items (9 news items or 16.4%) are in third place.

The high second place of the news items that contained only reported speech of a politician is an indicator that, especially during the political campaign, the political actors were given a lot of space to express freely their ideas and views, as well as insults and unsubstantiated attacks, without them passing the journalistic filter and being analysed and put in context. It should be considered that in an election campaign, it is the responsibility of the media to report on the political offers of the candidates, even when they use strong rhetoric, in order to provide the voters with a comprehensive picture in order to make an informed decision. Nonetheless, it is very important what kind of attitude the journalist will have towards that rhetoric, how the journalist does it - whether they condemn or reinforce that rhetoric.

'The election campaign consists of speeches, rallies and press conferences that present the party leader in the spotlight. However, the task of the media is not simply to broadcast everything that was said by the leaders, but information is also needed regarding the reactions of the people, regarding the views of the opponents, the attendance, etc. It is the task of the media to report on the differences between the parties on the same issues, and to provide voters with sufficient information to make a comparison.'[13]

13 Association of Journalists of Macedonia, Guide for ethical media coverage of elections in North Macedonia. https://znm.org.mk/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/prirachnik-za-etichko-izvestuvane-od-izbori-vo-severna-makedonija.pdf. Accessed on 16 May, 2024.

The second indicator of this thesis can be seen if you look at the analysis of the occasion for the journalistic news items (Table 5), according to which pseudo-events as the occasion for the news item (14 news items or 25.5%) are right behind the social events or the social topics (16 news items or 29.1%). The current planned events (11 or 20%) and actual events (10 or 18.2%) are in third and fourth place.




An example of a news item in which harmful narratives appear, and where a pseudo-event of a political party served as an occasion, is the press conference of the coalition Vredi and Izet Medjiti, which is used as an opportunity for a political confrontation, and not as an event where current topics or social developments are discussed:

'He is asking for a Government to save Bujar and DUI, not a Government to save the citizens and the integration of the country.' **(TV 21, 8 April, 2024)**

According to this, it is obvious that certain political actors, with their press releases, press conferences and statements, still managed to find space to present their views and agendas without hindrance, but also harmful political narratives, without there being a specific occasion, currently happening or something similar.

The media must not turn into a free newsletter of the political parties, which will broadcast all their press releases and statements, without analysing them in an objective and balanced manner and putting them in a proper context. The choice of news must be carried out according to their significance for the society and the life of citizens, and not according to the rating of the political actors in the country.

## The political actors and the sources in the analysed news items

As previous, in this pre-election period, the most common actors in the news items with harmful narratives were the leaders and representatives of the largest political parties, as well as their presidential candidates.

These political actors mostly talked about each other, attacking and insulting each other, while the journalists took a neutral stance and their role was only in reporting the narratives, not in creating them.

With the exception of TV Alfa, where we see that in 6 news items the journalist had a negative attitude towards SDSM representatives (in 3 towards SDSM, and in the other 3 towards its presidential candidate Pendarovski), in all other cases the attitude of the journalist was neutral.

It should be underscored that even in reference to TV Alfa there was a decrease in the unbalanced and biased attitude, and unlike March, when 15 cases were registered in which the journalist took a noticeably negative attitude towards SDSM representatives, in April there were 6 such cases.

Table 14. Total representation of the first, the second and the third actor by TV channel

| TV channel | An actor | Frequency | Mode of presentation | | | Who and how the actor is represented | | | | | | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | | | | | The journalist | | | | Someone else | | | | Himself/herself | | | |
| | | | Quoted | Paraphrased | He/she is being discussed | - | + | -/+ | 0 | - | + | -/+ | 0 | - | + | -/+ | 0 |
| MTV1 | Bujar Osmani | 2 | 2 | 2 | | | | | 2 | | | | | | | | |
| | Ali Ahmeti | 2 | 2 | 2 | | | | | 2 | | | | | | | | |
| | Arben Taravari | 2 | 2 | 2 | | | | | 2 | | | | | | | | |
| | DUI | 2 | | | 2 | | | | 1 | 1 | | | | | | | |
| Kanal 5 | D. Kovachevski | 2 | 2 | 2 | 2 | | | | 2 | 2 | | | | | 1 | | |
| | Mickoski | 3 | 3 | 3 | 3 | | | | 3 | 3 | | | | | | | |
| Alsat M | DUI | 3 | | 2 | 2 | | | | | 2 | | | | | 1 | | |
| | Mickoski | 2 | 2 | 2 | 2 | | | | 2 | 2 | | | | | | | |
| Alfa | VMRO | 2 | 2 | | 2 | | | | | 2 | | | | | 2 | | |
| | SDSM | 5 | | | 5 | 3 | | | | 3 | | | | | | | |
| | Pendarovski | 4 | 3 | | 2 | 3 | | | | 1 | | | | | | | |
| TV21 | Bujar Osmani | 2 | 2 | | 2 | 2 | | | | 2 | | | | | | | |
| | VREDI | 3 | 1 | | 3 | | | | | 3 | | | | | | | |
| | VMRO-DPMNE | 3 | | | 3 | | | | | 3 | | | | | | | |
| TV24 | VMRO | 3 | | | 3 | | | | | 3 | | | | | | | |

It is evident that, as in the past months, the political actors were discussing all the social issues, but they were framing them in a manner that would score them daily political points.

Similar to the previous months, the creation of the harmful narratives is mostly the responsibility of the political actor, while the role of the journalist was in the reporting on these narratives, mostly without intervention and taking a stand. The exception is TV Alfa, where out of 16 indicators noted in 14 news items, in 5 the journalist was responsible for creating the harmful narrative, in 5 it was the political actor, while in 6 both participated in the creation of this narrative. In the largest number of cases when the journalist (i.e., the editor and news presenter) is responsible for creating the harmful narrative, it usually happens in the preview of the news item, where the presenter is free to evaluate, attack, defend, explain and interpret certain events and political positions:

'The surgeon who turned into an influencer and a diplomat who eventually accepted the Bulgarian blackmail to become European conditions for Macedonia. That is Bujar Osmani, the Minister of Foreign Affairs and candidate for the president of Macedonia from DUI. And apparently he had other activities, i.e., he also took on the role of a journalist, so he started recording podcasts, both in a studio and in the car. Despite all the professions he has, Osmani could not live without a salary, he would have to go into debt if the salary was late.' **(Alfa TV, 12 April, 2024).**

Apart from TV Alfa, we also noticed one case where the journalist is responsible for creating the harmful narrative on stations such as TV Kanal 5, TV Sitel and TV 24.

This role of the journalist is contrary to the journalistic standards and goes against the principles of professionalism, impartiality and balance. As indicated by the first point of the International Federation of Journalists' Global Charter on the Ethics of Journalists, 'Respect for the facts and for the right of the public to truth is the first duty of the journalist.[14] Concomitantly, the responsibility that she or he has towards the public is far greater than the responsibility towards the employers, the authorities or the political parties.

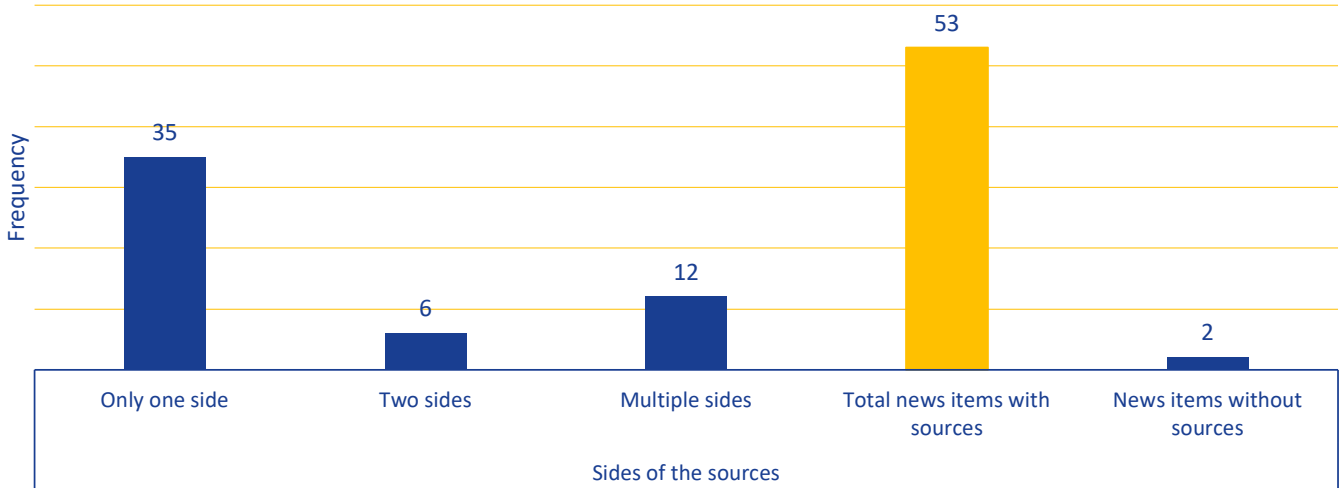
Regardless of what values the media outlet represents and what its editorial policy is, the professional journalists must follow the principles of truth, impartiality and balance.

14 Global Charter of Ethics for Journalists, IFJ, accessed 12 May 2024, https://www.ifj.org/fileadmin/user_upload/Global_Charter_of_Ethics_EN.pdf

| Table 15. Attitude of the media towards the harmful narratives | | | | | | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| TV | Number of indicators | Number of news items | No. of indicators produced only by the journalist | No. of indicators produced only by the political actor | 1. The journalist reports it without any intervention | 2. The journalist clearly highlights it, but does not take a stand | 3. The journalist reports it with condemnation/criticism | 4. The journalist reports it with approval | No. of indicators produced by both | The journalist supports the indicator from the politician | The journalist opposes the indicator from the politician |
| **MTV1** | 9 | 5 | **2** | **6** | 8 | | | 1 | **1** | | |
| **MTV2** | 5 | 5 | | **5** | 5 | | | | | | |
| **Kanal 5** | 8 | 7 | **1** | **7** | 7 | | | | | | |
| **Sitel** | 5 | 4 | **1** | **4** | 1 | 2 | | 1 | | | |
| **Telma** | 5 | 3 | | **5** | 3 | 2 | | | | | |
| **Alsat M** | 6 | 6 | | **6** | 5 | 1 | | | | | |
| **Alfa** | 16 | 14 | **5** | **5** | 2 | 3 | 1 | 5 | **6** | 5 | 1 |
| **TV21** | 9 | 8 | | **9** | 9 | | | | | | |
| **TV24** | 3 | 3 | **1** | **2** | 2 | | | | | | |
| **In total** | **66** | 55 | **11** | **48** | **36** | **9** | **1** | **6** | **6** | **5** | **1** |

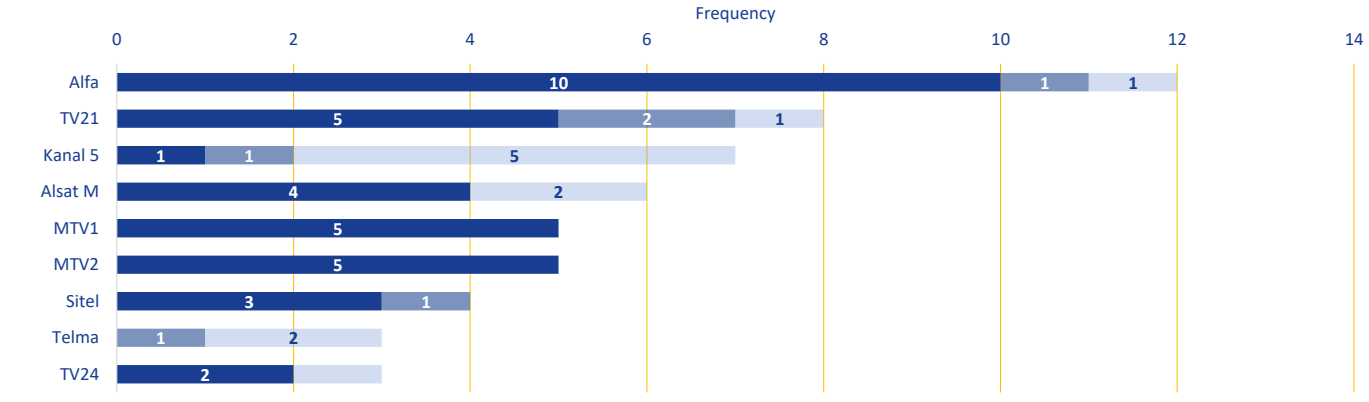
The news items with harmful narratives were more one-sided than before, i.e. they presented only one side (35 news items or 63.6%). Only 6 news items (10.9%) had a second side, while 12 news items (21.8%) had more than one side. Two news items had no sources at all.

Table 16. Frequencies of representation on the side of the sources in the news items that have harmful narratives (April 2024)



The largest number of news items in which only one side was presented in April were noted on the two public broadcasting service channels MTV 1 (5 or 100%) and MTV 2 (5 or 100%), followed by TV Alfa (10 or 83.3%), TV Sitel (3 or 75%) etc.

Table 17. Source side distribution by TV (April 2024)




| | TV24 | Telma | Sitel | MTV2 | MTV1 | Alsat M | Kanal 5 | TV21 | Alfa |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Only one side | 2 | | 3 | 5 | 5 | 4 | 1 | 5 | 10 |
| Two sides | | 1 | 1 | | | | 1 | 2 | 1 |
| Multiple sides | 1 | 2 | | | | 2 | 5 | 1 | 1 |

One-sidedness, along with an unbalanced approach, can be an indicator of partiality in the news items, but not always. If we take into account that 25.5% of the news items as an occasion for the event had a pseudo-event and 21.8% were a reported speech of a politician, we can conclude that sometimes, the journalists, instead of approaching social developments and events in a serious and thorough manner, let the political actors speak for them, of course through the prism of daily politics.

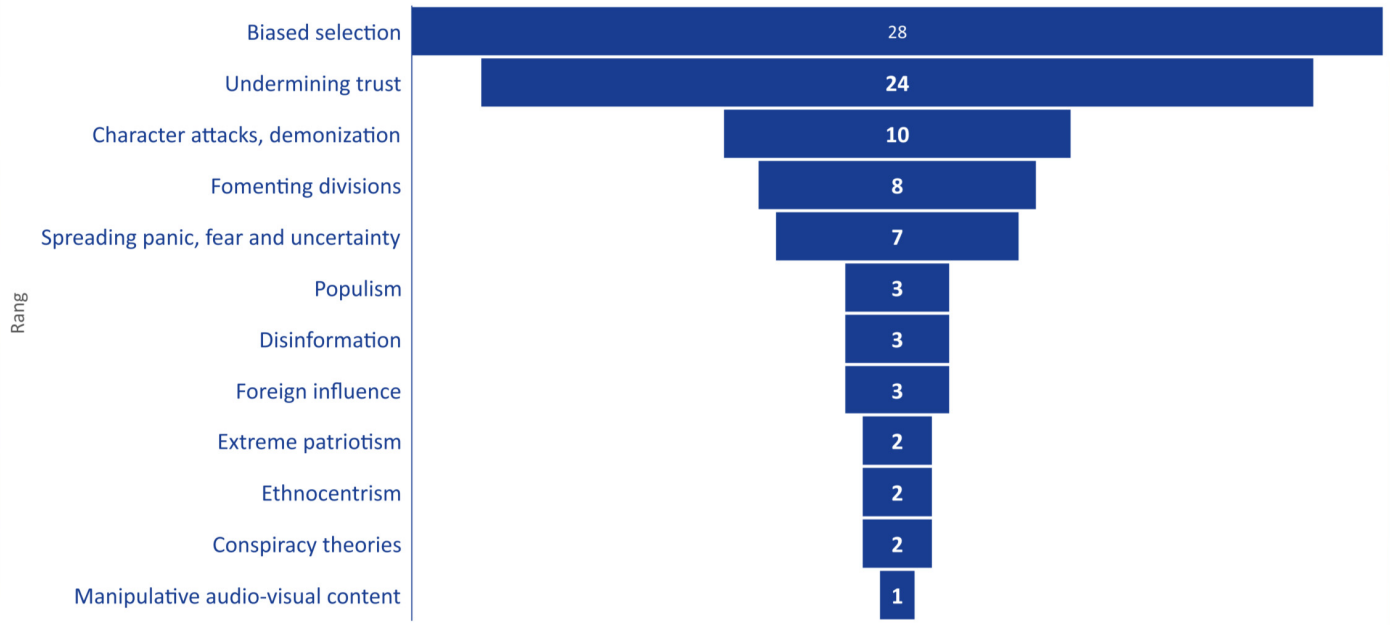
Thus, serious topics such as vetting in the judiciary, the corruption and crime, foreign influences in the domestic politics, the constitutional amendments, the attitude towards neighbours, were addressed without the intention of serious analysis, but only as part of the political attacks and accusations. Therefore, the news items are one-sided, unprofessional and do not contribute in any way to enriching the public debate on these important topics.

'The murder of a minor by his own aged peer, fifteen burned vehicles in the last 14 months alone, a multitude of unexplained crimes, thefts, intense drug sales, violence in the streets are just some of the problems that have been kept silent in Prilep in recent years. The continuous criminal functioning of the country in general is the cause of this chaos, according to the current Minister of Interior, Panche Toshkovski.' **(Alfa TV, 16 April, 2024).**

## The most common harmful narratives

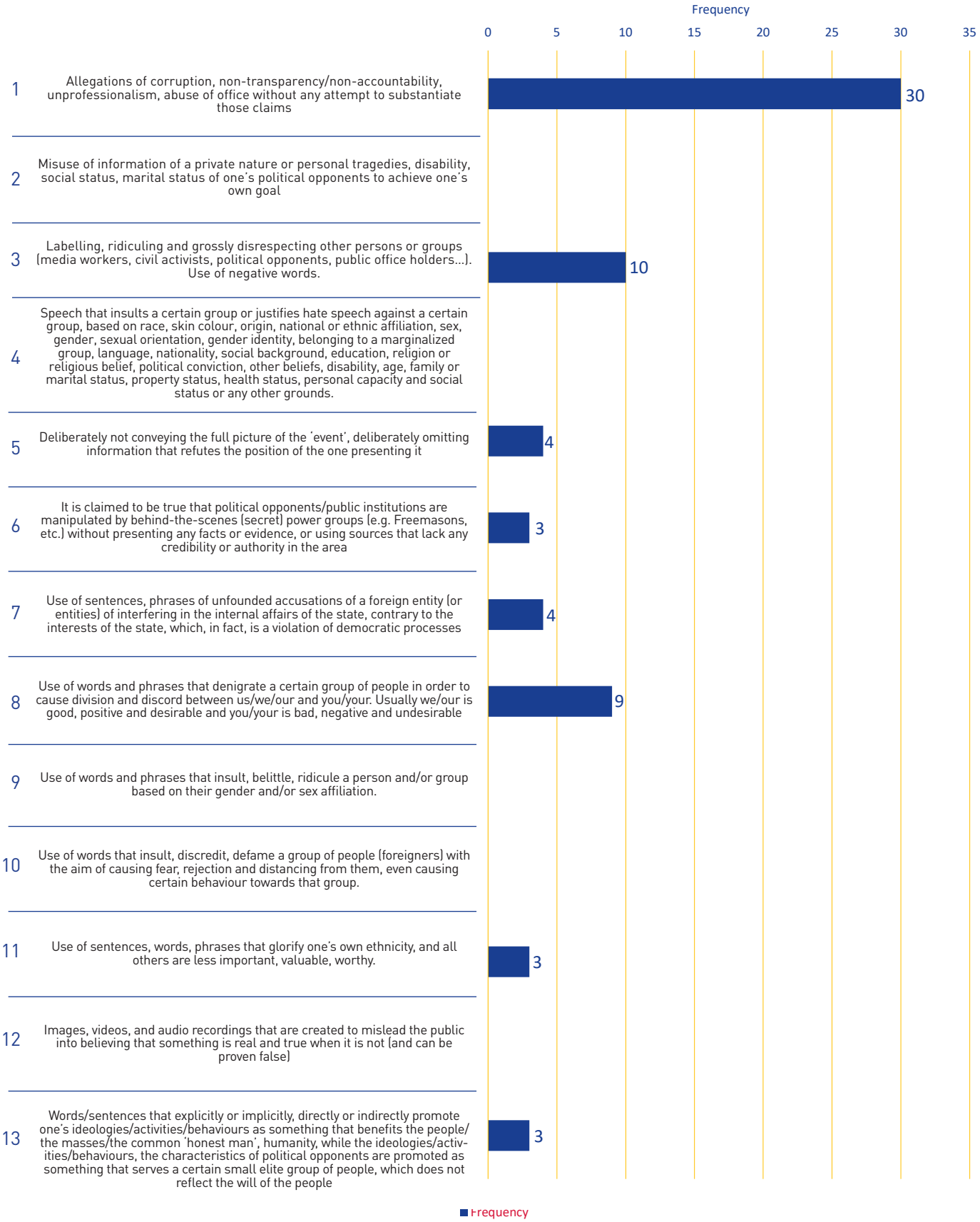
In April, a total of 55 news items containing a total of 91 harmful narratives were registered. The most common were biased selection (28) and undermining of trust (24), which is a feature of all previous months of the research. Then, the next ones were the news items where there were character attacks or demonization (10), fomenting divisions (8), spreading fear and panic (7), etc.

Table 18. Frequency of harmful narratives in April 2024




These harmful narratives are mostly the result of allegations of corruption, non-transparency, non-accountability, unprofessionalism, abuse of office, without supporting those claims (30 such cases or 45.5%), but also insults, ridicule and labelling (10 or 15, 15%), use of words and phrases that smear a certain group of people in order to cause division and discord (9 or 13.64%), accusing a foreign entity of interfering in internal affairs (4 or 6.06%) and intentionally not conveying the whole picture and omitting information (4 or 6.06%).

## Table 19: Indicators of harmful narratives on TV stations in April 2024



Considering that the parties were at the height of the political campaign, the statements where explicitly or implicitly one's own ideologies, are promoted, activities or behaviours as something that benefits the people, the broad masses, the 'common man', the 'average citizen' are not surprising, while the activities of the political opponents are usually said to be aimed at the interests of a smaller elitist group, but it is not in the direction of the will of the people.

Such is the statement of the president of VMRO-DPMNE, Hristijan Mickoski dated 20 April:

'These are referendum elections where the decision is either us - the people or them, the narrow clique that is suffocating and keeping the system away from the people.' **(TV Alsat M, 20 April, 2024).**

By means of such a pronounced populist discourse, one's own party is promoted as a true representative of the people, morally pure and fully united with the people, unlike the opponent who represents the corrupt and inferior elite[15].

On the other hand, there is the statement of the president of SDSM, Dimitar Kovachevski, who similarly promotes his own party as the only chance for European integration, unlike the political opponent, who allegedly declared a moratorium on the EU.

'One option is Mickoski, Siljanovska and DPMNE, with a moratorium for the European Union. The other option is SDSM and Stevo Pendarovski, who will not give up on our European future.' **(TV Telma, 20 April, 2024).**

The role of the media in such cases is to recognize and critically analyse such populist narratives, in order for the audience to obtain a clear picture of the entire context.

Unfortunately, even in April there was no lack of harmful narratives that insult and demonize the political opponents. One of the most notable tactics of the opposition VMRO-DPMNE throughout the campaign was to label the SDSM as henchmen of the smaller Government coalition partner DUI, calling them its servants. This kind of narrative was also accepted by Levica, but it was used it to attack not only SDSM, but also VMRO-DPMNE, as in the indicated example:

'The first concept that they offer us is the concept of Daytonization, for which both SDS and DPMNE have worked, to be the servants of UCK and servants of DUI.' **(TV 24, 28 April, 2024).**

Such nationalist discourse not only aims to present the largest Macedonian parties as incompetent and manipulated by the smaller DUI, but also to accuse them of national betrayal, division of the country (according to the Dayton model in Bosnia and Herzegovina) and working in favour of the Albanian interests.

Levica tries to present itself as the third and the best political option in the country, and therefore it often equates VMRO-DPMNE and SDSM, accusing them of functioning contrary to the interests of the people.

'These Siamese twins, bourgeois parties, SDSM and DPMNE, led by Stevo and Goga, are anti-people parties. These are business oligarchies of millionaires who have no link with reality.' **(MTV 2, 20 April, 2024).**

15 Jan-Werner Müller, What is Populism?, Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, 2017

Moreover, the use of nicknames for the political opponents is inappropriate for the public scene, especially when it comes to the presidential candidates. This kind of lowering of the level of the political discourse is an attempt to flatter the 'common man', showing that the politician is part of their environment and speaks their language.

The insults were not absent from other political parties, so the president of VMRO DPMNE, at the rally in Prilep, Hristijan Mickoski called SDSM's presidential candidate, Stevo Pendarovski, 'misogynist', 'arrogant', 'scumbag of a man with no shame':

'Stevo applauded the insults shamelessly, while Bogdanka laughed. What scumbags of people, what kind of a person is this man? Besides being arrogant, Pendarovski has become a prototype of a Balkan misogynist. Frchkoski needs to join him and form a club of misogynists.' **(TV Kanal 5, 16 April, 2024).**

We see the down-to-earth and 'common people's language' here, as part of the same strategy, approaching the people and the 'common man', unlike the opponent who only represents the interests of the elite and does not speak 'people's language'. The manner in which the political opponent is devalued is through personal insults and the use of nicknames and personal names.

The insults and the demonization of the political opponents were one of the specifics of these political elections, but on the central news editions of the TV stations, unlike portals and social networks, we encountered them sporadically, which is one of the most positive conclusions of this analysis.

## MTV 1

The public broadcasting service, during the election period, is subject to additional obligations compared to all other broadcasters, which are prescribed by the Electoral Code.[16], and especially with Article 76-a, of this legal act. This Article prescribes the period of time that the public broadcasting service is obliged to devote to the electoral activities, parties and their candidates, but informing the public about the methods and techniques of voting as well.

During the analysis of the first channel of the public broadcasting service in April, it was noted that it was one of the few TV channels where there was not any trend of decreasing of the number of the news items with harmful narratives this month. A total of 5 news items in which 10 harmful narratives were registered is not too many, but it is still noticeable more than February and March, when only two such news items were registered.

Among the indicators of harmful narratives in the news items broadcast on MTV 1 we recognize accusations that a foreign entity (mostly Russia and Serbia) interferes in the internal affairs of the country, contrary to the interests of the country. Such a narrative usually originates from DUI, according to which every vote for the opposition is a vote for Russia, in contrast to the European agenda and EU integration that they promote.

Thus, the most common harmful narratives that emerge are spreading panic, fear and insecurity (4), as well as accusations of foreign influence (1).

16 Electoral Code – Refined text March 2024.https://drive.google.com/file/d/1ZJMruqcNl-yC5VuWSzpfT9BFeKphm5An/view?usp=sharing. Accessed on 16 May, 2024.

As an example, we single out the statement of the president of DUI, Ali Ahmeti, broadcast in the news item on 28 April:

'That is why it remains our task, our mission, in accordance with our historical commitments for alliance and partnership with NATO, with Western European countries to disable Russian and Eastern influences in our country. However, we cannot completely prevent it because Russia has penetrated with associations, media, and conferences. A political party was even founded by Putin's chief advisor, Aleksandar Dugin, who came to Macedonia several times. In order to say no to all those activities and interventions, on 8 May we will not have an election, but a referendum in which we should win.' **(Alfa TV, 28 April, 2024).**

All 5 registered news items with harmful narratives were one-sided, i.e., they presented only one side. Also, among the news items, the most common were those with only one source (3 or 60%).

## MTV 2

Regarding the second channel of the public broadcasting service MTV 2, very similar numbers were observed as with the first channel. A total of 5 news items were registered, which contained 6 harmful narratives. All news items, just like MTV 1, presented only one side, i.e., they were one-sided.

However, unlike MTV 1, regarding MTV 2, we notice a constant decrease in the number of news items with harmful narratives, so after December, when 17 news items were registered, in January 11 news items, February 10 news items and March 7 news items, in April we registered only 5.

The most common harmful narratives were biased selection (3) and character attacks (2), and there was also one news item in which disinformation was noted.

We single out the report broadcast on 20 April, which quotes the statement by DUI's presidential candidate, Bujar Osmani, which the political opponent characterizes as a nationalist and vengeful option:

'In this election, we also have a nationalist vindictive alternative that requires 61 MPs to exclude other nationalities from decision-making.' **(MTV 2, 20 April, 2024).**

Spreading fear and playing with the national sentiments, especially in multi-ethnic societies like the Macedonian one, is always a very dangerous option. In countries where there are various divisions, including divisions on ethnic and religious grounds, these types of harmful narratives can further increase polarization, affect trust, and even cause various conflicts. The political actors, as well as the media, should be very careful with such narratives, which can be very dangerous.

## TV Alfa

The reduced number of news items with harmful narratives, which this report found, is especially noticeable with reference to TV Alfa. Compared to February when 40 news items with harmful narratives were registered and in March there were 35 such news items, the number of 14 registered news items represents a serious decrease.

The most common harmful narratives (a total of 31 harmful narratives in 14 news items) were undermining trust (13) and biased selection (12).

The highly tendentious attitude, in which one political actor is attacked and its political opponent is protected, especially in the headline of the news, is still a clearly expressed element in the central news programmes of TV Alfa. Unlike the rest of the TV stations, where the role of the journalist was only in reporting the harmful narratives, and the responsibility for their creation lay with the political actors, on TV Alfa there were 5 cases in which the journalist was the one who created the harmful narrative himself, and in 6 cases they did it together with the political actor.

'Alfa has been trying to communicate with him for days, after a flurry of accusations that he was paid with dirty cash from REK Bitola tenders and that he is an expert in smear campaigns through forged documents and fake news. It seems that the Israeli is most afraid of the Israeli curse: To have, then to not have, and so on, even though he spends millions on PR strategies on the Internet, he has almost nothing.' **(Alfa TV, 12 April, 2024).**

The journalist from TV Alfa made a number of accusations regarding criminal acts related to an alleged SDSM consultant, but he did not offer any real evidence or serious journalistic research. Techniques such as: there are serious allegations, it is talked about, it is heard that... can be part of speculative journalism, but not of a professional journalistic report.

The role of the media is above all to be the corrector of the Government and to monitor the work of the Government and governing structures. Nonetheless, the criticism is based only on speculation and not on real journalistic research only compromise this important mission that the media in democratic societies have.

Out of 14 news items with harmful narratives, 2 did not have any sources at all, while 10 presented only one side. The attitude of the journalist was not equal towards all political actors, so in 6 news items it was noted that he was strongly negative either towards SDSM or its representatives and candidates in the elections.

## TV Kanal 5

During the analysis of TV Kanal 5, 7 news items were registered in which there were a total of 13 harmful narratives. What should be noted in the case of TV Kanal 5 is that on certain days of the monitoring, the pre-election presentation of the candidates was broadcast outside the central news programmes.[17] The most common were biased selection (6 cases) and undermining of trust (5). Almost all of them were created by the political actors, except for one that was produced by a journalist.

The largest number of the analysed news items had more than one side (5 or 71.4%), and in only one news item, one-sided reporting was noted. All analysed news items concerning domestic politics topics, while the report was the most represented genre (5 or 71.4%).

'Mickoski talked about some kind of Macedonian unity and about moratoriums.' Unfortunately, more and more people realize that the only moratorium in Mickoski's head is the moratorium on the country's integration into the EU. Just as he has blocked it for the past two years, he is ready to delay the EU membership for another 11 years, just as his mentor Gruevski did. Instead of national unity for a moratorium, Macedonia needs national unity for EU integration. That is the right path for change and that is exactly the decision you should make in these elections, said Kovachevski.' **(TV Kanal 5, 20 April, 2024).**

17 The so-called 'Election Chronicle' was broadcast immediately after the departure of the news anchor. However, keeping this in mind, the monitoring analysed these news items and party representations in these conditions as well.

The singled out news item is an example of the most frequent accusations of SDSM representatives towards VMRO-DPMNE, who are presented as the obstacles of the European integration. According to SDSM, the opposition party will continue to delay EU membership in the future, as it has done so far. The president of VMRO-DPMNE, Hristijan Mickoski, is presented as a pupil of Gruevski, who, according to SDSM, was his mentor.

Such accusations were very often part of the campaign, and have been analysed and pointed out in the previous reports.

## TV 21

In April, during the analysis of the central news editions of TV 21, 8 news items were registered, which contained a total of 9 harmful narratives. The most common among them were biased selection (4) and character attacks, i.e. demonization.

All news items are as regards the domestic politics topics, and were mostly one-sided (5 or 62.5%).

'DUI today, through a statement, called on the Albanian opposition to come to its senses and not be a tool of, as they emphasized, the Russian agendas that are proclaimed by VMRO and their messengers. Mickoski and VMRO publicly demand a Macedonia without Albanians.' **(TV 21, 20 April, 2024)**

In the selected example, the most common narrative that DUI used during the campaign is found, which is the ties with Russia, i.e., the accusations that everything that is against their coalition is joining a group behind whose interests Russia stands. This kind of intimidation and fear-mongering, without offering arguments for the claims, is a common tactic in the political campaigns.

The harmful narrative of spreading panic, fear and uncertainty is usually created through the sharing of half-truths or false information, their over-sizing, over-emphasis, too-frequent repetition, the use of wording that intentionally causes panic, fear and uncertainty – as the given example demonstrates.

In the example that has been indicated, apart from spreading fear as regards the rapprochement with Russia, another thesis is used that has a similar purpose, which is to spread panic and uncertainty, but also to awaken national sentiment among the Albanian population. The information, which does not have any support, alludes that the opposition VMRO-DPMNE, if it wins the elections, will not include the political representatives of the Albanians in the Government, i.e., they will form a Government without them.

As previously stated, the abuse of the national sentiments during elections, especially in multi-ethnic societies like the Macedonian one, is very dangerous, and the political actors, as well as the media, must be especially cautious when dealing with such harmful narratives.

## Sitel TV

In April, during the analysis of TV Sitel's news items, 4 news items were registered that contained a total of 6 harmful narratives. The most common were fomenting divisions (2) and biased selection (2). The largest number of the news items with harmful narratives were with only one side (3 or 75%), while two sides are noted in one news item. Of the analysed news items, two were a speech of a politician, one was an analytical-report news item and one was an interview.

The political actors are the ones who are mostly responsible for creating harmful narratives, except in one report, in which the journalist deliberately did not report on the full picture of the 'event' and deliberately omits important information.

In the news item broadcast on 4 April, the journalist conducted a survey with young people, asking them how much they follow politics and elections. In the news item, one young person stood out, who, unlike the rest of the interlocutors who were not so interested in politics, said that she regularly followed it:

'I absolutely follow the campaigns of all political parties, of all presidential candidates. First of all, I think that it is an obligation of every young person, also I study law, so I would say that it is in my profession and I am interested. I follow, as I said, the political campaigns, I follow them on TV duels and on social media, and I think the key is for young people to be aware, so that we can go out and cast our vote for the changes we need to happen.' **(TV Sitel, 4 April, 2024).**

Obviously, the student is, as she says, 'for changes' in the Government, but what is omitted in the news item, and is very important for the context, is that she is an active member of the Youth Force Union of VMRO-DPMNE.

Such non-conveying of the entire image or of information that is very important for the context, contributes to the formation of an unrealistic image among the viewers and creates the harmful narrative - biased selection, i.e., selectively revealing data regarding an event and concealing other data that is used to manipulate the public.

Unfortunately, such subtle manipulative techniques are not always easily discernible and remain in the domain of editorial policy.

## *TV Alsat-M*

As with most media in April, as regards to TV Alsat M there were also a reduced number of news items with harmful narratives, i.e., 6 news items with a total of 6 harmful narratives were registered. The most frequent were the narratives that undermined trust in the institutions, the system or the political entities. These news items mostly had only one side (4 or 66.7%), and had only one source (3 or 50%). All topics were related to domestic politics, and of the genres, news with a statement prevailed (3 or 50%).

In the statement made after the first round of the presidential elections, the representative of the Vredi coalition, Bilal Kasami, not only unarguably accused of electoral bribery, but at the same time he insulted other ethnic communities for selling their votes.

'We are the winners in the elections. [...] DUI has bought the votes of the smaller ethnic communities and vulnerable citizens who needed their money.' **(TV Alsat M, 24 April, 2024).**

Such a narrative, which determines whose votes are important and whose votes are counted, also creates an offensive attitude towards other communities, as less valuable. Hence, the problem is not only in the unsubstantiated accusation of the political opponent, but also in demonstrating ethnocentrism, i.e., ethnic bias, thinking that one's own ethnic group is more important and superior than some others.

In addition, such ethnocentrism also creates negative prejudices and attitudes towards others, in the specific case that they sold their votes in the elections.

On the other hand, such serious accusations should be investigated and analysed more deeply by the journalists, which they are not doing. The media should investigate whether there really was bribery, where and whether there is evidence of it.

## TV Telma

As in the previous month, only three news items were registered on TV Telma in April, but a total of 8 harmful narratives were recorded in them. The most common was the narrative of fomenting divisions (2), but we also find populism, foreign influence, spreading panic, biased selection, etc. Among them there were not any one-sided news items, and 2 were registered as multi-sided news items, while 1 news item two-sided. All the harmful narratives were created by the political actors, while the journalists either reported them without any intervention or highlighted them clearly, but without taking a stand.

The singled out example is the statement of the president of SDSM, Dimitar Kovachevski, who promoted his own ideologies/activities/behaviour as something that was in the people's favour, in contrast to the opposition, which worked to the detriment of the public interest, i.e., it was against EU integration.

'One option is Mickoski, Siljanovska and DPMNE, with a moratorium on the European Union. The other option is SDSM and Stevo Pendarovski, who will not give up on our European future.' **(TV Telma, 20 April, 2024).**

Such a narrative incites divisions and smears the political opponents as a group working against the interests of the people.

## TV 24

In April, TV 24 along with TV Telma had the fewest news items with harmful narratives, only 3, in which a total of 4 harmful narratives were recorded. The most frequently harmful narrative was the narrative of character attacks or demonization. In two cases it was the political actors who produced the harmful narrative, and in one it was the journalist.

SDSM also used the case of arresting a journalist to accuse the opposition of their autocratic intentions if they return to power. This is also the statement of the SDSM spokeswoman:

'We are seeing attempts in the most brutal way, by arresting a journalist who published a scandal about DPMNE, to return VMRO - MVRO' **(TV 24, 8 April, 2024).**

VMRO-MVRO is a derogatory term for the name of the party, which alludes that this party wants to introduce a police regime and its system of Government would be autocratic or the introduction of a police state.

## SUMMARY

The Macedonian media that were the subject of monitoring in April continued to be partners of political actors in spreading harmful narratives, but an important difference between TV stations and online media is noticeable. Namely, the trend of reducing harmful narratives in TV news continued in April and after February and March when 90 and 79 cases were registered respectively, this month has a record low of just 55 posts with harmful narratives. The low number of such news items is particularly positive news, if we consider that April

was a month of intense presidential and parliamentary campaigns. On the other hand, an analysis of online media shows a completely different picture, with a record 261 cases of harmful narratives (February – 211, March - 224), including insults, attacks and disinformation, which indicates that the behaviour of politicians and the way they conduct political campaigns has not changed.

## Key features of online media reporting in April 2024

The trend of an unabated pace of production of news items with harmful narratives in the online media, which is constantly on the rise from month to month, culminates in April during the pre-election campaign. The stories revolved around unsubstantiated allegations of corruption, unprofessionalism, abuse of office; unverified/difficult to verify findings incriminating political opponents; labelling, mocking and disrespecting others as well as defaming certain groups of people to cause division and discord. Rhetoric was used that undermined trust in institutions, biased selection, attacked and demonized a certain person and encouraged division, fear and insecurity. It is characteristic that in the past period online media has seen a continuous and significant increase in the harmful narrative 'spreading fear, panic and insecurity' (February-4, March-11, April-23). At the same time, the creativity of the authors, the main protagonists, above all, the political actors at all levels of Government, in building and developing the harmful vocabulary is no longer surprising. Their negative rhetoric, translated into public speeches, performances, statements, political press releases, easily found their way to the public, and the online media, where time and space are unlimited, were fertile ground for their promotion. To that, as an added value, is the privilege of online media, precisely in this month - the month of election campaigns, which are not subject to legal provisions and methods of covering the elections like the broadcasters, to open their information pages widely for all political entities in the election race, which does not exempt them from adhering to professional journalistic standards.

On the agenda of the monitored portals, the highest coefficient of news items with harmful narratives, by default there were several of them who occasionally change the first, second or third place. This time, as well as a few months before, Kurir has the most news items with harmful narratives, followed by A1on, Vecher.mk Almakos and Republika. In the online media, an increase of over 100% in the number of harmful narratives was recorded by Sloboden Pechat (178% more harmful narratives in April compared to March) and Almakos (106% more harmful narratives in April compared to March), with them there was also an increase in the number of news items with harmful narratives, although much lower - 31% at Sloboden Pechat and 75% at Almakos. A drop in both the number of harmful narratives and the number of news items with harmful narratives was recorded by MKD.mk - 56% decrease in the number of harmful news items and 55% in the number of news items, Nova TV a 50% decrease in the number of harmful narratives and 43% in the number of news items and Nezavisen with a drop of about 30% in both the number of harmful narratives and the number of news items with harmful narratives published in April compared to March. In all online media, the topic of domestic politics, and this time, within that framework, the presidential and parliamentary elections, always has the primacy. But from a non/professional journalistic point of view, genre forms such as political speeches and party press releases, one-sided information, consulting mostly one source of information, indicating precise sources of information, the absence, with rare exceptions, of an author/journalist news items, photos, current or archival, without marking them. Nothing new in the established structure with small, negligible concessions.

Individual and collective political actors participate almost equally in the construction of harmful narratives. But this time preference is given to the individual ones, first of all to the president of VMRO-DPMNE, Hristijan Mickoski, and from the collective VMRO-DPMNE, and only then DUI and SDSM. Seen as a whole, April is a repetition of the already established and confirmed indicators. The only thing that remains is the surprise for such a large number of harmful narratives, and the possible explanation is the increased activity of political actors, primarily due to the political campaigns for the dual elections in the country and the struggle for power, as well as the clear recognition of internet media as entities in the information space without legal restrictions. right during the election campaigns.

## Key features of TV stations reporting for April 2024

The main conclusion of the analysis of the central news editions of the TV stations in April is that at the height of the presidential and parliamentary election campaigns, the number of harmful narratives is the lowest compared to the previous period. What must be noted in this context is that information provided by the television stations, and especially the public broadcasting service, during election processes, is regulated not only by the Law on Audio and Audiovisual Media Services, but also by the Electoral Code. Whereupon, the objective and the equal representation of the candidates is monitored by several domestic and foreign organisations, including the media regulator, the Agency for Audio and Audiovisual Media Services.

The harmful narratives, as was shown in the previous months, were mostly created by the political actors and the parties, and less frequently by the journalists, who only reported them, without intervention or taking a stand. An exception, as before, was TV Alfa, where out of a total of 14 news items with harmful narratives, 6 were created by the journalist, and 5 by the journalist and the political actor.

The most common harmful narratives in April were biased selection (28) and undermining of trust (24), which is a feature of the previous months as well. This is followed by character attack or demonization (10), fomenting division (8), spreading fear and panic (7), etc. It is noticeable that the spread of panic and fear as a harmful narrative of television stations appear following a several-month absence and is present in 13% of the total number of news items containing harmful narrative.

TV Alfa was again the media outlet with the highest number of news items with harmful narratives (14 or 44.3%), but it must be emphasized that even regarding this television station we noticed a significant drop in this type of news items, after the registered 40 news items in February and 35 in March.

The one-sidedness of the news items with harmful narratives remained a key feature in this period as well, where we saw that as many as 35 news items or 63.6% presented only one side and did not provide space for the other parties to present their own arguments.

This report also mentions a news item broadcast on Sitel TV, in which the journalist did not share important information with the viewers concerning the active political role of one of the interlocutors, thereby manipulating the public and creating an unrealistic picture of the matters. Such cases are not rare, but unfortunately they are not always easy to see, and even more difficult to prove.

In this context it is important to mention a few things. Firstly, it is very important who has access to the mainstream media, i.e., who is allowed to speak. Although the media seems to promote the concept of balance and offering time and space to everyone, this is not really the case. This research has so far shown that the most frequent actors in the news items are the representatives of the largest political parties, who were given the opportunity to speak on every social topic, ranging from domestic and foreign policy to healthcare, education, corruption, etc. The public rarely has the opportunity to listen to the experts in the field, but even more rarely the marginalized and minority groups in the society, whose existence is almost invisible, and their voice can be heard only on rare occasions when talking about the problems of their communities.

On the other hand, except in the news editions, the selection of guests in the shows, experts and interlocutors largely determines the general discourse, i.e., it forms the public opinion and how the public will deliberate.

The public does not always know much concerning those who speak or have the opportunity to shape the public opinion. Frequently, although presented as independent experts, they are in the role of party campaign organisers, own or work in the communication and the marketing agencies that cooperate with various political actors and parties, have business relations with them or are in their management boards. It goes without saying that they will represent certain points of view and attitudes that are in line with their colleagues and business partners, and they will not be able to refrain themselves from the relationships they have.

We should be aware that sometimes, although it is difficult to prove and determine, the selection of those who have a platform in the mainstream media is also a way of subtle, implicit manipulation of the public.

Secondly, also very important, is the manner the media and editorial team frame the social events and developments. The political elections can be observed as an interesting case study of how certain topics are framed, how they are discussed and in what context they persist. Topics such as the European integration, the relations with neighbours, the constitutional amendments, the fight against crime, etc. during the political campaign, were framed in binary oppositions, 'us' and 'you', traitors and patriots, pro-Western and pro-Russian, crime fighters and criminals. Such a simplified, yet simultaneously unsustainable approach, does not open a real debate on these important topics, but on the contrary it perpetuates the whole problem and offers false, populist solutions.

And thirdly, the choice of topics, i.e., the choice of what will be debated and which important issues will be discussed, also plays an important role in creating the dominant discourse. Setting the agenda is very important, and the media plays a major role in that process. Numerous important topics such as education, agriculture, security, urbanism, culture, are treated superficially, in the shadow of party mutual accusations and unsubstantiated character attacks, or are not even discussed at all. Or, as Bernard Cohen says, maybe media does not tell us what to think, but it definitely tells us what to think.

Finally, from the beginning of the analysis in September 2023, until today, we can conclude that most frequently, the harmful narratives were created as the result of allegations of corruption, non-transparency, non-accountability, unprofessionalism, abuse of office, **without supporting those allegations** (30 such cases in April or 45.5%).

On the one hand, we see a large number of accusations without evidence, without documents and arguments, still on the other hand, whenever arguments and documents appear, the other side does not even want to discuss them, immediately discrediting them as fake news and disinformation prepared in the headquarters of the political opponent.

It seems that all political entities have reached a consensus on such avoidance of a discussion that will be led by arguments and supported by facts. Thus, the political actors without any problem enter into discussion only when the debates take place at the level of mutual, unsubstantiated accusations, quarrels about values and ideals, but not when there is evidence and documents are presented.

In this manner, but also through vulgar and inappropriate vocabulary, insults and demonization of political opponents and dissenters, they constantly reduce the level of the public discourse, and the quality of the public and the political debates in the society.

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