DETERMINING HARMFUL POLITICAL NARRATIVES

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Introduction

The seventh report Determining Political Harmful Narratives (HARM-TIVE) is a sublimation of the data from the monitoring of the communication practices of the political actors in May 2024 in which harmful narratives were identified. Additionally, the report includes an analysis on the manner these harmful narratives were addressed in the central news editions of 9 television stations and 11 online media outlets.

Regarding the May report, it is interesting, that the monitoring was conducted during the last days of the pre-election campaign for the second round of the presidential and the parliamentary elections which were held concurrently on 8 May, as well as during the post-election period when the results of the voting were presented, i.e. the Prime Minister of the new Government, and the negotiations regarding its future composition were already underway. It is the latest in a series of two-month and one-month reports for the monitoring period from September 2023 to May 2024.

The Institute of Communication Studies (ICS) underscores that the candidates for president of the country were 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 the 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; Kurir; Almacos; Tetova sot; Nova TV; Vecer.mk. Televisions: MTV 1 (public); MTV 2 (public, in Albanian language); Alfa TV (private); Kanal 5 (private); Sitel TV (private); TV 24 (private); Telma (private); Alsat M (private, in Albanian language); 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. Hereupon, the report points out the violations of the standards and the principles of non-discriminatory and transparent political communication by the political representatives, as well as the standards of professional and ethical journalistic reporting, especially during election periods.

The data contained in this report were obtained by a combination of several methods and techniques: quantitative-qualitative analysis through monitoring – observing, monitoring and determining the presence of pre-defined indicators (14 in total), which in turn are correlated to some of the 16 harmful narratives; critical discourse analysis – examining the language, rhetoric and 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, regarding the media every fourth day of the month. More details on the methodological framework, samples and follow-up dynamics, as well as details on the entire research process are available at: HARM-TIVE.

The research Determining Political Harmful Narratives (HARM-TIVE) was carried out by the Institute of Communication Studies (ICS) within the project Use Facts: Fact-Based Journalism for Raising Awareness and Countering Disinformation in the Media Space in North Macedonia, supported by the British Embassy in Skopje. The research is longitudinal and was conducted during 2023 and 2024. It was 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 the monitoring and the control.

The analysis of the data from the monitoring in May, as well as from the past nine months, reveals that the political actors in Macedonia strategically use harmful narratives and devalue the level of the political communication in order to attract more voters in the pre-election period. The best indicator of this is that the trend of growth of harmful rhetoric in the months before the elections in May, after the end of the election process, i.e., the presentation of the election results, changed significantly, i.e., the harmful narratives subsided.

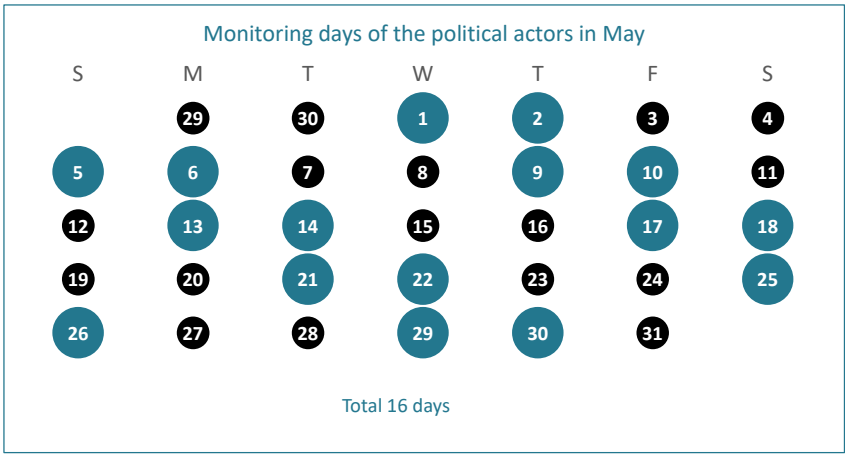
Namely, **in May, 115 posts with harmful narratives were recorded on the Facebook pages of the political parties and their leaders**, which is a decrease compared to the previous two months (142 posts in March and 176 posts in April). This trend was also reflected in the media reporting, where there was also a drop in the number of posts with harmful rhetoric. In the news editions on the TV stations **this month, 51 news items with harmful content were recorded, which is a record decrease** (55 'harmful news items' in April and 79 in March). The situation is similar **in the online media outlets, where 187 posts with harmful narratives were recorded**, which is a noticeable decrease compared to the previous period (261 posts with harmful narratives in April, and 224 in March).

The three most common harmful narratives among the political actors, as in previous months, are **'biased selection', 'undermining trust in the institutions' and 'characters attacks'**. The layout of the first two places is the same for the online media and the TV stations, with the third most common harmful narrative in both types of media being 'fomenting divisions'. This month too, posts with 'extreme patriotism and nationalism', 'ethnocentrism', 'spreading panic and fear' and individual cases of 'hate speech' can be observed.

1. Monthly report on facebook profiles and websites of the political actors

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

Month: May 2024.



Monitoring days are:
1, 2, 5, 6, 9, 10, 13, 14, 17, 18, 21, 22, 25, 26, 29, and 30 (16 days in total).[1]

The holding of the parliamentary elections on 8 May of this year and the announcement of the election results brought a significant slowdown in the dynamics of producing and spreading harmful narratives among most political actors, resulting in a reduction of harmful rhetoric in the public discourse compared to the previous months of the monitoring. In the period from 1 to 30 May 2024, a **total of 115 posts containing a harmful narrative were identi(ed on the websites and on the Facebook pages of the political actors** (61 harmful narratives less than April and 27 less than March), mostly posted on the Facebook pages of the parties.

In May, there were significant changes in the **top three places** on the list of the political parties ranked by the number of posts with harmful narratives. Unlike the previous months, when VMRO-DPMNE was consistently the party with the most harmful narratives identified, this month that primacy is taken by the **Levica with by far the most (25) harmful narratives in their public communication**, which is still a slight decrease compared to the previous period (in March 27 and in April 38 posts with harmful narratives). The winning of the first place, apart from the reduced harmful activity of the competing political parties, is probably due to the retention of the ferocity of the pre-election narrative of this political party even after the announcement of the election results. Particularly, the Levica increased its presence in the Assembly from two to six MPs, but still remained in the opposition and, as in the previous period, continued to criticize almost all political opponents. The **VMRO-DPMNE fell to the second place with 16 posts** with harmful narratives (in March and April there were 43 harmful posts each, respectively), which is also probably due to the election results, i.e. the convincing victory of this party (58 parliamentary mandates) and consequently to that reorientation from attacks and criticism of the political opponents to seeking partners for the formation of a new government. It

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

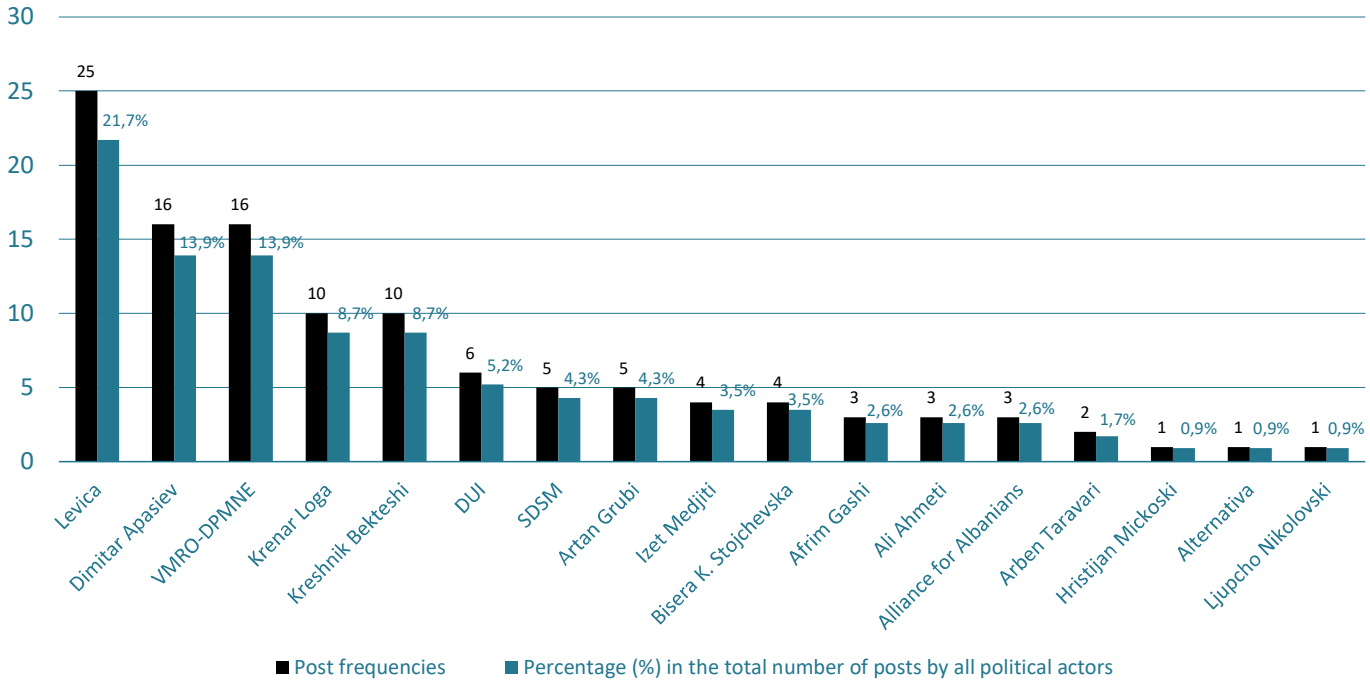
is interesting that for the first time since the beginning of the monitoring, i.e., in the months from September 2023 onwards, the SDSM was not among the first three parties with the most harmful narratives in May of this year. This party with five posts with harmful narratives (29 in March and in April, respectively) took the fourth place and gave away **the third place to DUI**, where six posts with harmful narratives were determined (in March 9 and in April 14 harmful posts). The impression is that the election results caused a kind of post-election silence among the SDSM, even though harmful narratives were again observed among some Ministers from this party, specifically the Minister of Agriculture, Forestry and Water Economy Ljupcho Nikolovski and the Minister of Culture Bisera Kostadinovska Stojchevska.

Although the communication of the political parties is expected to intensify in the run-up to the elections and in the post-election period, the reduction of the harmful narratives can be partly due to the fact that the political parties are aware that during the official campaign they are under monitoring by various institutions and organizations such as SEC, SCPC, OSCE/ODIHR hence are even more careful not to violate the rules and the codes.

When it comes to the individuals, i.e., **the party leaders and the officials**, the most (16) harmful narratives were found on the Facebook page of the leader of the **Levica, Dimitar Apasiev**, which is a significant increase compared to the previous two months (in March 9 and in April 7 harmful posts). **One harmful narrative** was also identified **at leader Hristijan Mickoski, and none at SDSM leader Dimitar Kovachevski. Kreshnik Bekteshi led the list of harmful posts among the DUI representatives with 10 such posts**, which is a noticeable increase compared to the previous month (2 harmful posts in April), followed by **Artan Grubi (5) and Ali Ahmeti (3)**. An increase in the number of posts with a harmful narrative can be observed among one of the key spokespersons of the Alliance for the Albanians, the Minister of Justice Krenar Loga (from 3 posts with a harmful narrative in April to 10 in May).

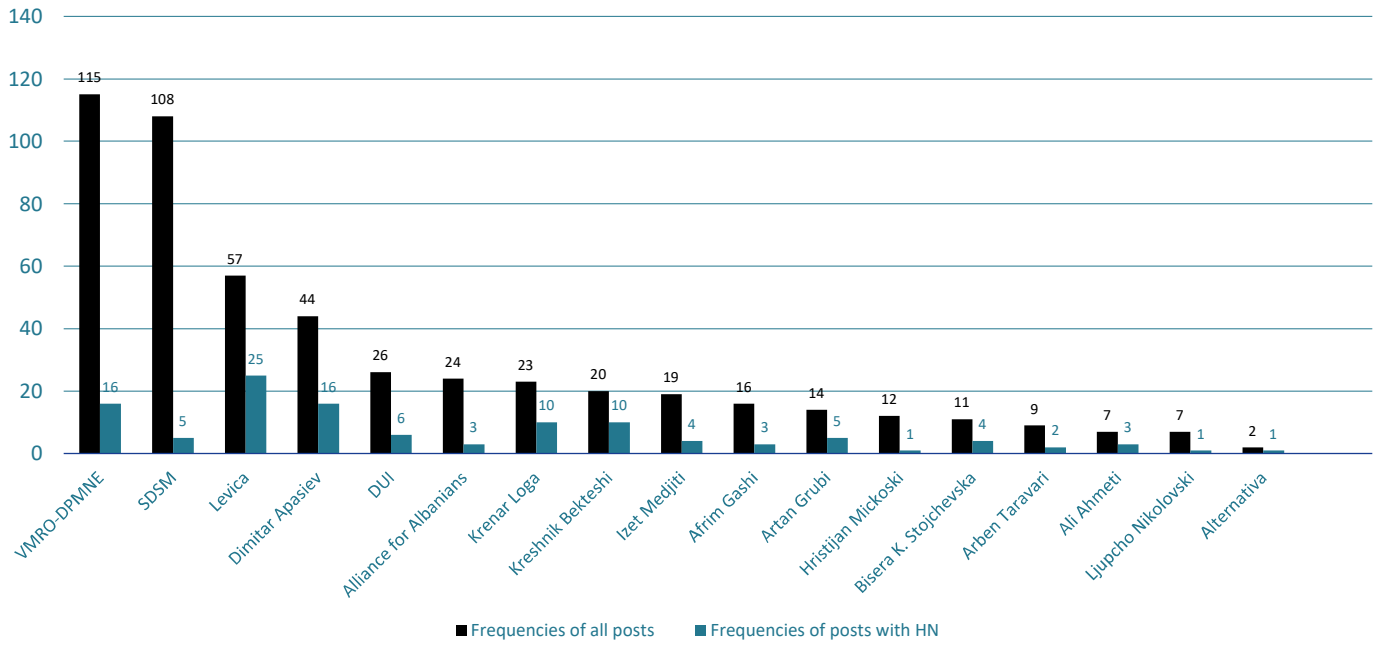
As in the previous months, the monitoring for April did not show any posts with harmful narratives on the websites and Facebook pages of the parties LDP, New Social Democratic Party and the Socialist Party of Macedonia, as well as on the pages of their leaders.

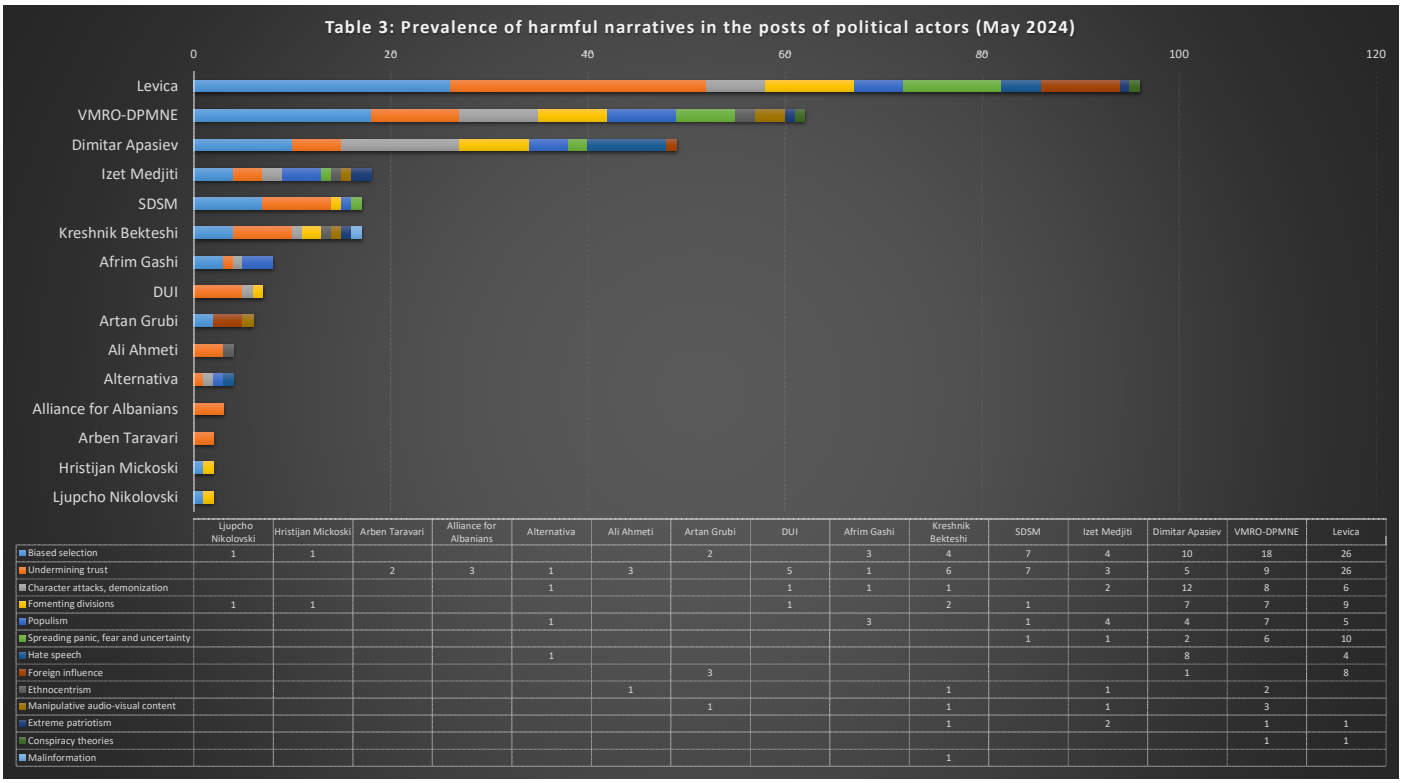
Table 1. Prevalence of posts with a harmful narrative according to political actors (May 2024)



Taking into account the total number of posts compared to the number of posts with a harmful narrative, on each of the monitored communication channels of the political parties and their leaders, it can be noted that the percentage of harmfulness in May is most pronounced on the channels of the Alternativa and Levica parties, as well as the Facebook profiles of the Minister of Economy from DUI Kreshnik Bekteshi and the Minister of Justice from the Alliance for the Albanians Krenar Loga. The communication channels with the lowest percentage of harmfulness in May are the SDSM and the VMRO-DPMNE leader Hristijan Mickoski.

Table 2. Prevalence of posts with harmful narratives in the total number of posts on FB profiles of political actors (May 2024)





	Ljupcho Nikolovski	Hristijan Mickoski	Arben Taravari	Alliance for Albanians	Alternativa	Ali Ahmeti	Artan Grubi	DUI	Afrim Gashi	Kreshnik Bekteshi	SDSM	Izet Medjiti	Dimitar Apasiev	VMRO-DPMNE	Levica
Biased selection	1	1					2		3	4	7	4	10	18	26
Undermining trust			2	3	1	3		5	1	6	7	3	5	9	26
Character attacks, demonization					1			1	1	1		2	12	8	6
Fomenting divisions	1	1						1		2	1		7	7	9
Populism					1				3		1	4	4	7	5
Spreading panic, fear and uncertainty											1	1	2	6	10
Hate speech					1								8		4
Foreign influence							3						1		8
Ethnocentrism						1				1		1		2	
Manipulative audio-visual content							1			1		1		3	
Extreme patriotism										1		2		1	1
Conspiracy theories														1	1
Malinformation										1					

In May, for the first time, the press releases are not the most common form of communication for spreading harmful narratives, but **party reactions and accusations**, name-calling and attacks among the political opponents, Facebook posts with speeches from public gatherings and rallies, interviews and the media statements surface, as well as manipulated audio and visual content, video clips and short Facebook statuses. This change in the most commonly used forms of communication and the transition from formal and indirect to informal and direct is mainly due to the election campaigns and the sharpening of the pre-election rhetoric and attacks on the opponents. Furthermore, the frequent meetings with citizens and gatherings affect the increase of the verbal communication in the form of speeches and statements, at the expense of written forms such as posts.

In view of the pre-election atmosphere, the most common topic, as in the previous months of the monitoring, was the domestic politics, this time reaching a record number of 100 out of 115 posts with harmful narratives, or 87 percent of the total number of identified harmful posts. Other topics dragging through the pre-election harmful rhetoric were crime and corruption, which were used for unsubstantiated attacks on the political opponents. Each daily political topic, all social problems were used for public communication and making points with the voters by criticizing the opponents and promoting their own political party. While the VMRO-DPMNE, the Levica and the Vredi were focused on criticism of the rule of the SDSM and the DUI and their corruption, the SDSM had been reminding of the previous rule of the VMRO-DPMNE, and the DUI of the conflict in 2001 with the intention of creating revulsion among the opposition party voters through these narratives. Also, the European integration was a frequent topic in the harmful narratives that permeated the communication of all parties, of which only the Levica believes that it should not be continued.

According to the quantitative analyses, a similar trend of representation of the types of harmful narratives continued. In May, aslo, the parties often selected information in a biased manner (which could lead the public to wrong conclusions), because in a heated atmosphere of pre-election rhetoric, proactive and reactive party communications are mainly aimed at accusing the opponents. Additionally, the parties often undermined trust in the institutions by making unsubstantiated claims of corruption and abuse of office and harshly attacking and labelling the political opponents. The SEC (State Election Commission) is a more frequently attacked institution in the post-election period, especially by the DUI and the European Front. The percentage of accusations of negative foreign influence is almost the same, mostly Serbian and Russian identified in the communications of the European Front and SDSM and directed at the Vredi, the Levica and the VMRO-DPMNE, while the Western influence is criticized by the Levica. On one hand, the European Front and the SDSM accuse the political opponents of acting under negative Serbian and Russian influence, which aims to distract the country from its Euro-Atlantic strategic focus and undermine democracy. Then again, the Levica accuses the DUI and the SDSM of succumbing to negative western influence, which sells out and destroys the state. With the tightening of pre-election rhetoric, one can also notice the frequent use of populist narratives, fomenting divisions and spreading panic, fear and insecurity in the society. The ruling parties announced a bright and European future if they gained power and warned of darkness, regression and crises if their political opponents won. Moreover, harmful narratives of populism, ethnocentrism and extreme patriotism can be observed among the ethnic Albanians from the Government and the opposition, as well as among the VMRO-DPMNE and the Levica. Hate speech has been re-identified in the rhetoric of the Levica and leader Apasiev, especially by developing the narrative of Albanianisation and Kosovarisation.

1.1. Communication practices of the political parties and their leaders

The Social Democratic Union of Macedonia - SDSM

In the month of May, the monitoring of the communication channels of the Social Democratic Union of Macedonia - the SDSM noted a sharp decrease in the public communication and the harmful narratives, with a total of 108 posts (53 on the Facebook page and 55 on the party's website). Of these, only five posts with a harmful narrative were identified or 4.6% harmfulness in the total number of posts. In contrast, in April, a total of 278 posts were noted, of which 29 were with a harmful narrative (or 10.4% harmfulness), and in March, out of a total of 540 posts, also, 29 were noted with a harmful narrative (or 5.4% harmfulness).

The reduced number of posts with a harmful narrative is partly due to the reduced total number of posts on the SDSM's communication channels, especially after the electoral defeat, on 24 April in the first round of the presidential elections and on 8 May in the second round of the presidential elections and the parliamentary elections. Thus, from 9 May to 23 May, only one Facebook post (on 12 May) Stefan Bogoev's column was posted.

The pre-election rhetoric of the SDSM continued with the same key message that they offer a European future and a better standard of living for all citizens of the country, while the the VMRO-DPMNE is the same party that ruled the country until 2016 and would only bring a regime, unruly spending of citizens' money and deviating from the European path. Therefore, the SDSM often biasedly selects and uses examples from the past ruling of the VMRO-DPMNE, such as the Skopje 2014 project and their previous leader Nikola Gruevski, in order to convince the citizens that the SDSM is the good one, and the VMRO-DPMNE is the bad political option.

Four of the posts with harmful narratives were posted only on the website and one was posted on both communication channels. All harmful posts are in the form of press releases from the field of domestic politics, specifically three with a focus on comparisons between the ruling of the SDSM and the ruling of the VMRO-DPMNE, one with an attack on the ZNAM party and one on the vote of the DUP in the Lisiche neighbourhood in the Municipality of Aerodrom.

In addition to mentioning its party and portraying it as a defender of justice, and less often as saviours and EU-oriented, the most frequently mentioned in the harmful posts of SDSM this month are the VMRO-DPMNE and further referred to as 'DPMNE', Nikola Gruevski, Gordana Siljanovska - Davkova and Hristijan Mickoski.

In May, the SDSM again often used unsubstantiated claims of corruption (5), and less often intentionally omitted information (2) by which they develop harmful narratives for undermining trust in the institutions (7) and biased selection of information leading the public to wrong conclusions (7).

Undermining trust and biased selection of information can be seen in a statement from the speech of the party leader Dimitar Kovachevski at a pre-election rally in Radovish on 2 May titled 'Kovachevski: Too much power with a right-wing party like VMRO DPMNE means the end of our EU perspectives, the end of independent media and the independent judiciary'. He develops the harmful narratives of his speech using allegations of corruption, unaccountability and unprofessionalism: *Don't let VMRO sell cheap demagogues about the future. Remember how his mentor from Budapest robbed and captured the country(...)Remember the millions spent on weeping willow, fake baroque, cheap styrofoam just to enrich individuals and the family that was in power(...)* and by deliberately not conveying the full picture of the events - *See how Mickoski and Siljanovska turned the election campaign into nationalist chants and fights with the leader of DUI, Ali Ahmeti, instead of a competition of projects and ideas(...)*

In the strengthening of the pre-election rhetoric, in addition to the biased selection of information and the undermining of trust in the institutions and the media, it can be noticed the attempt of the SDSM to smear the VMRO-DPMNE in order to foment divisions and discords, but also to spread panic, fear and uncertainty regarding the return of Gruevski's policies and the interruption of the process for joining the European Union. For example, in a 1 May press release from Kovachevski's speech from the May Day picnic, entitled 'Kovachevski: By returning the VMRO-DPMNE, we allow a secure blockade of Macedonia and internal ethnic tensions' the narrative continues that nothing has changed in the VMRO-DPMNE and with their coming to power the 'regime' would return - *If a right-wing party like VMRO gains such power, with all state resources available, we may face the end of our European perspective. VMRO will delay European integration indefinitely, as Gruevski did.*

Apart from the harmful posts from the party channels, this month there were harmful narratives on the Facebook pages of two SDSM Ministers, i.e., one harmful narrative by the Minister of Agriculture, Forestry and Water Management, Ljupcho Nikolovski, and four harmful narratives by the Minister of Culture, Bisera Kostadinovska Stojchevska, who, as well as the party's harmful communications, refer to domestic politics with a focus on attacks against the VMRO-DPMNE.

In the post on Ljupcho Nikolovski's Facebook page from 6 May, which calls for a vote, continues the rhetoric that with the return of VMRO-DPMNE to power, the 'regime' will return, with the message - *A strong #SDSM in the Parliament is needed for the future of the state. There is no other way to prevent the VMRO DPMNE from bringing back the regime that we have been trying so long to overthrow. So on 8 May, let's not allow go back.*

In the harmful posts of Bisera K. Stojchevska the party's pre-election rhetoric can be seen in which the VMRO-DPMNE and the ZNAM party are attacked, with biased selection of information and fomenting divisions. For example in Facebook post from 6 May the Minister Stojchevska calls for a vote, smearing the VMRO-DPMNE and the ZNAM:

- The vote for ZNAM is a vote for the VMRO DPMNE, a vote for regime and violence, a vote for darkness and the past. The vote for false social democrats and false patriots is a deviation from the European path and complete isolation of the country. Real social democrats do not vote for populists and do not form coalitions with the regime.

Such messages, especially when they come from public office holders, are harmful because they contribute to the strengthening of divisions in the society and the normalization of the low level of political communication, and the smearing of the main political opponent by being identified with 'regime', 'darkness' and 'backsliding' contributes to spreading fear in the society of a possible Government led by VMRO-DPMNE.

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

This month, at the Democratic Union for Integration - DUI, a transformation in the harmful public communication before and after the parliamentary elections is observed. If the key narrative before the election results was the slogan 'Yes for Europe, No for Russia', after the elections DUI spokespeople focus on the ethnocentric narrative that DUI is the only legitimate representative of the Albanians, recalling the 2001 conflict. Additionally, they accuse the institutions and the Vredi of electoral engineering and announce a crisis if DUI is not a participant in the formation of a new government.

In the six identified harmful narratives on the websites and on DUI's Facebook page, it can be noted that they continued to use the same pre-election rhetoric, mainly using unsubstantiated claims of corruption, unprofessionalism and negative foreign influences, which after the election were transformed into harmful

narrative of undermining confidence in the SEC, with criticisms of the election results and the decisions on re-voting, but also attacks on the formation of the coalition between the VMRO-DPMNE and the Vredi, heralding a crisis in the society. Hence, continuing to present themselves as defenders of the national identity, defenders of justice, EU-oriented, transparent and accountable, the focus of DUI's harmful narratives is mainly directed at the VMRO-DPMNE, Mickoski, the SDSM and the opposition Vredi.

The key messages from the pre-election campaign of the 'European Front' coalition formed by DUI are repeated this month as well - 'Yes for Europe, no for Russia', and self-representation as the only option that is the main bearer of European integration in the country, but also the only representative and defender of the interests of the ethnic Albanians.

For example, in a post on 6 May on the party's Facebook page, at a press conference of the European Front, Arber Ademi summarizes the harmful pre-election narrative that unfoundedly alludes to negative foreign influence in the opposition parties and highlights the comparison of DUI as the good option that stands for a European future for the country and the 'opposition', i.e. the Vredi coalition, as an option under Russian and Serbian influence with which the state will go back: *Victory of the bright future against going back (...) the opposition rivals (are) without a platform encouraged by Moscow and Belgrade (...) votes for the opposition are votes for VMRO (...) the European front is the only guard on (...) the European perspective.*

Also, in a post on 2 May on the Facebook page of DUI, from a press conference by Bujar Osmani the same harmful pre-election narrative is observed, which has the capacity to deepen and create social divisions: *While VMRO and their allies recycle the nationalist theses every day, flirt with pro-Russian interests, openly threaten the glorious uprising of 2001, increase tensions between ethnic and religious communities in the country, the Front guarantees stability and coexistence by uniting all communities in the mission for a better and richer life (...) hence the citizens should not trust those who want to take us back (...). let's strengthen the political position not only of the Albanians but also of all communities against the arrogant threat of majoritarianism made by the irresponsible chorus of VMRO.*

Furthermore, in the pre-election period, in a 5 May DUI website post, a text, photo and video from a pre-election rally of the European Front in Tetovo, where, in addition to unsubstantiated claims of corruption, offensive attacks on the political opponents can also be observed: Zeid: *The Albanian opposition surrendered to Mickoski(...)but they did not abuse Albin Kurti for votes and returned to Mickoski. The opposition forgets that it cannot scare the people with the police and with such thoughts(...); A. Hodja: They started every rally in the presidential elections with Albin Kurti, and when they lost by over 40 thousand votes, they returned to Mickoski. Our front represents all citizens and is not divided as their Vmro boss wants (...) A chicken remains a chicken even if it puts wings of an eagle, so let's not allow the eagle's wings be cut off. We do not want isolation, I don't care about Bilal's cry, nor about Afrim Gashi's well frog or others.' or for example an excerpt from Menduh Tachi's speech: (...) I am an expert on swamps and bacteria like Vredi(...).*

After the election result, DUI's harmful public narratives focus on the claim that they are the only option that protects the interests of the Albanians in Macedonia, while the Vredi coalition cannot represent the majority of the Albanians in the country and it is in coalition with the VMRO-DPMNE portraying them as a party that will install a captive state and advocates ethnic majoritarianism, as well as criticism of the SEC for the decisions regarding the election violations and the re-voting.

For example, in a Facebook post on 14 May from Elmi Aziri's press conference it is possible to notice this harmful narrative that undermines trust in the SEC, the election process and outcome: (...) *Unfairly and with an outvote in the SEC, as a unanimous decision was made to re-vote(...) party instructions were given to the members of the SEC (...) a coordinated political attempt by the Macedonian parties and the Albanian opposition to take over the mandates from the European Front (...).. the captured state, overruling and ethnic majoritarianism are being reinstalled (...)*

Also, a 17 May Facebook post from a press conference by the Minister of Information Society and Administration Naim Bajrami reiterates the harmfulness of the DUI's post-election narrative heralding a crisis in the country: *An attempt of electoral engineering aimed at changing the relationship in the Parliament through a political agreement at the table (...). with a political agreement and a monstrous anti-democratic plan prepared in the headquarters of VMRO, SDSM and Vredi, an attempt is made to disrupt the will of the citizens (...) The session of the SEC was a scandal of overruling and suspension to the principles of the Ohrid Agreement and the return to previous systems (...) the return to the anti-democratic system that produces an international, inter-neighbourly, inter-ethnic social crisis.*

In May, three posts with harmful narratives were identified on the Facebook page of the party leader, Ali Ahmeti, from his interviews and statement for televisions, which refer to the elections, however the conflict in 2001 is mentioned as a topic. In these posts, Ahmeti presents himself as the defender of his own national identity and the defender of the people, while other political actors he often mentions are VMRO-DPMNE, Siljanovska-Davkova, Mickoski, Gruevski, SDSM, Zaev, the Vredi coalition, and Taravari.

For example, in post on 6 May from an interview for the Albanian TV show 'Opinion' Ahmeti uses unsubstantiated claims regarding the corruption of the political opponents who allegedly wanted to 'bury the DUI' and thus the ethnic Albanians, with which he develops harmful narratives to undermine trust in the institutions of the state - *There is propaganda that the Albanians took our state (...) That's why Mickoski had a meeting with SDSM ex-president Zaev to bury DUI*, while to the journalist's question about the pre-election coalition with the parties of the smaller ethnic communities in the country, as with the Turkish one, Ahmeti answered (...) *all other communities in Macedonia, together with the Albanians, comprise 46% of the population (...) so far the smaller communities have been walking around like puppets between SDSM and VMRO (...)*[2]

After the electoral result of the parliamentary elections, in Facebook post from 25 May from an interview with the journalist Furkan Saliu for the media PortalX, Ali Ahmeti also uses unsubstantiated findings to undermine trust in the institutions of the state, where his key point is that the Vredi does not have the legitimacy to represent the Albanian people and the principle of a winner-to-winner coalition is not respected: *Vredi, VMRO and SDSM agreed and did electoral engineering (...) Gashi has no legitimacy for the Albanians (...) by disrespecting the legitimacy, do not destroy the Ohrid Agreement (...) the war in 2001 happened precisely because of disrespect for the previous Constitution and of majoritarianism and economic injustices (...) the legitimacy should be defended by every Albanian (...) the Albanians who are in the Government do not have the legitimacy, I don't know why they are doing this because this will grow into a national movement (...) what happened was done by the anti-Albanian movement.*

In addition to the leader of the party Ahmeti, in May the monitoring noticed five harmful narratives by the deputy Prime Minister Artan Grubi and 10 harmful narratives on the Facebook profile of the Minister of Economy Kreshnik Bekteshi.

During this month, the political communication of Artan Grubi is focused on the tendency personally as a political exponent of DUI to convince the voters to vote en masse because the vote for the European Front is a vote for the European future of the country. As usual, Grubi continued to use the propagandistic narrative based on ethnocentrism in May. When Grubi smears the Albanian opposition, tending to portray the European Front as the legitimate winner of the elections, he uses ethnic arguments even though the coalition they formed is multi-ethnic: *We made all the achievements together because only united we are stronger. Today, schools teach about the ONA, the first Albanian prime minister, the Albanian language, the national flag, the*

2 This post was shared on both DUI's Facebook page and Kreshnik Bekteshi's Facebook page.

first Albanian president of the parliament, Corridor 8, the universities, the administrators, the institutions, NATO membership and many, many great achievements that we have achieved together in the last two decades. However, we still have work to do in terms of European integration, to unite around this noble goal and succeed together. VOTE 4 🗣️ NO Russia, YES Europe! 🤝 One prime minister for all 📈 Economic framework agreement #EuropeanFront ευ🤝us #together' (Facebook post on the profile of Artan Grubi, 5 May, 2024). This post also uses manipulative video content that was part of the DUI campaign, further biasing the selection of information.

Also, Grubi focuses on accusations against the opposition, i.e. the Vredi coalition, for servility and humility towards malignant foreign influences - *I invite all the voters of the Albanian opposition and those who stayed at home not to allow the servility, vassalage, humility, service that the 5 people do it to Mickoski, Gordana, Apasiev, VMRO and Levica, and indirectly to Serbia and Russia.* (Facebook post on the profile of Artan Grubi, 1 May, 2024). Part of Grubi's messages were aimed at convincing the public that DUI/European Front is the winner of the elections in the Albanian electoral block and that they have the legitimacy and the right to participate in the Government: *Dear honest voters of the Albanian opposition, they abused your honest vote they turned a vote into a vote for VMRO DPMNE, a vote for Gordana Siljanovska.* (Facebook post on the profile of Artan Grubi, 6 May, 2024).

The harmful communication on the Facebook page of the Minister of Economy from DUI Kreshnik Bekteshi mainly uses biased selection of information and refers to reactions and criticisms of the decisions to re-vote the parliamentary elections and accusations of electoral engineering: *Attempt for majoritarianism, are we going back for decades as a country? VMRO-DPMNE and SDSM are you preparing to trade with the will of the citizens in 5th ELECTION UNIT???!!! Hey people, neither EUROPEAN FRONT nor VLEN have votes in these polling stations!!!* (Facebook post on Bekteshi's profile, 13 May, 2024). As with the rest of the members of the DUI, Bekteshi's ethnocentrism can be observed in his attacks on the opposition. For example, in 29 May post, from a photo by Afrim Gashi in the office of the Assembly with flags circled on the desk, Bekteshi emphasizes: *It is a national and legal obligation to place the national flag AL on your desk! Running for positions (without legitimacy) they forget what was achieved and defended with blood.*

The Alliance for the Albanians, led by Ziadin Sela

Ziadin Sela's wing of the Alliance for the Albanians, which went into coalition with the European Front of DUI, apparently manages the Facebook page of the Alliance for the Albanians, and three posts with harmful narratives were identified there this month. The noted harmful posts are related to the party's pre-election activities of the European Front, and their content coincides with the rhetoric of DUI, mostly critically directed at the parties of the opposition bloc of the Albanians, calling them 'vassals' and 'losers', and presenting themselves as defenders of their own national identity and oriented towards the EU. This month, unsubstantiated claims of corruption and ethnocentrism, aimed at VMRO-DPMNE and Vredi, are mainly observed, which undermine the trust in the institutions of the state, especially the citizens from the Albanian ethnic community.

For example, in a 1 May post on the AA Facebook page, from a press release from a meeting with the diaspora in Austria, it is said *that the diaspora confirmed today with a press release its readiness and does not allow the Macedonian nationalist and opposition parties to experiment against the Albanians (...) it is ready to do everything necessary, as in 2001 and today, to ensure peace and justice in our country.* Similarly, in a 1 May post on the AA Facebook page, with a video of an interview of AA MP Ilire Dauti, one can notice the harmful narrative with an attack on the VMRO and the Vredi: *If there is a Government with the losing party (the so-called Vredi is meant) it makes the Albanians losers, (...) their motto is that Mickoski will take us is very humiliating, according to that logic there is no need for elections, the Macedonian voter or the president of VMRO will decide who will be the winner among the Albanians, something like that cannot happen (...) Mickoski and those who support them his policies see the Albanians only as a minority within VMRO or within the governments with the aim of dominating the Albanians..*

After the election results, in taken post on 29 May from a European Front press conference, one can note the well-known narrative that Vredi has no legitimacy to represent the Albanians in the Parliament and with their 'vassalage' they contribute to the return two decades backwards when the Albanians and other smaller ethnic communities in the country were 'second-class citizens' and the largest Macedonian party will decide for them instead of them having that right themselves: *The European Front came out as a second force (...).These results were violated and continue to be violated through electoral engineering (...)..the defeated ones in the elections without the legitimacy of sovereignty ignored the will of the people, the Ohrid Agreement, the legitimacy (...) the citizens do not ask what is the meaning of democracy (...) if the majority community determines who represents the Albanians, Turks, Roma, and other communities?(...) the largest Macedonian party decides for them? (...) this vassalage takes us back to the time more than two decades ago when the communities were discriminated against, treated as second-class citizens(...)*[3]

The Minister of Justice Krenar Loga is part of Ziadin Sela's wing of the Alliance for the Albanians, and 10 posts with harmful narratives, which are mostly short statuses with manipulative visual elements, emoticons and hashtags, were identified on his Facebook page this month. As well as in the narratives of the DUI and the AA, Krenar Loga promotes his party and the European Front coalition, and he is critical of the Vredi coalition, which he portrays as a vassal coalition of VMRO-DPMNE. In his posts, the criticism of the Albanian opposition is obvious, and the Eurocentric narrative dominates, i.e., the country's path to the EU. Loga often uses harmful narratives regarding events, topics or issues of a pre-election nature, i.e. in which the Albanian opposition is smeared, with a tendency to portray it as anti-European, pro-Russian and close to the VMRO-DPMNE. After the elections, the same rhetoric of DUI was observed, that Vredi has no legitimacy to represent the Albanians in the Parliament.

For example, in Facebook status dated 29 May, Loga comments on the new parliamentary majority by undermining trust in the Assembly, fomenting social divisions, fear and insecurity, predicting 'deformations in the cohesion between the communities and serious consequences for the Albanians as well as for the future of the state in the EU: *The violation of the will of the majority of the Albanian population in RNM is as harmful and dangerous as the violation of the Prespa Agreement or the Negotiating Framework with the EU. If an attempt is made to install the normality of vassalage in relation to the Albanians, it will produce deformations that can threaten the coherence and the cohesion between the communities, but also the statehood that has been built with so much effort and sacrifice for decades. #MaqedoniaeVeriut #postenialbanci #vassal'*

As well as, regarding Krenar Loga, ethnocentrism can be noticed especially in one post on 6 May with photos of Ziadin Sela's speech at a pre-election rally of the European Front in Labunishta in which it is written - *In Labunishta on the European front ᴇᴜ With the most powerful message ever, the time when other people decided instead the Albanians had ended, those times are dead along with Yugoslavia and its remnants.*

In addition, there are two posts with a harmful narrative identified at Krenar Loga regarding the speech of President Gordana Siljanovska-Davkova at her inauguration, criticizing her and VMRO-DPMNE, using unsubstantiated arguments and biased selection of information that undermines trust in the institution of the President of the country, but also in general in the new Government which will be led by VMRO-DPMNE: *What is the logic of giving one oath in oral form and another in writing? This is an unprecedented paradox. How can the president of a country take an oath other than what they will sign? This means that all those things that you will say verbally, tomorrow you will not respect them because you will sign something else.* (Post on Krenar Loga's Facebook page from an interview with Sloboden Pechat, 14 Mays, 2024) or again in the next similar post when he says: *Siljanovska scored the first penalty in the first minute!' Davkova's statement about*

3 This press conference was also posted on DUI, Ahmeti and Bekteshi channels.

the use of the name Republic of Macedonia, according to her conviction, is a bad example for a statesperson and a bad example as a professor, given that she taught constitutional law all her life and sits in office to prove how the Constitution and the state should be respected (Post on Krenar Loga's Facebook page from an interview for the Sloboden Pechat, 14 May, 2024)

The VMRO-DPMNE

The VMRO-DPMNE, as in all previous months, is in the first trio of parties with the highest number of harmful narratives in May, but unlike March and April when it was in first place with 43 harmful posts in both months, in May with 16 posts there was a significant reduction in harmful rhetoric and **ranked second** in the number of harmful posts.

Days with the most harmful narratives are 2 May and 6 May, which are the period of pre-election activities, as well as 29 May, the day after the constitution of the Assembly. The domestic politics topics dominate, in five out of 16 posts, four are regarding healthcare, three are regarding corruption, three about crime and one about justice. The VMRO-DPMNE posted about the activities of the opponents from the SDSM (4 out of 5), healthcare topics were about the conditions in the Clinical Centre in Skopje (4 out of 4), crime topics were mostly accusations of criminal behaviour of the opponents from SDSM and accusations about the officials of DUI that they illegally acquired wealth, and corruption topics are mostly accusations of corruption allegedly directed by the political opponents.

In two out of a total of 16 posts, their party/leader is shown as defender of justice, and in two as defender of the people. The most frequently mentioned actors by the VMRO-DPMNE were their own party VMRO-DPMNE in all 16 posts, SDSM and DUI together in eight posts, SDSM in six posts, and DUI in five posts. The practice of naming the SDSM as 'SDS' continues, not using the letter 'M' from the abbreviation for the Social Democratic Union of Macedonia, in order to emphasize that they consider that SDSM is not a party that works for the Macedonian interests.

The VMRO-DPMNE often uses the on-going developments that are of broad social interest to be placed in the context of the rule of the SDSM and the DUI and to be used as criticism for mismanagement of the state resources or for corruption, crime and disregard for the rule of law in society as a whole. Such are the cases with the posts by VMRO-DPMNE concerning the scandal with the closed operating theatres of the surgical clinics in Skopje, as well as the case with the arrest for bribery of a supreme court judge, a case in which there were indications that a public prosecutor was also involved.

On the of VMRO-DPMNE' website in the pre-election period of 6 May a clip from an interview of the leader of the party Hristijan Mickoski is posted, titled 'Mickoski: The Government's feeling and the treatment towards people of the first and second rank prevails, the wave is big, I expect we will reach or close to 61 MPs.' In the post with a negative tone, the main political opponent is mentioned, presented *as a corrupt political actor, that SDSM should look for its defeat much further back, not only in the campaign and these few months, but also when in the conditions of the corona crisis they made an epic misuse of the state resources, money, institutions.* The political opponent is attacked, making a division between we-good ones and they-bad ones, promoting the VMRO-DPMNE as a political option that represents the interests of the citizens, while making allegations of criminal behaviour, without citing examples of cases of abuse and offering adequate facts to support the allegations.

In addition to the SDSM, in the interview, excerpts of which are posted on the website, messages are also addressed to the DUI. The text from the 6 May post is titled 'Mickoski: The commanders of Ali, who in 2001 did not have five pennies in their pockets, are now millionaires, so I do not believe that they will risk destabilization when they go to the opposition'. The DUI officials are named as 'Ahmeti's commanders', *regarding whom he says that they did not have five pennies in 2001, are now millionaires with haciendas like*

Middle Eastern sheikhs, and it would be very difficult for them to sacrifice it all. However, that they will try to make any riots and that they will try to protect what they have, as Ali Ahmeti said on one occasion during the local elections on the 21st, booty of war. That is what he said about Kichevo and Debar, so it is booty of war. Now, the booty of war is Soravia, the Rolls Royce of the in-laws, the apartments, the downtown shops, and so on. The fists shared by their robbers in the institutions like Air Traffic Control will try to protect them. While the DUI is presented as a criminal structure, the VMRO-DPMNE is presented as the protector of the state and the citizens because, as Mickoski says, they are ready and they have a plan to protect the system, the state and the institutions. Through the use of populist discourse, the party is promoted that it will provide protection, because it is ready and has a plan, its own political option is promoted as better, instead of other political opponents who are smeared.

After the constitution of the Assembly and the officialization of the cooperation of the VMRO-DPMNE with the Vredi as an Albanian partner in the Government and the Assembly, there were reactions from the DUI to which the VMRO-DPMNE responded. The reaction posted on 29 May on the party's website is titled 'There was neither majoritarianism, nor chauvinism, nor it is important that Ahmeti felt offended, what matters is that the will of the majority is for the DUI to go into opposition and face responsibility.'

In the reaction, it is pointed out that DUI's allegations that the fact they are not part of the government coalition violate the Ohrid Framework Agreement, but that Ali Ahmeti also violated it when he decided to leave the VMRO-DPMNE out of the Government and did not respect the results of the 2016 elections when the VMRO-DPMNE won. Hereupon, the leader of the DUI Ahmeti is directly attacked that *he should stop behaving like a naughty child who cries for a toy that is not his, because VMRO-DPMNE is not SDS, nor does DUI going into opposition have anything to do with the VMRO-DPMNE's attitude towards the Albanians. While the DUI is said to be not only the Albanians in Macedonia, DUI is the segment that stole from the Albanians as well as the Macedonians.* Moreover, the leader of the DUI Ali Ahmeti is being targeted if he thinks that *new and anti-state ethnic demands translated into documents and platforms will save him from going to the opposition and hide the crimes of his party, he should only know that this will quickly end his career.*

By means of the rhetoric of harmful narratives that directly attack the political opponent, ridicule, representation as a criminal structure, the division of we-good ones and they-the bad ones is encouraged, while one's own political party is presented as the better option for the citizens in order to gain their trust.

As regards the leader of the VMRO-DPMNE, Hristijan Mickoski, the monitoring notes a post that contains a harmful narrative.[4] It is about a post on his Facebook page dated 6 May 2024, before the beginning of the electoral silence for the second round of the presidential and the parliamentary elections. In the message titled 'MESSAGE TO EVERY CITIZEN OF MACEDONIA' he promotes the political offer of the VMRO-DPMNE and criticizes the political opponents. He presents his own party as a better option for the citizens, which represents the interests of the people, unlike the opponents. He says that the citizens know the ruling parties and that unfortunately *we all were living in the reality of their incompetence and greed*. While regarding the VMRO-DPMNE he says that *we commit ourselves and give our word that we will not let you down. The road will be difficult, but there is no obstacle that we cannot overcome together.* A populist narrative is used to promote one's own political option, and to encourage division regarding the political opponents we- the good ones versus they-the bad ones: *now, as we stand on the threshold of a new chapter in our nation's story, let us seize this moment with courage and determination, and with our heads held high let's defeat them together!* The text does not present concrete measures and steps, but uses general political platitudes with the promise of a better life with the VMRO-DPMNE and criticism of the political opponent, a populist rhetoric that was significantly used by the political actors throughout the election process.

4 This is the same number as in April, when one harmful post was noted, while in March no harmful narratives were noted in the posts of VMRO-DPMNE leader Hristijan Mickoski.

The 'Vredi' (Vlen) coalition

In May, on the communication channels of the Vredi monitoring coalition, only one harmful post on the Facebook page of the Alternativa party and three posts with harmful narratives on the Facebook page of the leader of the Alternativa Afrim Gashi, as well as two on the Facebook page of the presidential candidate of the coalition, Arben Taravari, as weel as four posts with harmful narratives on the Facebook profile of the leader of the Democratic Movement, Izet Medjiti. In comparison, in April, three posts with harmful narratives were identified by the Alternativa and six by the leader Gashi, one post by Taravari, one harmful post by the Democratic Movement and ten by the leader Medjiti. Hence, it can be concluded that there is a certain reduction in the harmful narratives and in general in the number of posts on the websites and Facebook pages of the parties in this coalition, while the harmful posts are mostly found on the profiles of the leaders Medjiti, Gashi and Taravari.

As in the previous period of the pre-election campaign, the narrative of the Vredi coalition is aligned and coordinated, and it moves along the line of promoting its coalition at the expense of harsh criticism of the governing structures, especially the DUI. In particular, the main ethnocentric message is that *the Albanian majority in these elections is represented by the Vredi coalition, not by the multi-ethnic European Front coalition.* (Post on the Facebook page of Izet Medjiti, 2 May). Hence, the renaming of the political rival European Front to the 'Multi-Ethnic Front'. Presenting themselves as defenders of the people and justice, the spokepersons of the Vredi coalition mostly use unsubstantiated accusations and labelling of the DUI for corrupt actions. Nonetheless, this month they also communicate regarding the pre-election pressures and bribery, developing an ethnocentric populist narrative for the mobilization of the electorate that promotes their own coalition. Thereto, the DUI is attacked and their leader Ahmeti is demonized. Accusations and labelling are mostly without providing precise, reliable sources, i.e., the political actor himself is the only source.

For example, even in 30 May post on Izet Medjiti's Facebook page, as the most prominent spokesperson of the Vredi coalition, and in the post-election period develops the key narrative of Vredi - *Meanwhile, the Albanians with the 'European Front' are becoming equal with the smallest communities in the country. As a result, the 'European Front' maintains the line of division, namely the line of discrimination, leaving the Macedonians as the first - dominant people, while grouping the Albanians with other ethnic groups in the second rank, namely as a marginalized people or group. Thirdly, it was Ali Ahmeti and the 'European Front' who relativized the weight of the Albanian voter and actualized the question why the political organization of the Albanians should exist as a political concept in North Macedonia?! If the Albanians in North Macedonia should be organized politically in a block of smaller communities where the Turks, Bosniaks and others belong, then Ali Ahmeti consciously returned the majority of the Albanians and their return to the level of minority nations.*

Also, especially after voting in the parliamentary elections, the Vredi highlights the accusations of blackmail, fear, threats and pressures on the citizens/voters without giving concrete examples and facts. For example, in a statement from 30 May on the Facebook page of Alternativa, it is said: *The institutions such as the SEC and the Administrative Court determined that on 8 May the DUI and the Multiethnic Front tried once again to violate the will of the citizens with threats and violence. That is why they decided to vote in the village of Larce on 22 May. Nevertheless, the Multiethnic Front machinery again tried to pressure and threaten the residents and the commissioners, bringing DUI Ministers and police officers to the polling station as observers to intimidate residents into voting. This scene looked more like a siege than an ordinary day of revoting. However, the criminal actions of DUI were also rejected last night by the Administrative Court itself, which did not have even the slightest remark about the entire re-voting process. Larce exposed the anti-democratic and anti-European politics of the DUI and its partners who stole mandates for 20 consecutive years using their power to steal votes and threaten the Albanians in their homes (...) The communist politics has come to an end.*

This narrative of the disruption of the democratic electoral process was developed even before the elections. For example in a 1 May post on Afrim Gashi's Facebook page biased selection of information and undermining of trust in the institutions can be observed with accusations that the DUI coordinates a strategy to intimidate voters: *We are two days following the public statement of the president of VMRO, where he pointed out that there are facts that armed groups are present in various populated areas in our country and accused DUI and Ali Ahmeti of such a thing. There is still no response from the authorities. On the contrary, this leads us to assume that the whole situation is a coordinated effort to instil fear in the voters, creating a discourse that there could be a conflict on the Election Day. Change is a matter of days and there is no tactic that will prevent it(...)*

On Arben Taravari's Facebook page, the former leader of the Alliance for the Albanians and presidential candidate of the Vredi coalition, there are two posts with harmful narratives on the topic of elections, which, however, do not refer to his personal communication, but they are video posts from the Vredi's press conferences. - One on the occasion of the re-voting in Larce - Zhelino and one from Izet Medjiti from Skopje. At the two press conferences, unsubstantiated claims can be seen that undermine trust in the institutions through the criticism directed at DUI. Thus, at the press conference on 6 May, Izet Medjiti says: *(...) they (DUI) make the last threats, the last pressures, they continue with bribery of votes, with pressures on the administration, on those who are under contract, on the business (...),* while at the press conference of Vredi after the elections, on 22 May, with a focus on the re-voting in Larce-Zhelino, the DUI is again criticized and trust is undermined in the government institutions that have the responsibility to conduct fair and democratic elections in the country: *..the coalition of the terror (evil or doing evil) has only 48 votes (...) and in 2016, when we competed as Besa until 9:30 p.m., we led 8 to 7, but after the DUI thefts, when we woke up, 3 MPs were stolen from us (...) and in other election cycles, they stole three or at least two mandates, this time they were not lucky (...) inspectors and police paraded in the village, and addressed the villagers in a provocative way, this is the part when the front of evil* terrorized with the mechanisms of the government, with the police, with secret services (...) with blackmail, threats (...) we managed to avoid an incident from a man who was sent to buy votes and fulfil their scenario (...).

The Levica

The rhetoric of the political party Levica in May continued to be intense and aimed at the political opponents as the primary audience, thus this last breaking into the first place according to the number of harmful compared to other political actors (total of 25 posts). The secondary audience of the Levica is the general public to which it addresses in order to show that the Levica is a defender of the citizens' interests compared to other political actors.

The Levica presents itself as a political party that protects the national state interests and will not allow changes to the Constitution and foreign influences. In the pre-election period, statements of the party's leaders who are also holders of the candidate lists for the elections are noted, but it is also noted that the Levica continues with intense and sharp communication even after the end of the election process. There are speeches and posts from the party and its first members also on the day of the constitution of the Assembly, where the party posted key messages from the speech of the constitutive session of the leader Dimitar Apasiev and MPs from the Levica in the Assembly.

The Levica's communication has two main themes. One is #NepodmitliviteVoSobranieto (The incorruptible ones in the Assembly), which is the main message and hashtag of the campaign for the parliamentary elections, by means of which the Levica promotes itself as a true representative of the interests of the citizens and in a firm fight against corruption. The second topic is regarding the defence of the state, and often in the messages of the main people of the party it is said that they are against the 'Kosovo' and 'Bulgarian' platform, and they stand for only the 'Macedonian one.' In the posts of Levica, you can find content regarding the

presidential and parliamentary elections, the election results of the Levica, the formation of a Government, the fight against corruption, the constitutional changes for the inclusion of the Bulgarians in the Constitution, labour rights and the quality of life of the citizens.

Dimitar Apasiev's Facebook profile has 44 posts, 16 of which contain harmful narratives, which means that he remains at the top of the list of political party leaders in terms of the number of harmful narratives. The Levica political party recorded 57 posts, 25 of which had a harmful narrative. In his posts, the leader of the Levica, Apasiev, often mentions the Levica, himself, and the harmful narratives are aimed at the VMRO-DPMNE, the SDSM, Hristijan Mickoski, the Vredi, the DUI, Bojan Marichikj, Dimitar Kovachevski and Timcho Mucunski.

In its communication with the public, the Levica continues to label its political opponents. It calls the SDSM the 'SDS', 'SDS of Our Country', as well as the broad coalition 'DPMNE-SDS-DUI', 'quislings', 'transitional kleptomaniacs.' There is a significant number of posts on the Levica' communication channels and of the leader Dimitar Apasiev which contain insults and labels, such as towards the previous ruling party the SDSM and its leader who is often referred to as 'Tache', 'SDS', 'The Snake', Vice Prime Minister Bojan Marichikj 'fat arse'. The Vredi, just as DUI are labelled 'neo-ballists', the VMRO-DPMNE as 'false patriots', 'DPMNE', 'neo-supremacists from DPMNE', 'unhinged vmroids', 'vmroid nits', 'vmroids', Hristian Mickoski as 'the duke', 'Micika', the mayor of Aerodrom Timcho Mucunski as 'the most incompetent mayor'. Following the posts as regards to the formation of a coalition between the VMRO-DPMNE and the Vredi, there are also harmful narratives about a 'Tirana' and 'Kosovo' platform.

The use of hashtags continues in the communication of the Levica, with the fact that in May they were created in support of the election campaign: #NepodmitliviteVoSobranieto, #Zaokruzhi5 (circle 5), #NemaVladaBezLevica (There is no government without the Levica), #ParliamentarniIzbori2024 (Parlamentary Elections 2024).

The communication practice of the leader of the Levica, Dimitar Apasiev, continues, he continues to posts short texts with a key point that, in addition to text and a photo, end with a hashtag, which contain one or more short and effective messages, as well as names. They usually contain insults and criticisms of the political opponents, comments on on-going events, and the populist discourse dominates. In 14 May post he addresses the larger parties:

More young Turks and Bosniaks entered the Parliament through the parliamentary lists of the Levica than through any of the lists of ethno-tribalist parties in Macedonia.

Well, let more class-conscious young Albanians, Roma, Serbs, Vlachs enter the next elections (...) - so you can see in action what BROTHERHOOD UNITY is, screw yourselves and the 'coexistence'!
#SocialismOrBarbarism
#KlasnaBorba (class struggle)

A similar example is the 9 May post after the end of the parliamentary elections, by which he targeted the Vice Prime Minister for European Integration Bojan Marichikj:

Fat arse MARICHIKJ did not become our MP, but he was 4th on the list in first constituency!? 🤭

The Levica has officially become the second party in Aerodrom and Kisela Voda, and it is breathing down the neck of SDS in their yesterday bastions - Karposh and Centar.

The prophecy of the PASOKIFICATION began to be fulfilled.
p.s. As of yesterday, SDS of 'Our Country' became SDS under 'Our Country'.
 # Pasokification
#CrvenoSkopje (Red Skopje)
#AsnomskiteIdeali (Asnom ideals)

The representation of the party as a protector of the Macedonian national interests is also represented in Apasiev's post of 17 May after it was announced that VMRO-DPMNE will form a government coalition with the Albanian opposition parties that are united in the Vredi coalition. The post contains a photo of the leaders of Vredi with a screenshot from a media article about combinatorics for the future government and text:

You tell him Macedonian platform, he says: - 'No thanks.' We will go with TIRANA PLATFORM'
p.s. Go ahead!
#vmroid

The text is aimed at the VMRO-DPMNE, and is accompanied by the hashtag #Vmroid, a term used in a pejorative context for members and supporters of the VMRO-DPMNE.

The two main topics of the Levica, the fight against corruption and the defence of the national interests, were treated in almost all posts in the pre-election period, i.e., before the voting for the parliamentary elections on 8 May. After the elections, the topic of defence of the national interests and foreign influences is more dominant.

In a post from pre-election activity in Bitola, on 2 May 'Apasiev from Bitola: The Macedonian platform will win these elections'. In this post, the Levica is presented as a saviour, as a defender of the Macedonian national interests, unlike their political opponents: *In these elections, the Macedonian people will put an end to the dictates and defeats of the SDS and DUI regime and restore the Republic again! Also, that Bitola sends a message that in these elections the people should choose between the three platforms: the Sofia, the Tirana and the MACEDONIAN platform!* Wherein Levica is considered as a representative of the 'Macedonian platform', unlike other political parties, thus there are also allegations of the existence of foreign influence and the imposition of foreign agendas that are not in favour of the Macedonian society.

On the eve of the parliamentary elections on 8 May, speeches of the leader of the Levica, Dimitar Apasiev, were posted, in which the citizens are encouraged to come out and vote for the Levica, and the party is promoted as the best option for the 'ordinary' citizen. Although it is usual on the day before the election silence for the political actors to post messages with which they will motivate the citizens to give them their trust, in some of the contents of the Levica, harmful narratives were noted.

One of them is the post from the gathering in Skopje on 6 May with the title 'Apasiev from Skopje: If you want war, you will get it - but this will be a class war of the poor against the oligarchs.' The post uses populist discourse pointing out that the Levica is the real opposition, while *Leave these inflated balloons, these Maksovians which will evaporate in a year - a year and a half. In these elections, we expect to enter with a parliamentary group, and our people know that they should vote for the Levica!* and the post is accompanied by the hashtags #NebormitliviteVoSobranieto and #Zaokruzhi5. The emotions of the citizens are encouraged, to promote the Levica as the party that is on the side of the ordinary citizens, the poor, without providing reasoned measures and proposals. Hereupon, a direct attack is made on other opposition parties, such as leave these Maksovians, alluding to the ZNAM party formed by Maksim Dimitrievski, and the Levica presents itself as a real opposition party.

The populism, the insults to the opponent, the allegations of corruption and crime, and the fomenting divisions between we- the good ones versus they-the bad ones stating that the ruling party does not work for the interests of the state and the citizens is also present in the 6 May mass turnout call. The text says *we are closing an era of a treacherous, criminal and corrupt rule of SDS and DUI - whose results are counted in lost years, lives and disfigurement of Macedonia. They changed the name, capitulated in front of all their neighbours, and in the meantime filled their pockets greedily.* The citizens are called to come out en masse and deliver the final blow to *the worn-out ruling clique!* In the post, a direct attack is made on the SDSM by insulting and labelling them as the *transition kleptomaniacs of SDS on 'Our country'* and that the Levica should

get rid of them, return to *ASNOM ideals and the urge for freedom from the clutches of profit and national betrayals, the urge to fight the oligarchy and the urge to get the Republic back into the hands of the common people,* and that they will defeat the 'Quislings'. The post ends with the hashtags #NepomitiliviteVoSobraniete and #Circle 5.

By virtue of this kind of narrative, the politicians present themselves as ordinary people like all citizens, that they are one of them and sympathize with their sufferings and therefore they are the right choice which the citizens should make because the political actor knows how to take care of the ordinary citizens and to deliver good results for them.

The critical discourse, which contains harmful narratives with allegations of foreign influence, working for other people's interests and failure to protect the Macedonian national interests, is also observed during the constitution of the Assembly of the Republic of North Macedonia, where the cooperation of the VMRO-DPMNE and the Vredi for the ruling majority is already official, and Afrim Gashi, the leader of Alternativa and part of the Vlen, has been elected president of the Assembly. During the constitutive session, the Levica's MPs had their speeches, in which messages with harmful narratives were noted, labelling the political opponents, spreading fear and panic, allegations of foreign influences, as well as presenting the Levica as a political party that, unlike other political entities, defends the national interests.

In the speech of MP Jovana Mojsoska, posted with a title by the Levica as 'MOJSOSKA: DPMNE CHANGES TIRANA FOR KOSOVO PLATFORM' VMRO-DPMNE is criticized for being a party *that is called the last bastion in defence of the Macedonianism, with 61 MPs, it gave the position of president of the Assembly, which is the second most important position of the country to a party which until 1 year ago was part of Zaev's criminal regime.* Thereto, the VMRO-DPMNE is criticized for not having the capacity to prevent all 'anti-Macedonian processes since 2001' and *everything that DUI got in the previous term, will now only be upgraded with a Kosovo platform, which represents the coalition of the Vredi, as well as that only the Tirana platform has been replaced with Kosovo platform.*

On a similar line is the speech of MP Sasho Janchev, whose speech was posted by Levica with the title 'JANCHEV: UNDER THE DIRECTION OF DPMNE, MACEDONIA IS BEING DEMOLISHED BRICK BY BRICK.' In the speech, Janchev attacks the VMRO-DPMNE for not defending the national interests and that *DPMNE's proposal to award the Speaker's chair to Afrim Gashi is just an extension of the foreign platforms that conspire to degrade the country. Also, under the direction of the DPMNE, we got a president of the Assembly who comes from a pre-election coalition that presents itself as a guarantor of treacherous constitutional changes, electing a president of a state with a Badenter majority and openly advocates a binational state and complete bilingualism.*

Hence, one's own party is presented as the defender of the national identity, the emotions of the ordinary citizens are fed that the country is 'disintegrating', that the 'Tirana Platform' is being replaced by 'Kosovo Platform', that the Macedonians are losing control over their own country, and thus it also spreads panic, fear and insecurity among the population that the country will be at the service of foreign interests.

The public communication on the part of the political actors needs to be fully presenting the facts, explaining their views with arguments, and the criticism of the political opponents must be sustained, without insults and labelling. The populism is a useful tool for the political parties because it is applicable in a wide range of areas and for its application it is enough to provoke the emotions of the citizens, to make promises that are not explained how they will be realized, as well as the manner their success will be measured.

1.2. Monitoring of official communication channels of government officials

However, on the Facebook pages of other representatives of the Government, abuses can be observed for the promotion of their party activities within the framework of the pre-election campaign, as well as party communication after the election results.

Starting with the Prime Minister of the Caretaker Government, Talat Djaferi, his official Facebook page this month shows posts with party communication from the election campaign, such as meetings with the citizens and messages and audio-visual content from pre-election rallies.

Once more, as in the past months, on the Minister of Foreign Affairs Bujar Osmani's pages, until the elections on 8 May, posts can be seen about his candidacy for the president and the promotion of his DUI party and the European Front coalition. All pre-election communications continue to be posted on the Minister's official Facebook profile with the circled number 4 (Osmani's number on the ballot for the presidential elections) and the election poster. After the elections, the focus of his party communication is in creating a certain panic regarding the dangers of not including DUI in the new Government, as well as the necessity of respecting the Ohrid Framework Agreement and speeding up the European integration process of North Macedonia as a shared strategic interest and a guarantee for stability. However, after the elections, it can be noted that Minister Osmani is returning to the official diplomatic activities with posts from meetings with ambassadors.

The party propaganda can also be seen from the SDSM government representatives on their official government Facebook pages. The former Prime Minister and leader of the party, Dimitar Kovachevski, has been passive in the public communication after the elections until his resignation and the constitution of the new Assembly where he is a member of. The Minister Nikolovski and the Minister Kostadinovska Stojchevska noted the populist party narratives that mainly smear the VMRO-DPMNE and their previous rule of the country, in a package with the promotion of their own party.

In addition, the Minister of Defence Slavjanka Petrovska also used her official Facebook profile for party communication, and in one 6 May post has a combination of an announcement about visiting a religious event being used to send a party message to end the election campaign: *Well organized happening in Gostivar on the occasion of the biggest Christian holiday, Easter. With this beautiful event, we also marked the end of the campaign MPs and president in electoral unit 6 (...) I call on all citizens with the right to vote on Wednesday to exercise their right and vote for the SDSM and the coalition and for our president Stevo Pendarovski.'*

Hence it can be concluded that at the end of the pre-election campaigns, most of the Ministers violated the Code of Ethics of Government Officials for Public Communication and misused their ministerial profile for posting party propaganda, instead of using it only for activities related to their work in the Ministry they manage.

SUMMARY

The monitoring for May 2024 showed that there was a reduction in the harmful narratives used by the political actors. The decrease is due to the fact that the second round of the presidential elections, as well as the parliamentary elections, took place on 8 May, so the monitoring covers the pre-election period, the holding of the elections and the presentation of the election results and the constitution of the Assembly on 28 May, when the parliamentary composition was changed. After the end of the election process on 8 May, it is noticed that a large part of the political actors reduced the volume of posts, there were less speeches, interviews and reactions. The rhetoric of mutual attacks focused more on the formation of the new Government.

In contrast to the previous months, when the VMRO-DPMNE was constantly the party with the most harmful narratives, **this month the (rst place is taken by the Levica** with by far the most (25) harmful narratives, which is still a slight decrease compared to the previous period (in March 27 and in April 38 posts with harmful narratives). **The VMRO-DPMNE fell to second place with 16 posts with harmful narratives** (in March and there were 43 harmful posts each, respectively), and for the first time since the beginning of the monitoring, i.e. in the months from September 2023 onwards, **SDSM was not among the top three parties with the most harmful narratives in May**. This party with five posts with harmful narratives (29 in March and in April each, respectively) **has now taken the fourth place and ceded the third place to DUI** which was found to have six posts with harmful narratives (in March 9 and in April 14 harmful posts).

When it comes to the types of harmful narratives, the political actors in May, as in the previous period, mostly **selected information in a biased manner (83 cases)**, which could lead the public to wrong conclusions. They then **undermined trust in the institutions (76 cases)** by making unsubstantiated claims of corruption and abuse of office and **harshly attacked and demonized the political opponents (33 cases)**.

The conclusion of the analysis of the communication practices of the political actors in Macedonia this month is that the political communication in the country is at a low level, which was also feature of the previous months of the monitoring. A significant use of populist discourse and nationalism can be observed among almost all political actors. In the pre-election speeches, statements and comments, a better life for the citizens and improvement of the living conditions were promised, while often not stating exactly which measures and steps will be taken, but offering general platitudes and political promises for a better future.

The nationalist rhetoric and ethnocentrism can be useful tools for mobilizing the electorate, especially in a multi-ethnic society like the Macedonian one that has a history of fragile inter-ethnic relations. The nationalist rhetoric easily encourages strong emotions regarding the sense of belonging and identity, as well as the urge to defend one's own country, especially when the citizens are served rhetoric that the survival of the country is at stake, that foreign agendas want to impose themselves and that the future of the country is in the hands of the citizens. This approach in the political communication in the Macedonian society is known and applied, and the monitoring notes it at the VMRO-DPMNE, the Levica, the DUI and the Vredi.

The SDSM continued with the same key message that they offer a European future and a better standard of living for all the citizens of the country, while the VMRO-DPMNE is the same party that ruled the country until 2016 and would only bring a regime, wasteful spending of citizens' money and deviation from the European path. The DUI and their pre-election coalition European Front, in which the Alliance for the Albanians led by Ziadin Sela also participates, continue to use the same pre-election rhetoric with the key message 'Yes for Europe, No for Russia' with accusations against the Vredi of vassalage to the VMRO-DPMNE and Russian and Serbian influence. After the elections, the focus shifts to undermining trust in the SEC, with criticism of the election results and the decisions on re-voting, but also attacks on the formation of the coalition between the VMRO-DPMNE and the Vredi, announcing a crisis in the society, emphasizing that the Vredi is not a legitimate representative of the Albanians in the country. The VMRO-DPMNE finished its election campaign by mainly targeting the SDSM as a corrupt and incompetent Government that needs to leave. However, in the election campaign, and especially during the month of May, there was a harsher rhetoric towards the DUI, which in this election cycle, along with the SDSM, were the main target of the VMRO-DPMNE for attacks and accusations of corruption and crime. The harmful narratives of the VMRO-DPMNE were aimed both at the DUI party and at the leader Ali Ahmeti. The Levica continued with harsh rhetoric towards the ruling parties the SDSM and the DUI, as well as towards the main Macedonian opposition party the VMRO-DPMNE. After the end of the elections, after it was already known that the VMRO-DPMNE will form a coalition with the Albanian opposition Vredi, it is noted that the nationalist and ethnocentric rhetoric is intensifying, by smearing the VMRO-DPMNE as well as the Albanian parties, by spreading panic, fear and uncertainty that the destruction of the country is carried out with allegations that it is in danger of being governed by foreign agendas. The Vredi coalition, although with a reduced number of public communications and posts with harmful narratives, continued to attack the Government and the DUI with the main ethnocentric message

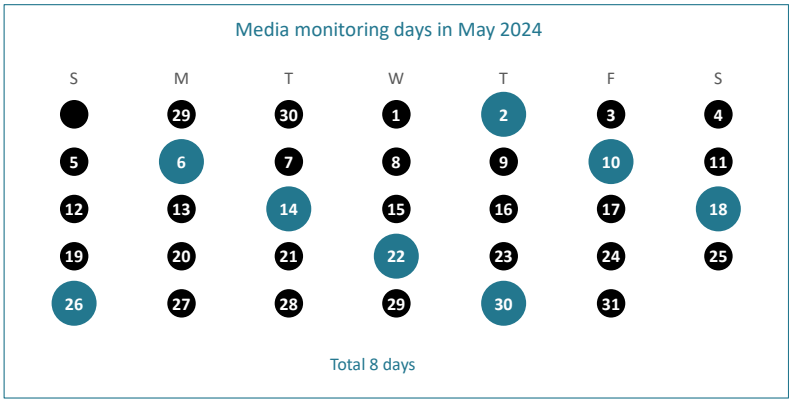
that they are the legitimate representatives of the ethnic Albanians in the country instead of the multi-ethnic European Front of Ali Ahmeti. Therefore, the Vredi spokespeople mainly used unsubstantiated accusations and labels against the DUI for corrupt actions, but this month also concerning pre-election pressures and bribery, developing an ethnocentric populist narrative that promotes their own coalition, while attacking the DUI and demonizing their leader Ahmeti.

The criticism and the mutual attacks among the political actors are expected and present in every democratic society, especially when it comes to the electoral processes. However, narratives that contain personal attacks with unfounded criticism contribute to the polarization of the public debate and they foment divisions in the society, as well as encourage a low culture of public communication. The political actors in their communication with the public need to respect The principle of evidence-based communication because the manipulative speech, which includes disinformation, false information and malicious information, can seriously affect the democratic processes and the elections, by creating and spreading lies, attacking individuals, which can result in a decrease in confidence in the electoral process and in the institutions.

Argued and sharp criticism of the political opponents in the pre-election period is expected. Nonetheless, the production and distribution of harmful narratives in the public space can contribute to the normalization of bad communication practices and the violation of the standards and the principles of ethical and professional communication. The discourse containing nationalism, ethnocentrism, spreading fear, panic and insecurity among the population by the political actors can contribute to instigating even greater divisions on ethnic and political grounds, in addition if this rhetoric is considered in the context of the history of fragile inter-ethnic relations in Macedonia and the compromises that have been made for the long-term stabilization of the country. The use of terms such as 'transitional kleptomaniacs', 'fat arse, 'unhinged vmroids', 'vmroid nits'', 'vmroids', 'neoballists', 'quislings', 'incompetent', 'crying baby', 'vassals' by the political actors in the public discourse encourages the normalization of the use of offensive vocabulary on the public stage and in the public communication. When the offensive vocabulary is not condemned, its use is not restricted, after a long period it can be accepted as part of the general lexicon of the language, and thus enable the spread of harmful narratives and a low culture of the public speaking.

2. Monitoring of the media reporting on the political actors

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



Monitoring of the media reporting on the political actors May 2024 Report

As the election campaign for the double, presidential and parliamentary elections ended, i.e. the citizens' vote on 8 May, the negative rhetoric of the politicians and the political parties in the public information space 'wore off', and consequently of the online media, which during the entire period they 'meticulously' recorded all their activities (performances, speeches, meetings with the citizens, press conferences). This is also confirmed by the monitoring, which found a significant reduction in the total number of news items with harmful narratives. **187 news items** with sentences, paragraphs, phrases with negative rhetoric were noted, which is far less compared to the previous analysed month (April - 261 news items), as well as compared to other analysed months during the nine-month monitoring with the exception of October, when the lowest number of news items with harmful narratives was determined (154 news items in total). It is noteworthy that out of a total of eight days in May in which the posts on the online media were monitored, the news items with harmful narratives were the most represented precisely in the first two days of the monitoring (2 and 6 May with a total of 104 news items), when the election campaign was still in progress. In the remaining six days of the monitoring (10, 14, 18, 22, 26 and 30 May) when the elections were already over, their number was significantly lower (84 news items in total). The political energy during this period was focused on summarizing, analysing and commenting on the election results, the composition of the new parliament and the government, as well as on the possible coalitions. Little attention was paid to healthcare, corruption and crime, and justice, the economy and the foreign policy were mentioned sporadically.

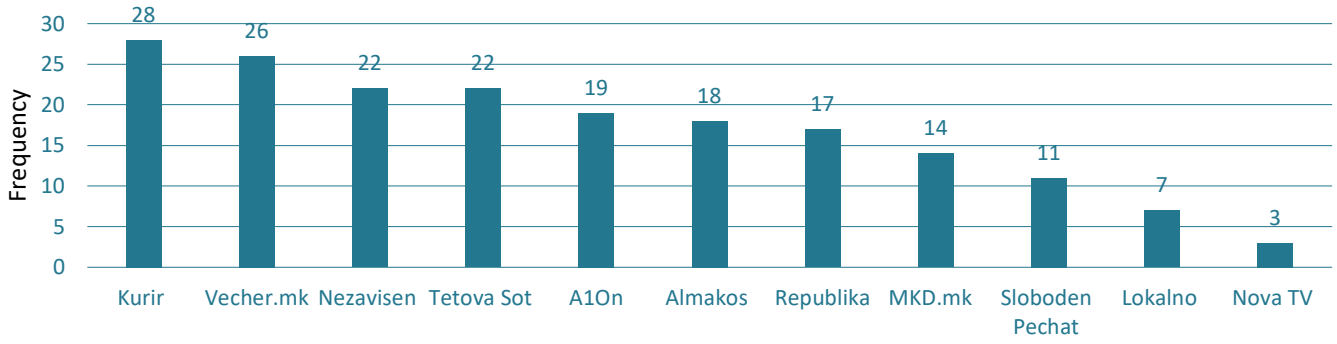
However, the reduced total number of news items with harmful narratives did not affect their structure. The reported speeches of the politicians **(71 news items) and party press releases (44 news items) continued to dominate the genre**, which together with the reported Facebook statuses of the political entities and parts of their interviews for other media (14 news items) cover 2/3 (or 69%) of all analysed news items. This was followed by the reports (24 news items) and news/news with statements (21 news items) and somewhat less interviews (8 news items), while analyses and comments were neglected. One-sided information is a constant as well, i.e. consulting only one side of the stakeholders in the story (173 news items or 92.5%), relying mostly on precise sources (181 news items), as well as on one source of information (167 news items, or 89.3 %). Simultaneously, the most common reason for broadcasting the news items was current

events (81 news items, or 43.1%), followed by pseudo-events (57 news items, or 30.5%), i.e., the party press conferences and the politicians' statements. Usually, as before, the information/news items were mostly not signed (169 news items, or 90.4%), there was a negligible number of news items with the name or initials of the author/journalist, and there were also news items taken from other media (televisions, portals, Facebook pages). Thematically, the focus was on domestic politics (in 150 news items), and following, with far less representation, were healthcare, crime and corruption.

Frequency of Harmful Narratives in Online Media

The Kurir in May, as in months before, is the portal with the largest number of news items with harmful narratives (28 news items), followed by **Vecer.mk, Nezavisen and Tetova Sot, Nova TV** even now, and in previous months, it had the lowest number of news items with harmful narratives (3 news items), followed by **Lokalno** (with 7 news items), which is in the penultimate place on the list of portals ranked by the number of news items with harmful narratives in this month.

Table 4. News items with harmful narratives in May 2024

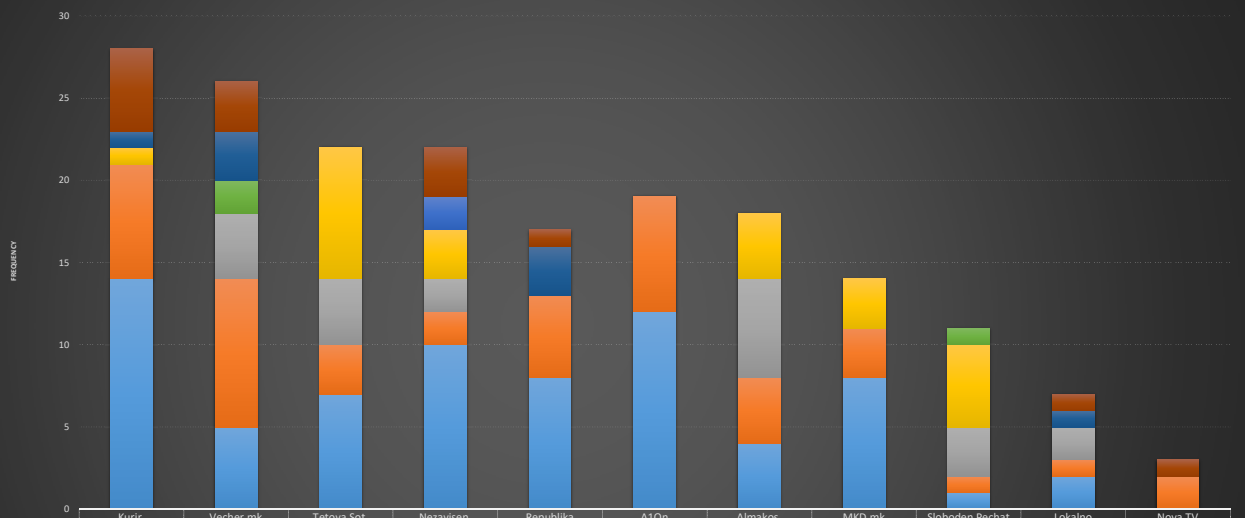


According to the genre, in May, the reported speeches of the politicians, their Facebook statuses, the interviews given to other media and the press conferences were the most represented, and then, with twice the number, party press releases. This image is identical to the previously monitored month of April. This ratio is distinguishing for Kurir (19 speeches, 7 press releases), Nezavisen (10 speeches, 2 press releases), MKD.mk (8 speeches, 3 press releases), Tetova Sot (7 speeches, 3 press releases) and Republika (8 speeches, 5 press releases). Vecer.mk is the only portal where the party press releases (9 news items) dominated before the politicians' speeches (5 news items), Tetova Sot stands out with the largest number of reports (8 news items), as well as Sloboden Pechat (with 5 reports), and Republika and Vecer.mk with the number of interviews (with the president and vice president of VMRO-DPMNE, but taken from other media). Hereupon, the Kurir and the Republika almost exclusively followed and informed regarding the activities (speeches, positions) of Hristijan Mickoski, the president of VMRO-DPMNE, the holders of lists for MPs and the spokespersons of the party. Likewise, on A1on, the president, the members, the electoral list holders and the spokespeople of VMRO-DPMNE were the most represented, and incidentally the president of SDSM, Dimitar Kovachevski, the president of DUI, Ali Ahmeti, while on Nezavisen almost equal space was allocated for the members of the Vredi coalition as well as for the president and vice-president of VMRO-DPMNE, and sporadically for Bujar Osmani from DUI and Venko Filipche from SDSM. In Vecer.mk, the space for the politicians' speeches and the party press releases was almost exclusively reserved for the president and the members of VMRO-DPMNE, while the focus of Tetova Sot was the European Front coalition, i.e., the speeches of Ali Ahmeti and of the members of the Front.

The figures for the genres and the occasion for information, which are dominated by the politicians' speeches, their posts on the social networks, the pseudo-events, indicate that in these monitored media

there is a lack of proactive and authentic journalistic information and research, behind which there is the author-journalist, transparent and responsible. This contemporary wave of media politicization dictated by the invasive and the sophisticated political communication, or as the new media theorists call it 'parasitic news'5, is flooding the online space, transcending the traditional ethical principles and practices.

Table 5. News items with harmful narratives according to the genr e structure in May 2024



	Kurir	Vecher.mk	Tetova Sot	Nezavisen	Republika	A1On	Almakos	MKD.mk	Sloboden Pechat	Lokalno	Nova TV
Other	5	3	0	3	1	0	0	0	0	1	1
Interview	1	3	0	0	3	0	0	0	0	1	0
Analysis/commentary	0	2	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0
Analytical reportage/news item	0	0	0	2	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Report	1	0	8	3	0	0	4	3	5	0	0
News/news with a statement	0	4	4	2	0	0	6	0	3	2	0
Broadcast press release	7	9	3	2	5	7	4	3	1	1	2
Broadcast speech of a politician	14	5	7	10	8	12	4	8	1	2	0

This genre structure, and especially the reduction in the number of news items with reported party press releases, is directly related to the occasion for the posting of these news items, i.e., for the first time in the nine-month monitoring of web portals, the current events (81 news items or 43.1%) dominated, which together with the announced events (14 news items or 7.4%) make up half of all analysed news items. Only then, the pseudo-events are next (57 news items, or 30.3%), i.e., press releases for the public, press conferences, planned and created to attract media attention and ensure publicity. This trend, which started in April, was even more pronounced this time. The current events were the most numerous in Vecer.mk (in 22 out of 26 news items), Kurir (in 22 out of 28 news items), Nezavisen (in 15 out of 22 news items) and Sloboden Pechat (in 8 out of 11 news items), and pseudo-events were given an advantage by the Tetova Sot (in 15 out of 22 news items), Republika (in 11 out of 17 news items) and MKD.mk (in 11 out of 14). The current and pseudo-events were equally represented in Almakos (in 7 and 8 news items out of a total of 18), while in A1on the social events were the most numerous (in 12 out of 19 news items).

Thereto, the domestic politics was once again an indispensable topic in the reporting of the portals concerning the political actors (in 150 news items, or 80.2% of the analysed 187 news items), and even unique for a large part of them (Tetova Sot, Almakos, Sloboden Pechat, Nezavisen, MKD.mk). This topic was mostly 'processed' through short statements, expressed views, parts of speeches or interviews of the politicians or the political parties' press releases. It is a constant that had been followed by the monitoring for the entire past nine-month period. The only difference is that this time, the reported speeches of the politicians 'packed' as current events dominated, and only then the party press releases were next, but they did not substantially deviate from them either in terms of content or volume, i.e., regardless of whether they were statements, speeches of the

5. Ekman, M., Widholm, A. Parasitic news: Adoption and adaptation of journalistic conventions in hybrid political communication, Stockholms universitet, Humanistiska fakulteten, Institutionen för mediestudier (2024)

presidents, vice-presidents of the political parties, their members, spokespersons or the list holders of the MPs, the news items were usually short, consisting of several paragraphs, with current or archival photos that were not signed, as well as without an author/journalist. Moreover, more importantly, these are news items with harmful narratives in both the headline and the body of the text. A few distinctive examples:

On 2 May, 2024, **the Kurir** and **the Republika** portals posted a news item under the same title 'Stojanoska: Multi-ethnic Gostivar should unite around VMRO-DPMNE and thus unite to give the last blow to this criminal government' from the speech of Dafina Stojanoska in Gostivar, list holder for MPs from VMRO-DPMNE in the 6th constituency, with rhetoric that had been repeated for months concerning the Government as 'criminal'. Hereupon, the author of the news item is the Communications Centre of VMRO-DPMNE and it was taken in its entirety (with the same text and photo) from the website of VMRO-DPMNE, the portals do not note this anywhere (source Kurir, Republika, 2.5.2024). Therefore **Vecer.mk** strung together the title 'Mafia is the synonym to DUI and SDSM, the mafia reigns, while the people suffer, LET'S END THIS', without any interventions in the content of the news item. The title is taken from Dafina Stojanoska's speech, which reinforces the harmful narrative (Vecer.mk, 2.5.2024). The same portals, the **Kurir** and the **Republika** present the speech of the president of VMRO-DPMNE, Hristijan Mickoski, at the rally in Prilep on 6 May, 2024. The title of the news item is 'Mickoski: This is the last chance to save Macedonia, which has been taken away from SDS and DUI to serve them, not the people'. The source is the VMRO-DPMNE's website, with the same content, but different photos **(Kurir, Republika, 6.5.2024)**. Concurrently, we are talking about the final rally of VMRO-DPMNE before the elections, at which, in addition to the president of the party Hristijan Mickoski, the presidential candidate Gordana Siljanovska Davkova, the vice president Aleksandar Nikolovski and other members of the party, candidates for MPs, spoke. However, the portals would inform about that in other news items.

The **Sloboden Pechat** in the news item 'Ahmeti: The European Front won the elections on 8 May, 2024', he conveyed the statement (through two quotes) of DUI's president, Ali Ahmeti, regarding the 'secret agreements' of VMRO-DPMNE and SDSM to overturn the elections in several polling stations places for the Front not to be the second party in the country, as well as for the unification between the two largest parties of the Macedonian community, which they fear will affect inter-ethnic differences **(Sloboden Pechat, 18.5.2024)**. In comparison, **Tetova Sot** posted two short news items, consisting of two paragraphs each, 'Can the European Front lose two MPs. Ahmeti: We know in detail the agreements in the red cellars' and 'Ahmeti: Macedonian-Albanian unification will endanger the inter-ethnic relations'. In the first, the president of DUI, Ali Ahmeti talked as regards the election results and the victory of the European Front in comparison to the 'political acrobatics' and the agreements (of VMRO-DPMNE and SDSM) that are 'made up' behind closed doors. In the second news item, as well as in the title of the news item, Ali Ahmeti highlighted the concern regarding the unification between the two largest parties of the Macedonian community, an alliance that will affect inter-ethnic relations. In fact, from the integral statement of Ali Ahmeti, the portal (journalist) 'tailors' two news items in which they only convey his statements. Both news items contained the same unsigned photo (taken from a different angle) of Ali Ahmeti, probably in front of the party's headquarters, but which clearly indicated that it was the same event and in the same place **(Tetova Sot, 18.5.2024)**.

The MKD.mk in the news item 'Apasiev: Marxists-Leninists together with DUI in opposition' reported the interview with Dimitar Apasiev for Sloboden Pechat, i.e. his position concerning DUI's mistakes in the elections and the structure of its elected MPs, about the old 'uchki-cadres' who no longer build a parliamentary career **(MKD.mk, 26.5.2024)**. The author of the interview is **Sloboden Pechat** with the title 'Apasiev: It is good for the state that DUI goes into opposition, but these who are coming are even worse', and the content of the news item is made up of three quotes (given both in text and as a video statement) by Dimitar Apasiev, about the mistakes of DUI and its elected MPs, with his photo and the author of the news item **(Sloboden Pechat, 26.5.2024)**. Actually, it is a matter of 'reposting' a small part (2-3 minutes) of the interview (lasting 32 minutes) posted in the portal on 23.5.2024. All together, the news item, the reposted part of the interview with Apasiev was reposted by a number of portals, news agencies, and Apasiev's video statement is also available on the website of Levica.

The political actors in the analysed news items

In the online media's reporting on the political entities, both in the previously monitored months and now, two (22.9%) or three (23.9%) entities were most often apostrophized, the collective actors, i.e., the political parties, and even then the individual ones, i.e. the politicians, dominated. **At the top was DUI** (i.e., the European Front), followed by VMRO-DPMNE, SDSM and VREDI, while regarding the individuals, the president of VMRO-DPMNE, Hristijan Mickoski, and the president of DUI, Ali Ahmeti. In **the Kurir** portal, the president Hristijan Mickoski and the members of the party were represented almost exclusively and equally with the largest number of news items with harmful narratives. **Vecer.mk** and **Republika** were dominated by the parties DUI and SDSM, **Nezavisen** was dominated by VMRO-DPMNE and its president Hristijan Mickoski, and **A1on** by DUI and the Government. **Tetova Sot** favoured the coalition VREDI and VMRO-DPMNE, and the individual actors Hristijan Mickoski and Arben Taravari. In **Almakos**, the European Front was mentioned the most, followed by the president of DUI, Ali Ahmeti.

The media representation of the political actors differentiated from portal to portal, but directly related to the actors, i.e., whether they were individual or collective. The collective actors (the government, the political parties) were mostly discussed in the context of the topic, while the individual actors were usually quoted, and less often their statements, speeches, performances were paraphrased, or placed in the context of the topic. **Almakos** and **Tetova Sot** mostly discussed the actors in the context of the topic, and especially the most represented Coalition VREDI and the European Front. **Vecer.mk**, both in the previous monitored and this month, exclusively reported on the actors in the context of the topic, and this is a feature of **Kurir**, as well as of **Nezavisen** and **Lokalno**, which except in a small, insignificant number of news items where the actors were quoted, in all others news items the actors were 'placed' in the context of the theme/story. **The Republika** preferred to inform concerning the most represented parties DUI and SDSM in the news items in the context of the topic, while it quoted the president and the members of VMRO-DPMNE. **A1on, MKD.mk** and **Sloboden Pechat**, when presenting the political actors, almost equally quoted and paraphrased their words and reported on them in the context of the topic.

Furthermore, the ratings for the political actors were different in the portals. When it comes to the journalists, they were mostly in the role of 'passive' reporters of the statements, the positions, the speeches (especially by quoting the words) of the political actors were without any interventions or were neutral, with rare and sporadic 'outings' with criticism or praise, which are incidentally found, for example, in **Tetova Sot, Republika, Nezavisen** and **Sloboden Pechat**. There were not any evaluations of the political actors about themselves, and the few that happen to be found in **Tetova Sot** and **Sloboden Pechat** given by the president of DUI Ali Ahmeti, the coalition VREDI, the Minister of foreign affairs, Bujar Osmani and the president of SDSM, Dimitar Kovachevski were positive. The most evaluations, especially negative ones, about the political actors were from other political entities, and all political actors in the news items of **Vecer.mk, Kurir, Lokalno, Nezavisen** and **Sloboden Pechat** had 'earned' them; in the Republika only two political entities (SDSM and DUI), and the least in A1on, while in Almakos and Tetova Sot, in addition to the most negative evaluations, there were also several positive (for the VREDI coalition and the European Front) or neutral evaluations (for SDSM and VMRO-DPMNE).

Journalistic (un)professionalism

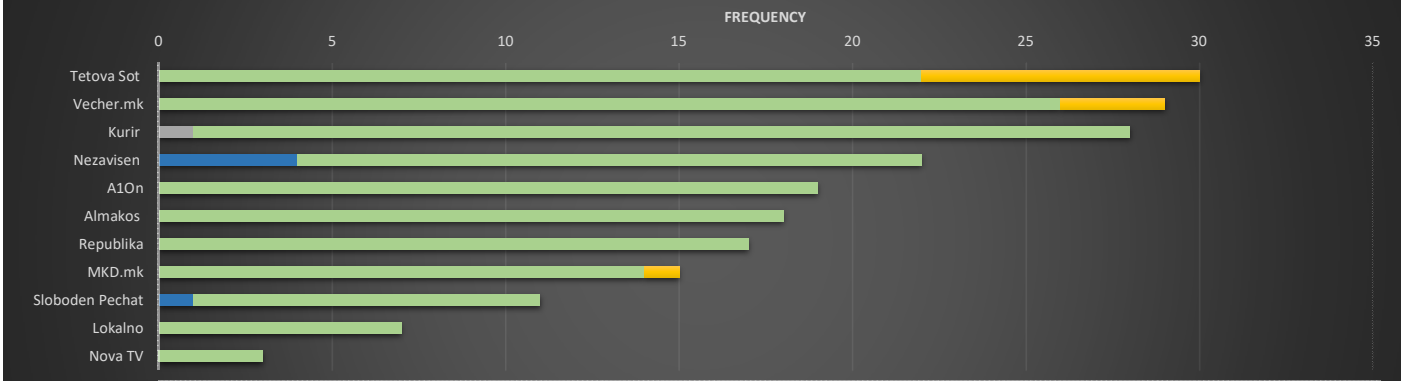
The image of the manner the online media 'pack' information/news items with harmful narratives and this month, as all previously monitored, had a standard format dominated by one-sided information, relying mostly on one source of information, consulting usually on one side of the story, absence of the author of the news items, unmarked visualization, everything contrary to the professional journalistic values and standards.

In particular, in May, out of a total of 187 news items analysed, 173 news items were determined in which **the portals rely on only one side in reporting the event** or the problem. Examples of these were all the news items in **Republika, A1on, Tetova Sot and MKD.mk**, while in the rest, **Kurir, Vecer.mk, Almakos, Nezavisen, Sloboden Pechat**, incidentally one or two news items where two/more sides were presented, could be noticed. As an exception, we can point out the portal **Lokalno**, where, out of the few news items with harmful narratives (7 in total), the one-sided information referred to one party press release and one reported speech of a politician, while in the other news items two/more sides were indicated. In contrast, for example, in the **Republika**, all 17 analysed news items relied on one side in the reporting, and of them five were party press releases, eight were politicians' speeches, three were reported parts of interviews for other media and one was a reported Facebook status. On the other hand, **A1on**, where out of all 19 news items analysed, seven were party press releases, and 12 were politicians' speeches. Undoubtedly, the two hybrid genre forms, the party press releases and the politicians' speeches, dictate whether and how many sides there will be in the story. In the case of party press releases, this could be 'corrected' if the medium, i.e. the journalist, asked for an answer or reaction from the stakeholders regarding the issue or the problem noted in the press release itself, despite that this requires time and creates additional work for the portals and the journalists in the face of the influx of new information that daily arriving minute by minute and which need to be 'processed' and marketed to the public.

This is followed by the practice **of the portals mostly relying on one source of information**. Hence, there is repetition, out of the analysed 187 news items with harmful narratives, 167 were with one source of information (89.3%). In **Republika** and **A1.on**, all news items had only one source of information, while in other portals (mainly **Vecer.mk, Kurir, Tetova Sot, Almakos, Nezavisen, MKD.mk**) one or two news items with 2/ 3 and more sources could be noted. **The Lokalno**, stood out where out of the 7 news items, two had one source, and five had two sources, and the **Sloboden Pechat**, where out of the registered 11 news items with harmful narratives, six had one source, two had two sources, and three had three sources.

Hence, as expected, as well as observed in the previously monitored months, the portals often refer to precise sources of information, and incidentally to unclear and imprecise sources (**Kurir, Nezavisen**) or sources from other media **(Tetova Sot, Vecer.mk, MKD.mk**). Simply put, in the news items with the most politicians' speeches or party statements, the source is clear and unambiguous, a specific political party/coalition or a specific politician, with first and last name and status in the party to which they belong to (president/vice president, member of the executive committee, spokesperson, candidate for a specific constituency...).

Table 6. Type of sources per online media (May 2024)



	Nova TV	Lokalno	Sloboden Pechat	MKD.mk	Republika	Almakos	A1On	Nezavisen	Kurir	Vecher.mk	Tetova Sot
Unclear									1		
Imprecise			1					4			
Precise	3	7	10	14	17	18	19	18	27	26	22
Another medium				1						3	8

The online media are not professional when it comes to the **visualization of the analysed news items**. Undeniably, all news items with harmful narratives were visually 'enriched', mostly with current (98 news items) and archival photos (87 news items), and from time to time with video statements with the same content as in the news items themselves. Nonetheless, what has persisted as a practice for months is that they are not signed and it is often left to the public to guess who is in the photo, the place where it was taken, whether it is a current or archival photo. Of all the portals included in the analysis, the exception is **the Sloboden Pechat**, where the entity/entities, the photographer and the source from which the photo was taken were noted under the photos. The photograph is a necessary integral part of every news item/ journalistic text, it 'strengthens' the text, gives it added value, greater credibility, but it is also (consciously or unconsciously) manipulated.

Several different examples from the analysis:

The Republika, in the news item with the long title 'Mickoski: DUI buys votes and fills in boxes as was the case with Lipkovo, for which there is a verdict from the Administrative Court, there are at least 50 such cases, however they will end up as opposition eventually', reports parts of the interview of VMRO-DPMNE's president, Hristijan Mickoski, from the **AlsatM** television appearance, where he says that he cannot think of any coalition with DUI that exerts pressure and bribery and numerous irregularities on the ground. However, the photo does not show the main actor in the news item, Hristijan Mickoski, but the one to whom he is sending the message, i.e. part of the DUI leadership, probably at a press conference, the Minister of Foreign Affairs, Bujar Osmani, is on the podium, and right behind him is the President Ali Ahmeti **(Republika, 2.5.2024)**.

The Nezavisen, in the news item 'Mickoski told the journalists to write about successes', reports parts of the interview of the VMRO-DPMNE's president, Hristijan Mickoski, in the show 'Truth Only' on Kanal 5 television, where, in addition to repeating the words from the title, he also refers to the issue of the parliamentary coalition, the amendments to the Constitution, the agreement on friendship and good neighbourliness with Bulgaria and announces the borrowing of one billion from another country. Concurrently, the portal (the anonymous journalist) apart from quoting Hristijan Mickoski, interprets and comments unprofessionally. Thus, regarding the announced borrowing of one billion from another country, he gives an interpretation 'The fact that he immediately announced the billion loan is a clear message to the EU how much their 800 million euros from the Western Balkans Growth Plan mean to him, which can only be obtained if reforms are implemented'. Moreover, in the news item, there is a photo, but not of the guest appearance on television, but of Hristijan Mickoski on the lectern, and there are written the words in the background 'Wild Meat, the oncology scandal is still going on' **(Nezavisen, 10.5.2024)**.

The Sloboden Pechat on the other hand, where in all the news items (with rare exceptions) the photos are marked, in the news item 'Osmani: There is no government without Badinter which will be ensured the European front', the photo shows Bujar Osmani, the main actor of the news item, but not at a press conference (as what is written under the photo, but not in the text) but it is a collage of two of his photos taken from other events **(Sloboden Pechat, 2.5.2024)**. Thereto, this information will be reported by numerous portals, and in most of them Bujar Osmani (according to the photo) is at a press conference, and there are some where he is photographed at a rally or alone at another press conference.

Dominant harmful political narratives

The number of 187 news items with harmful narratives, i.e. 311 posts (words, phrases, paragraphs, sentences) whose main creators are the politicians and the political parties, is large in itself, though, seen in relation to the past monitored months, when there was a constant upward trend (reaching 261 news items with harmful narratives and 482 posts in April), is slowly relaxing the public information space. When it comes to the types of harmful narratives, the stories in May concentrated on the claims of corruption, non-

transparency/non-accountability, unprofessionalism, abuse of office without any attempt to substantiate them, as well as the accusations of the political opponents with unverified or hard-to-verify findings (128 cases). The defamation (by means of words, phrases) of certain groups of people in order to foment divisions between 'we' and 'you' (33 cases), as well as labelling, ridicule and gross disrespect of other persons, the political opponents, the officials, the media workers, the civil activists (30 cases) are far behind them. The energy of the political actors was almost entirely focused on undermining trust in the institutions and biased selection, and somewhat less on character attacks of the political opponent and demonizing them, fomenting divisions, even spreading fear and insecurity.

The online media followed the activities of the political actors, filling in the media space not only with the speeches, the performances, the statements of the politicians, the party leaders, their members, the spokespersons at the election rallies, the press conferences, or the party press releases, along with their appearances and interviews in different media (televisions, radio shows, portals), using them mostly to 'create' more news items from them, but news items with harmful narratives, thus directly, as media, participating in their multiplication. It is an established practice that is repeated with different dynamics monthly and it is especially notable for the portals **Republika, Kurir** and **Vecer.mk**. A few distinguishing examples:

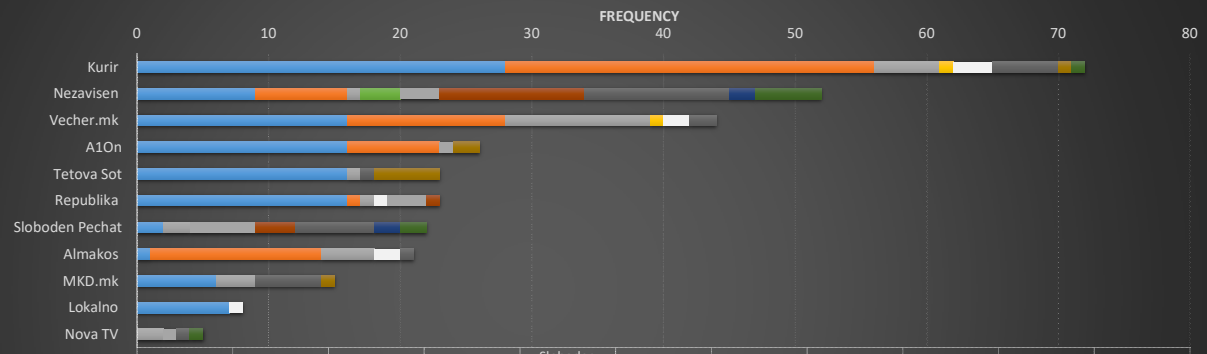
The Republika in two news items 'Mickoski: We will hit hard at the centre of the corruption brought by DUI and SDS, they are stealing from both the Macedonians and the Albanians' and 'Mickoski: DUI buys votes and fills in boxes as was the case in Lipkovo, for which there is a verdict from the Administrative Court, there are at least 50 such cases, but they will end up as opposition eventually' posts parts of the guest appearance of the president of VMRO-DPMNE, Hristijan Mickoski, on **Alsat M** television, but the news items in their entirety (both titles and content) are taken from the website of VMRO-DPMNE (from the 'interviews/columns/speeches' column). The 'creator' of the news items is the Communications Centre, and the portal in the role of 'administrator' which technically completes the process of posting the news items on its pages, with a small addition at the beginning of the news items that it is a guest appearance by Hristijan Mickoski on television **(Republika, 2.5.2024).**

The Kurir uses the same approach, from one event, the guest appearance of Aleksandar Nikoloski in the show 'Espresso with Zlatev and Bocevski' on radio Lider, to present to the public two news items, 'Nikoloski: There will be no collaboration with Ali Ahmeti in any variant, form and manner' and 'Nikoloski: The four pro-opposition candidates for president have not supported Siljanovska Davkova to this date, this means that they either do not have a basic sense of the state or they consciously or unconsciously work for DUI and Ali Ahmeti'. Furthermore here the creator of the news items is the Communications Centre of VMRO-DPMNE, and **the Kurir** just 'copies' it, i.e. without any journalistic engagement, takes over the news items completely (including the photo) and places them on its pages as if on a 'bulletin board' **(Kurir, 2.5.2024)**.

The portal **Tetova Sot** with two news items, posted on the same day, 'Osmani: VMRO's Albanophobia goes beyond the red lines!' They are against the Albanians and DUI' and 'Osmani: The masks have fallen! Taravari is an instrument of Mickoski for belittling the political will of the Albanians', reports (repeats) parts of the visit of the Minister of Foreign Affairs Bujar Osmani in the show 'Klan debate' on Klan TV, where he talks as regards the belittling of the political will of the Albanians, the disruption of the Ohrid Framework Agreement, the inter-ethnic humiliation, and in the context of the elections and the election campaign **(Tetova Sot, 6.5.2024)**. As well as, the two news items 'Ahmeti: We know in detail the agreements in the red cellars' and 'Ahmeti: The Macedonian-Albanian unification will threaten inter-ethnic relations', 'tailored' from the integral statement of the president of DUI, Ali Ahmeti regarding the victory of the European Front, the secret negotiations between SDSM and VMRO-DPMNE and the endangerment of inter-ethnic relations **(Tetova Sot, 18.5.2024)**.

Contextually, in **the Republika**, **the A1on** and **the Tetova Sot**, the most numerous are the news items in which trust in the institutions is undermined, in **the Almakos** biased selection, in **the Kurir** the undermining of trust in the institutions and biased selection are on the same level, while in **the Vecer.mk** these two harmful narratives character attacks and their demonization are also added. Tabular image is as follows:

Table 7. Prevalence of harmful narratives in the news items in o nline media in May 2024



	Nova TV	Lokalno	MKD.mk	Almakos	Sloboden Pechat	Republika	Tetova Sot	A1On	Vecher.mk	Nezavisen	Kurir
Undermining trust		7	6	1	2	16	16	16	16	9	28
Biased selection				13		1		7	12	7	28
Character attacks, demonization	2		3	4	2	1	1		11	1	5
Hate speech									1		1
Disinformation		1		2		1			2		3
Foreign Influence										3	
Populism	1				5	3		1		3	
Spreading panic, fear and uncertainty					3	1				11	
Fomenting divisions	1		5	1	6		1		2	11	5
Ethnocentrism			1				5	2			1
Conspiracy theories					2					2	
Extreme patriotism	1				2					5	1

Below are some examples of news items where the focus of the political actors is aimed at undermining trust in the institutions, the biased selection, attacking and labelling of the political opponents, fomenting divisions and spreading fear and insecurity in the society.

Vecer.mk in the news item 'Kovachki REVEALS: THE DEPARTING GOVERNMENT WANTS TO CREATE OBSTRUCTIONS', 'simply', from word to word, takes over and posts the Facebook status of Dragan Kovachki, a member of the Election Committee of VMRO-DPMNE. Kovachki's focus is on the institutions of the system and their unprofessionalism and abuse of office, specifically the Ministry of Defence and the 'delegitimized' leadership led by Slavjanka Petrovska, who, according to his information, would 'change the systematization and appoint its own party cadres' upon leaving in managerial positions **(Vecer.mk, 14.5.2024)**. Concomitantly, the portal did not try to verify the accusations and posted authentic media content about it. In addition, the portal, very often, both in this and other news items, uses words, entire paragraphs in capital letters in the titles, which is non-standard for journalism, as a 'strategy' to attract the attention of the readers, equally important to emphasize the meaning of those words, while in Internet correspondence it means to be 'louder', and it is even perceived as 'shouting' at the interlocutor.

The Kurir in the news item 'VMRO-DPMNE: SDS and DUI are the reason why today's judiciary is corrupt, Georgiev and Memeti are only part of the criminal judicial octopus', the party press release of VMRO-DPMNE, where the government of SDSM and DUI is qualified as 'criminal', the judiciary is 'corrupt' and a 'criminal octopus', and Ali Ahmeti and Dimitar Kovachevski, by installing their own criminal cadres, brought the justice system into complete chaos. The occasion for this press release to the public is the arrest of Supreme Court judge Nake Georgiev on suspicion of receiving a bribe and Idjet Memeti, a member of the Council of Public Prosecutors on suspicion of receiving a reward for illegal influence **(Kurir, 22.5.2024)**.

The Republika, the Vecer.mk, the A1on, together with numerous other portals, news agencies, televisions, informed as regards the same event from the press conference of the spokesperson and member of the Election committee of VMRO-DPMNE, Marija Miteva. **The Republika** and **the A1on** took over the title and the text given on the website of the party 'Miteva: The scandal with the corruption in the judiciary shows that SDS and DUI have established a criminal system - how many millions of euros have been extorted?', where the words from the title are repeated that 'SDS and DUI have established criminal system', but there are also questions (without answers) 'how many Nakes and Idjits are installed in the judiciary', 'whether several million euros were extorted from the judiciary in the past years', 'are there and how deep the tentacles of the judicial octopus are spread in the system and are SDS and DUI officials the head of that octopus **(Republika, A1on, 22.5.2024). Vecer.mk** shortens the title 'Miteva: HOW MANY MILLION EUROS HAVE BEEN RACKETED THROUGH THE JUDICIARY FROM SDSM AND DUI?', however the text remains the same, and at the end the video statement of the spokeswoman Marija Miteva is given **(Vecer.mk, 22.5.2024).**

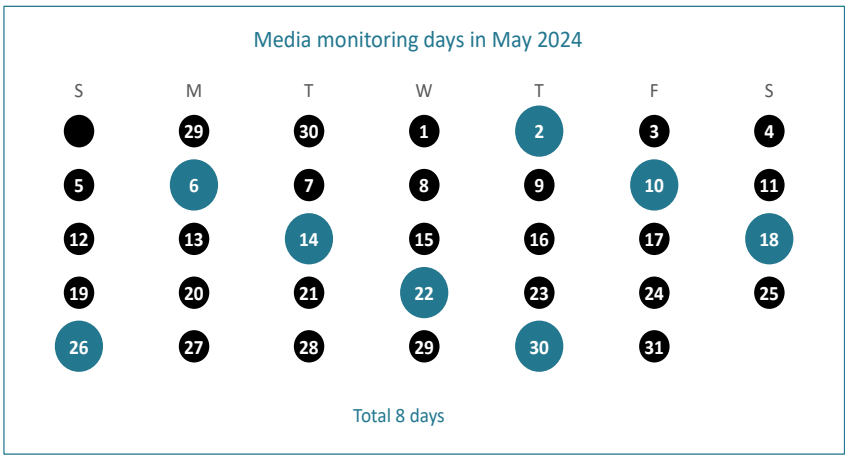
The Vecer.mk in the news items 'The mafia is synonymous with DUI and SDSM, the mafia reigns, while the people suffer, LET'S END THIS', from the rally of VMRO-DPMNE in Gostivar, i.e. the performance of Dafina Stojanoska, holder of the MP list of VMRO-DPMNE in the 6th constituency, who labels the Government (DUI and SDSM) as 'criminal' and 'mafia' and calls on the multi-ethnic Gostivar to unite around VMRO-DPMNE and thus united to deliver the last blow to this Government, to punish Ali and Artan Grubi and Zaev, Tache, Ali, Artan never to come into power. **(Vecer.mk, 2.5.2024)**.

The Nezavisen, in the news item 'Ahmeti: If someone has a strategy for us the Albanians to shoot each other, it will not be realized', quotes the statement of Ali Ahmeti, the president of DUI, before the start of the extraordinary meeting of the Presidency of DUI on the occasion of the election results of 8 May, i.e. the re-voting in seven constituencies, to deprive the party of two mandates. Ahmeti accuses the two largest parties of the Macedonian nationality (VMRO-DPMNE and SDSM) for this, which 'will also have an impact on the inter-ethnic relations' which they (DUI) do not want, and adds that 'this repetition (of the voting) that will be done, is being done with a risky background for us the Albanians to kill each other', ending with the words given in the title that 'If someone has a strategy for us the Albanians to shoot each other, it will not be realized'. The nationalist rhetoric, but also the rhetoric instils restlessness and fear among the citizens (the voters) by 'reminding' them of past inter-ethnic conflicts in the state **(Nezavisen, 18.5.2024)**. The harmful rhetoric present in the title, whose creator is the portal itself, as well as in the text of the news item is an example that shows how harmful narratives are multiplied, and the portals themselves contribute to this. For comparison, other portals included in the monitoring also informed regarding the event. In **the Republika** and **the Vecer.mk**, the news items (with the same content) are titled as 'Ahmeti blamed SDSM and VMRO-DPMNE for the re-voting, and he also mentioned guns', whereupon the effect is the same, while in **MKD.mk** the title is 'Ahmeti: The re-voting is due to VMRO and SDSM, and this can affect the inter-ethnic relations.' On the contrary, **the Sloboden Pechat, Lokalno** and **A1on**, only after the meeting of the Presidency of DUI, posted an integral text from the meeting and from the previous statement of Ali Ahmeti entitled 'The position on the re-voting of certain polling stations will be created by DUI with the coalition partners from the European front'. The integral text, in addition to the one originally posted with Ali Ahmeti's statement, was also posted by the Nezavisen.

The news item of **MKD.mk** 'SDSM, The return of the DPMNE regime will mean a blockade and ethnic tensions' with the use of words and phrases regarding VMRO-DPMNE as a party that 'represents a serious threat of the return of a captured state, divisions, blackmail and threats', 'sure blockade of Macedonia and internal ethnic tensions' and SDSM as 'guardian of the foundations of the statehood, the democratic values, the internal cohesion, the stable ethnic relations, the safe and European future of Macedonia', not only foments divisions, but it spreads fear and insecurity in the society as well. Concurrently, the portal reports the SDSM's press release, consisting of one short paragraph, i.e., two sentences. The insight of SDSM's website does not point to such press release, nonetheless another portal (of radio Leader) reports the same information, stating that it reports the SDSM's press release in its entirety, followed by the same few sentences as in the **MKD.mk (MKD.mk, 2.5.2024).**

The following news item is an example 'Are the surgery rooms closed because of the MRSA bacteria, asks Stoilkovski', posted in the portal **Lokalno**, but also in **the Republika, the Kurir** and the **A1on** with the title 'Stoilkovski: Is the cause of the chaos at Surgery clinic the compressed air system or is there MRSA bacteria?', from the press conference of the spokesperson of VMRO-DPMNE, Naum Stoilkovski, however he does not announce anything but only asks, 'speculates' about the MRSA bacteria, about the compressed air that supplies the operating theatres, about the control of hygiene in Trauma Clinic, about the increased infection of the operated patients..., thus bringing additional unrest and fear among the citizens regarding what is happening with the surgical rooms in the Clinical Centre. In the end, Stoilkovski concludes, 'SDSM and DUI are so preoccupied with themselves and with going into the opposition, to the extent that they turned the most frequented clinic into a ruin.' **The Lokalno** finally informs that the prosecutor's office is investigating why the operating theatres of Clinical Centre were closed for a week, and the Ministry of Health points to the problems with the functioning of the ventilation system **(Lokalno, 26.5.2024)**, and **the Kurir** does this in another report on the same day **(Kurir, Republika, A1on, 26.5.2024)**. The question is whether the portals and their journalists should have informed concerning this event in general through the press release, the press conference of VMRO-DPMNE, or whether they themselves should have followed and informed the public in reference to this issue. The media used to be the centre for gathering all daily, the latest information, they are still there today, but they are being replaced by the communication centres of the political parties, their press releases, the press conferences.

2.2. *Monitoring report on the TV stations coverage for May 2024*



In May 2024, the last month of the HARM-TIVE research, the central news editions of 9 TV stations in the following 8 days (2, 6, 10, 14, 18, 22, 26 and 30 May) were analysed.

During the analysis, a total of 51 news items or 6.3 news items per day were registered that contained one or more harmful narratives, which is the least since the beginning of the research until now.

The most common are the harmful narratives undermining trust in the institutions (29), biased selection (19) and fomenting division (13).

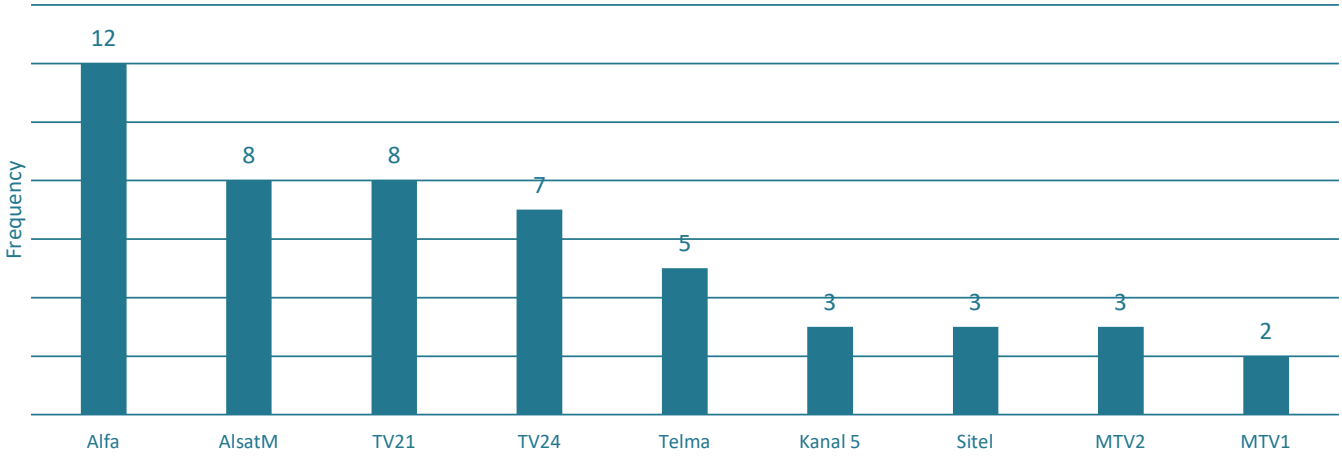
Frequency of the harmful narratives among the TV stations

The decreasing trend of the harmful narratives in the news editions on the TV stations continued in the last month of the research, when only 51 news item with harmful narratives or 6.3 items per day were registered. As stated in the April report, it is obvious that the clear legal framework covering the electronic media, as well as the monitoring carried out by several domestic and international organizations, affect the manner

the TV stations inform and cover the elections. Specifically, the informing provided by the TV stations during the election process is regulated by the Law on Audio and Audio-Visual Media Services.6, but also with the Electoral Code7 which prescribe in great detail the conditions and the manners in which the broadcasters, and especially the public broadcasting service - MRT, should cover the elections. Furthermore, the Agency for Audio and Audiovisual Media Services (AAVMU), starting from 15 February, 2024, monitored the media coverage of the presidential and the parliamentary elections by the broadcasters, as well as several domestic and foreign organizations, including the OSCE International Election Observation Mission /ODIHR8.

The clearly regulated legal obligations and the focus of the domestic and international organizations on their information during the elections, contributed for the TV stations to be very careful regarding the manner they will report and how they will report on the election campaigns. This, of course, also contributed to a drastic reduction of the harmful narratives in the news items, including those created by the journalists, likewise those for which the political actors are responsible, and the media reported them.

Table 8. Prevalence of news items that contain a harmful narrative according to TV stations in May 2024



As in the previous period, in May as well, the most news items with harmful narratives were recorded on TV Alfa (12 or 23.5%), but unlike February (40) and March (35), in April and May, this TV station also had a significant decrease in this type of news items. Following Alfa, Alsat M and TV 21 are the next (8 news items each or 15.7% of the total number of news items), then TV 24 (total 7 news items or 13.7%), TV Telma (5 news items or 9.8%) and finally MTV2, TV Kanal 5 and TV Sitel with 3 news items each and MTV 1 with only 2 news items.

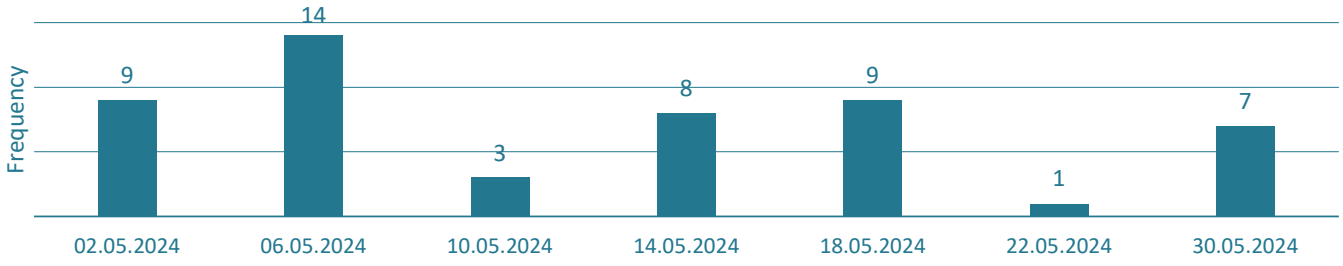
The most posts with harmful narratives were registered on 6 May (14 or 27.5% of the total number of news items), which is not surprising considering that it was right before the election silence and before the second round of the parliamentary elections that took place on 8 May. Therefore the main topic of the largest number of the news items is the parliamentary elections, and the harmful narratives mostly appeared at the election rallies of the parties.

6 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. Accessed on 26 May, 2024.

7 Electoral Code – Refined text March 2024.https://drive.google.com/file/d/1ZJMruqcNl-yC5VuWSzpfT9BFeKphm5An/view?usp=sharing. Accessed on 26 May, 2024.

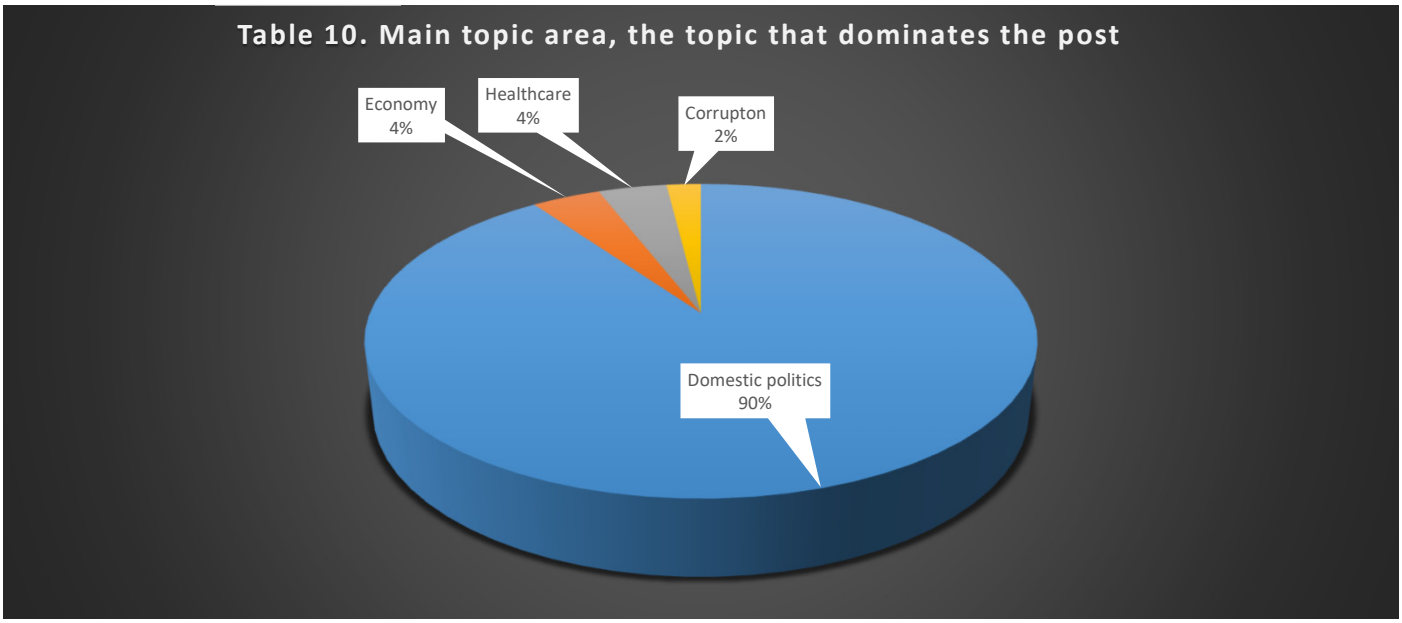
8 Statement on preliminary findings and conclusions of the International Election Observation Mission Republic of North Macedonia - Parliamentary elections and second round of presidential elections, 8 May, 2024 https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/f/8/568321.pdf

Table 9. Representation of news items by date (May 2024)



When it comes to the topics of the news items, just as before, topics regarding the domestic politics dominate (46 or 90.2%), and only 2 topics were related to healthcare and economy, and 1 to corruption.

Table 10. Main topic area, the topic that dominates the post



As envisioned, the elections were the main topic in these news items (41 news items), including the election rallies, accusations and promises, along with the post-election coalitions and analyses. The closed operating theatres of the Surgical Clinics in the 'Mother Teresa' Clinical Centre, the debate over the possible change of the constitution and the case of the alleged embezzlement with the sports vouchers, are among the few topics that do not enter the cluster of elections.

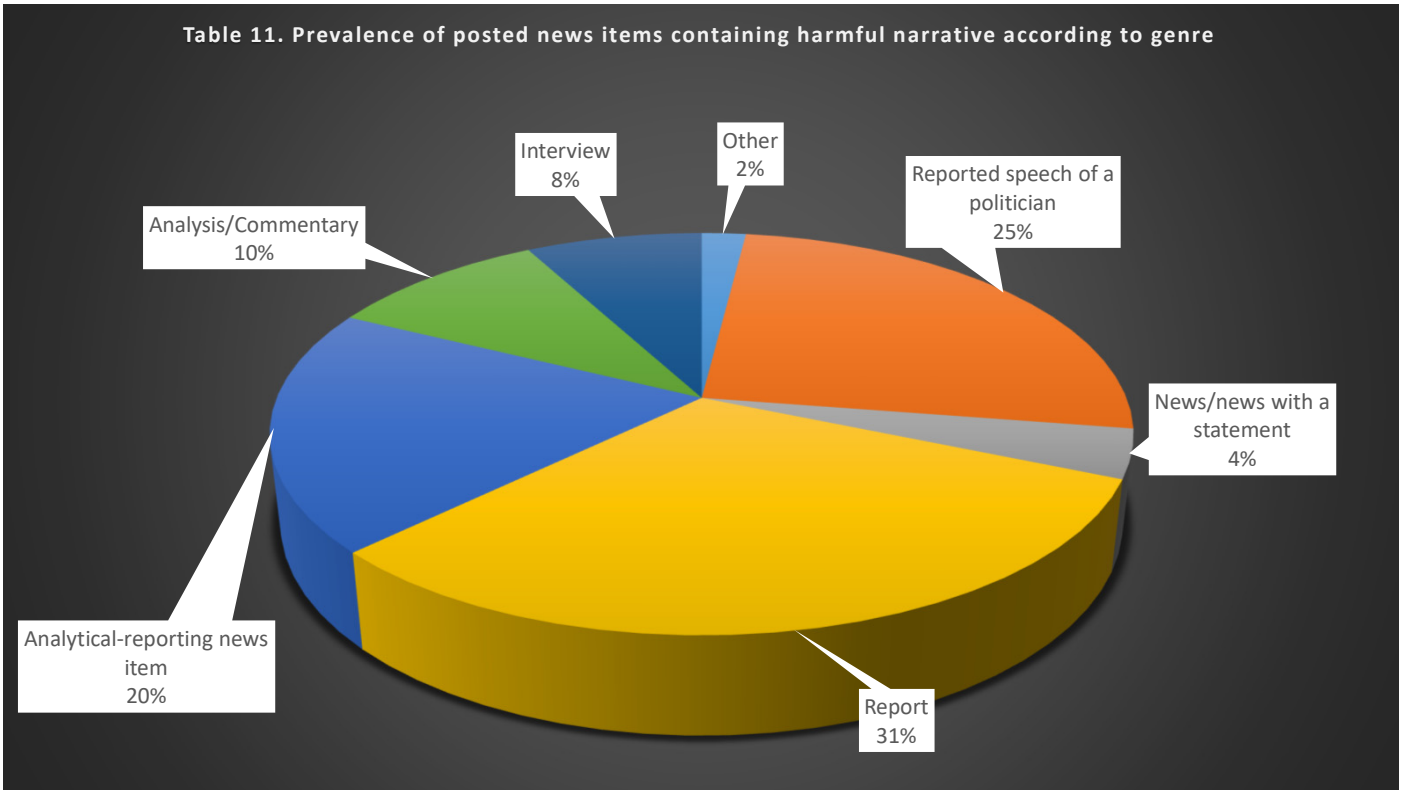
However, even in these topics, which are apparently not directly related to the elections, the pre-election discourse, seasoned with mutual party accusations, without serious arguments in criticism of the opponents can be observed. Additionally, as it has been noted several times in the news items of HARM-TIVE, it is increasingly obvious that all possible topics are framed by the framework of the party, of the binary oppositions, of traitors and patriots, of the good ones and the bad ones. Simultaneously, we rarely see a real analysis of the problems, answers to the important questions, but only mutual accusations of the political actors and populism.

Such is the case with the closing of the operating rooms in the 'Mother Teresa' Clinical Centre, which is an extremely serious problem, and is an indicator of the situation in the public healthcare sector. Once more, instead of analysing the situation in detail and working on solving the problem, as well as creating a strategy for the state of the public healthcare, the topic is used for cross-party accusations and collecting political points. Example of this is the statement of the spokesperson of VMRO-DPMNE, Naum Stoilkovski, given on 30 May:

'Neither the Minister nor these twelve people do not have anything to say concerning the economic director who went to the Cote d'Azur with a team, nor regarding those so-called Shared services. None of them said a word, not before or now after the system collapsed. [...] Not even the loud Dr. Ilir Hasani from Trauma, ex-deputy minister and Filipche's partner in construction, or Dr. Maja Mojsova from the University Clinic for Anesthesia, Resuscitation and Intensive Care, so loud and engaged that Filipche should not to resign after the tragedy with the Tetovo modular hospital.' **(Alfa TV, 30 May, 2024)**.

Likewise as in April, and most common genre in May is the report (16 or 31.4%), while in second place are the news items with the reported speech of a politician (13 or 25.5).

Table 11. Prevalence of posted news items containing harmful narrative according to genre



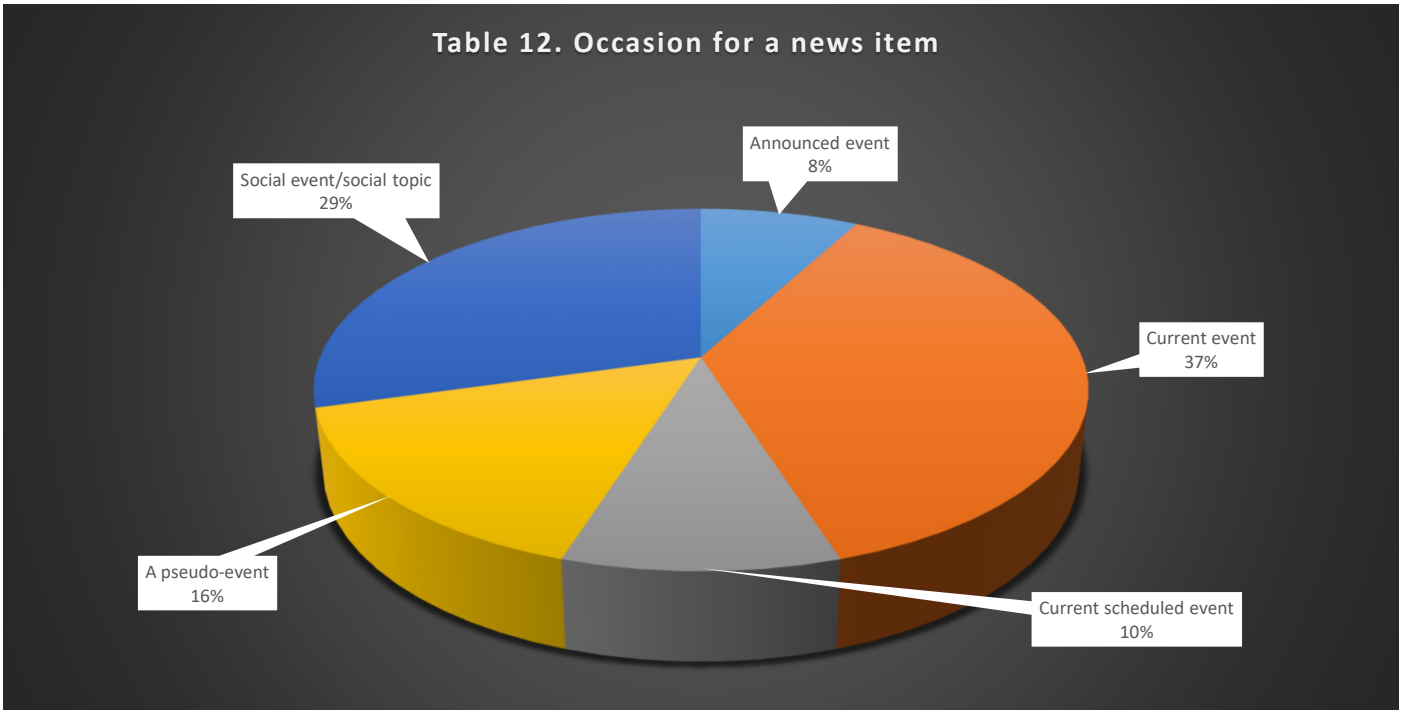
It is not surprising that a large part of the news items are the reported speech of a politician, especially if we consider that the pre-election period (especially the news items registered on 6 May) is dominated by pre-election rallies, speeches and press conferences of the political parties. Certainly, the media have an obligation to convey the political messages to the voters, in spite of that they should do so in a balanced, impartial manner and provide enough information so that the voter can make a choice based on objective information. At the same instant, the manner in which the media will approach the harmful narratives is important, how it will filter them, whether it will condemn or further strengthen them.

As emphasized in the Guide for ethical media coverage of elections in North Macedonia prepared by the Association of Journalists of Macedonia in 2021, the journalists must not use hate speech in their reporting and should refrain from using intolerant or inflammatory rhetoric, regardless, in the cases where such rhetoric is used by the political actors, the media must be careful how they report to convey that the candidate is using such rhetoric, but not to spread it further.[9] Moreover, in the Global Charter of Ethics for Journalists of the International Federation of Journalists it is emphasized that '. Journalists shall ensure that the

9 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 26 May, 2024.

dissemination of information or opinion does not contribute to hatred or prejudice and shall do their utmost to avoid facilitating the spread of discrimination on grounds such as geographical, social or ethnic origin, race, gender, sexual orientation, language, religion, disability, political and other opinions [10]'.

Finally, in the ODIHR, EU and Council of Europe Handbook On Media Monitoring for Election Observation Missions, it is recommended that the media reject overt or covert expressions of intolerance and 'carefully consider whether the publication of such statements contributes to defamation and ridicule on the basis of gender, race, colour, language, faith and religion, membership of a national or ethnic minority group, social inequalities or other opinion[11]'.



In May, the occasion for the news items with harmful narratives were mostly current events (19 or 37.3%) and social events (15 or 29.4%), which is not surprising considering that most of them were related to the elections that took place on 24 April and 8 May.

The political actors and the sources in the analysed news items

One of the main conclusions that emerge from the monitoring of the harmful narratives in these nine months is related to who has access to the mainstream media, i.e., who is given the privilege to speak and to shape the public discourse. In May as well, the TV stations gave the largest space to the representatives of the largest political parties, VMRO-DPMNE, SDSM, DUI and the Vredi coalition, and this can be seen from the following table, which presents the most frequent actors in the news items with harmful narratives.

10 International Federation of Journalists (2019) Global Charter of Ethics for Journalists, available at: https://www.ifj.org/who/rules-and-policy/global-charter-of-ethics-for-journalists.html. Accessed on 6 June, 2024.

11 OSCE/ODIHR, Council of Europe & EU (2005) European Commission for Democracy through Law (Venice Commission) Guidelines on Media Analysis during Election Observation Missions, Strasbourg

Table. 13 Total representation of first, second and third actor by TV channel

TV channel	An actor	Frequency	Mode of presentation			Who and how represents the actor											
						The journalist				Someone else				Himself/herself			
			Quoted	Paraphrased	He/she discussed	-	+	-/+	0	-	+	-/+	0	-	+	-/+	0
MTB2	SEC	2			2				2	2							
	Macedonian parties	2			2					2							
Kanal 5	Mickoski	2			2				1	2							
Sitel	VMRO DPMNE	3			3				2	1							
Telma	Ali Ahmeti	2	2						1						1		
Alpha	DUI	6	2		6	3				3							
	Bujar Osmani	2	1		2	1				2							
AlsatM	Bilal Kasami	2	2	2	2					2					2		
	VREDI	2	2	2	2					2					2		
	VMRO DPMNE	2			2					2							
	DUI	2			2					2							
	SDSM	2			2					2							
TV21	SDSM	2	1		2				1	1							
	Dimitar Kovachevski	2	2						2								
	VREDI	3	2		3				3								
	European front	2			2					2							
	Ali Ahmeti	2			2					2							
TV24	DUI	2			2					2							
	SDSM	2			2					2							

The presence and the concept of constant performance, i.e., being constantly active, are ones of the most important features of today's epoch. In order to be chosen, you have to be present all the time and everywhere. The visibility, the performance, the charisma are much more important than the arguments, which should be the main political weapon in democracy.

If we carefully analyse table 5, which shows the main actors in the news items with harmful narratives, we will realize that even in these news items there is not any place for minor political actors and parties. The whole scene seems to have been left to the big four, on which two binary oppositions are created, one for the Macedonian and the other for the Albanian bloc. The political representatives of these four parties use every opportunity, every social development, current event, problem or challenge, to attack their opponent (mostly without offering evidence and arguments), to insult, demonize, and demonstrate that they are not such, but completely opposite.

In May, unlike all previous months, on TV Alfa we see that SDSM is mentioned much less often and their political representatives had been replaced by DUI. Bujar Osmani and DUI were the most frequent actors who appeared in the news items with harmful narratives on TV Alfa, and they were discussed mostly negatively, either by the political opponents (5 news items) or by the journalist (4 news items). On other TV stations, we usually see a neutral attitude from the journalist, and the negative qualifications and the attacks usually come from the political rivals.

Table 14. Attitude of the media towards the harmful narratives

	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 repots 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
MTV 1	2	2		**2**	2						
MTV 2	4	3		**4**	4						
Kanal 5	5	3		**5**	5						
Sitel	3	3		**2**	1	1		1	**1**	1	
Telma	6	5		**6**	4		2				
Alsat M	8	8		**8**	8						
Alpha	17	12	**4**	**10**	2	1	7	3	**3**		
TV 21	8	8		**8**	8						
TV 24	8	7	**1**	**7**	6	1					
In total	**61**	51									

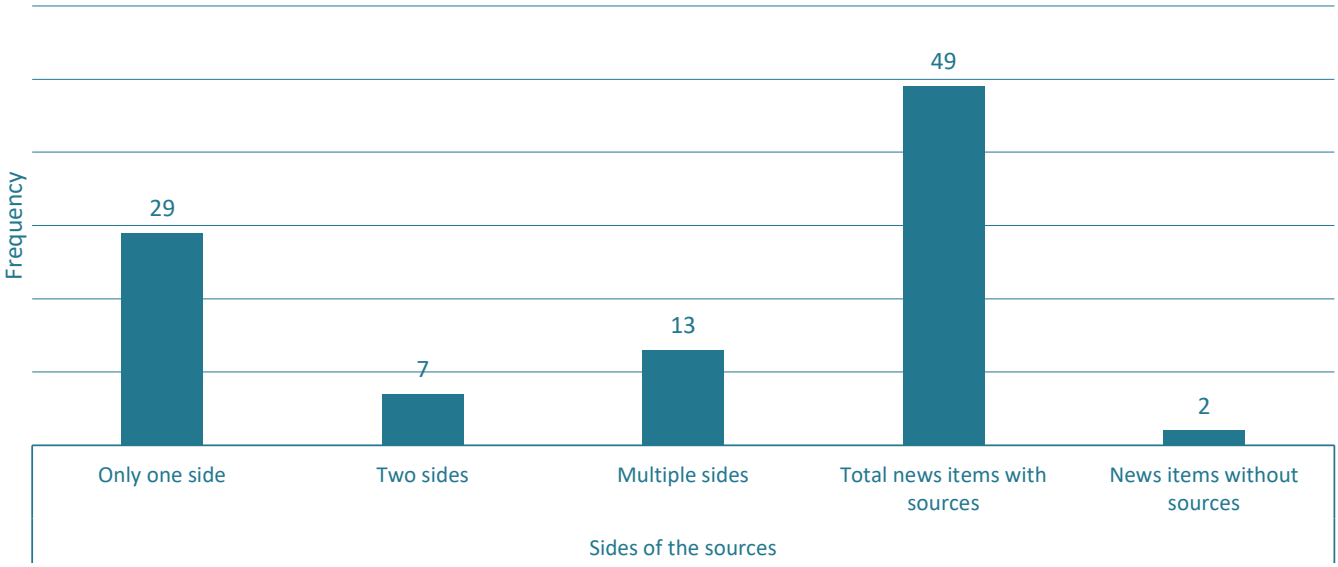
Similar to the previous months, the political actors participate mostly in the creation of the harmful narratives, while the journalists and the media only reported them in their news items, without intervention, but also without condemnation and criticism. Another exception is TV Alpha, where some of the indicators were created by the journalist (4) or by the journalist and the political actor together (3). Nevertheless, it must be emphasized that there was a serious decrease in this category as well, thus, compared to all previous months, the journalists of TV Alfa noticeably created less harmful narratives in the news items or the previews.

Among the other TV stations, we registered only one news item on TV 24 where the journalist was responsible for creating the harmful narrative and one news item on TV Sitel where the journalist created it together with the political actor.

Regarding the sources of the news items with harmful narratives, the analysis showed that 22 (43.1) had only one source, 11 (21.6%) contained two sources, while 16 (or 31.4) had three or more sources. In the case of two news items, the sources cannot be distinguished at all. Most often the sources were clear and precise (48 or 94.1%), while only 3 (5.9%) were imprecise and 1 (2.0%) was unclear.

The situation is similar when it comes to the sides in the news item, 29 had one side (or 56.9% of the news items), 7 (13.7%) had two sides and there were 13 news items with multiple sides (or 25.5%). Although one-sidedness is still a striking feature of the news items we analyse, we still observe a decrease in this context, especially compared to the previous month, April, when 35 news items (or 63.6% of the total number) were one-sided.

Table 15. Frequencies of representation on the side of the sources in the news items that have harmful narratives (May 2024)



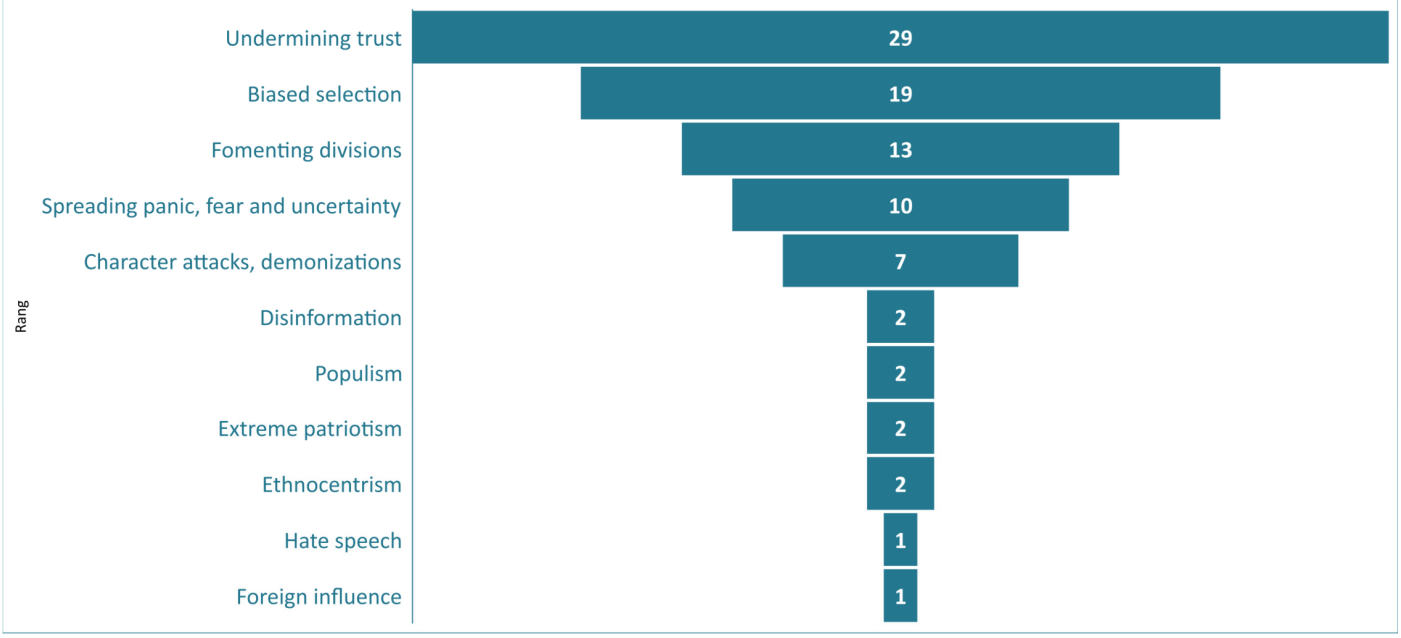
We notice the most one-sided news items with harmful narratives on MTV 1 (2 or 100%), TV Telma (4 or 80% of the total number of news items) and TV Alfa (7 or 70%).

Taking into account the social and the political context, i.e., the second round of the elections that took place on 8 May, one should not be surprised by the one-sidedness of some of the news items, especially those registered on 2 and 6 May. The rallies, the gatherings and the press conferences of the political parties were dominant in the public space during that period, and a very large part of the harmful narratives were created there. The manner in which the TV stations usually covered the election campaigns of the political parties, the linearity and one feature for each party, contributed to seeing one-sidedness in the news items.

The most common harmful narratives

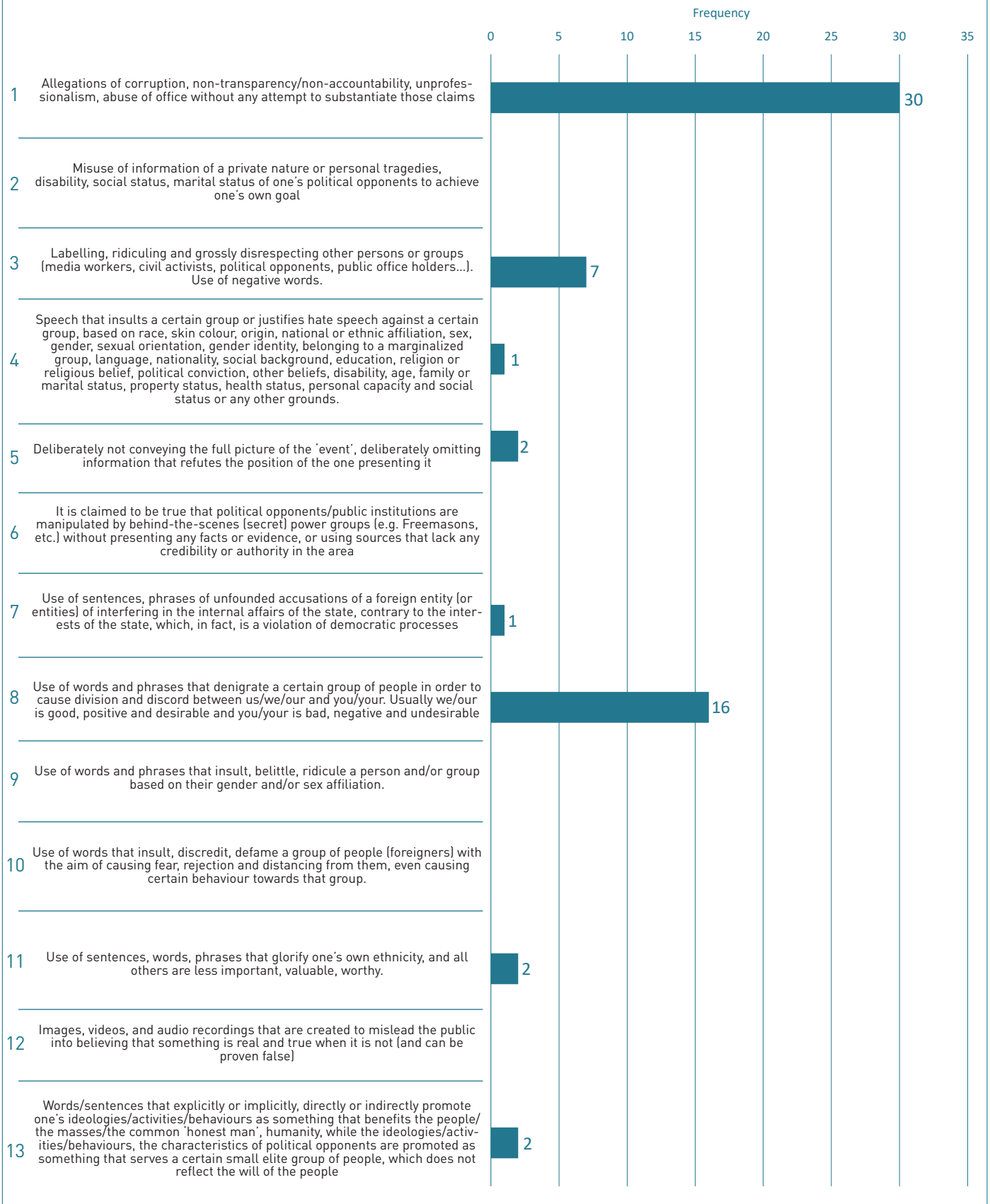
In May, 51 news items and a total of 88 harmful narratives were registered, i.e., 1.7 harmful narratives per news item. This month, the most common harmful narrative was undermining trust (29 cases), followed by biased selection (19). These two dominant harmful narratives were followed by fomenting division (13), spreading panic (10) and character attacks, i.e. demonization (7).

Table 16. Frequency of harmful narratives in May 2024



Such harmful narratives are the result of statements (more often) by the political actors or (less often) by the journalists which were used for accusation corruption, non-transparency, non-accountability, unprofessionalism, abuse of office, but without evidence and support for those claims (30 such cases or 49.2%), equally important statements that smeared a certain group of people in order to foment divisions and discords (16 or 26.2%), as well as statements with insults, labelling and demonization of the political opponent (7).

Table 17: Indicators of harmful narratives on TV stations in May 2024



The culmination of the political campaigns and the last attempts to win over the voter are also the main reason why in May (especially in the analysis of the first days of May, before the elections) we see an increasing number of statements that smear a certain group and a division is made us/ we/our and you/your, where of course we/our is good, positive and desirable, and you/your is bad, negative and undesirable.

Such is the case with this excerpt from the speech of the president of SDSM, Dimitar Kovachevski, broadcast on Alsat M TV on 6 May.

'They're going to take us backwards.' A vote for SDSM is a vote for tomorrow and the future, if they come to power, you will see Montenegro and other countries sitting on their chairs in Brussels by 2030, and ours with VMRO in power will remain empty.' **(TV Alsat M, 6 May, 2024)**.

In the election campaign, VMRO-DPMNE opposed this narrative of SDSM with accusations regarding reckless governance, unaccountability and crime, things that they, if they come to power, will change. We single out the statement of the representative of VMRO-DPMNE, Dragan Kovachki, broadcast on 6 May on TV 24.

'In two days, the citizens will have the opportunity to choose between Macedonia, humiliated, robbed, devastated, robbed and Macedonia proud, dignified, Macedonia that is being built and where the laws apply to everyone equally.' (TV 24, 6 May, 2024).

The promises and the political struggle before the elections are a regular phenomenon, despite that, there are limits for them and ethical norms apply. The emphasized populism and smearing of the political opponent often result in increased polarization in the society and divisions along political and ethnic lines, as well as in the division of the citizens on all important social issues related to the future of the state. Such a narrative creates fear, panic and insecurity and does nothing to build a healthy, democratic society. The role of the media must always be for the benefit of the public and the society, and therefore this type of political statements through which divisions are created, must not dominate the media space.

Unlike the previous months, we also note a decrease in the harmful narratives through which individuals or groups are insulted and attacked on a personal basis, in order to disparage or discredit them. This type of harmful narratives was quite frequent in the previous months of the campaign (in March 12, 10 April), while in May we registered 7, or only 3 after the May 8 elections.

We saw one such exchange of low blows below the belt, accompanied by a number of mutual insults, in the report on TV 21 broadcast on 6 May. First of all, the representative of the European Front, Arianit Hodja insults the representatives of the opposition that they are not brave enough to be eagles, but will remain chickens:

'A chicken is still a chicken even if you put eagle wings on it.' Therefore, brothers and sisters, let's not allow these from the opposition with the help of Mickoski to cut the wings of the eagles.' **(TV 21, 6 May, 2024)**.

The answer that follows from Bilal Kasami from the opposition party Vredi, is that a vote for DUI is a vote for outlaws:

'I neither curse nor abuse, but as a Mayor of Tetovo I won when you had zero investments. The voice of the Albanians is not a voice for outlaws. The vote for outlaws is not considered an Albanian vote.' **(TV 21, 6 May, 2024)**.

The iinsults and the obscene, insulting speech were a large part of the pre-election speeches of the political actors during these elections, who tried to address the voter in a simple, 'popular' manner, and to mock and humiliate the political opponent with a conventional, popular slang. What can be highlighted as a positive comparison is that the TV stations that we monitored these nine months very rarely allowed this way of addressing and this harmful narrative, in contrast to the portals, and especially the social networks, where this kind of discourse was dominant.

MTV 1

On the first channel of the public broadcasting service, we again note a decrease in the news items with harmful narratives, and in May we registered only 2 news items and 2 harmful narratives. This is important because the public broadcasting service, as we stated in the previous report, unlike the commercial broadcasters, especially during the election period, had additional obligations, which are prescribed by the Electoral Code12, and especially with Article 76-a, of this legal act. This Article prescribes the time that the public broadcasting service shall be obliged to devote to the electoral activities, the parties and their candidates, but informing the public concerning the methods and the techniques of voting.

The registered news items with harmful narratives have only one side (in both cases) and both are with topics related to the domestic politics. The harmful narratives undermining trust and ethnocentrism stand out among them. Such is the statement of the representative of DUI, Bujar Osmani, who calls on the voters to vote for his party, as the position of the Albanians would be strengthened:

'We call on the supporters of the opposition to support the European Front and strengthen the position of the Albanians and all other ethnic communities, against the arrogant behaviour of Mickovism.' **(MTV 1, 2 May, 2024)**.

This kind of ethnic bias, asking for a voice to strengthen the positions of the Albanians, can often lead to wrong 'ethnocentric' assumptions about the other one; however it will definitely influence a growing separation along ethnic lines as well, which is not good for multi-ethnic societies such as the Macedonian.

MTV 2

On the second channel of the public broadcasting service MTV 2, the monitoring registered a total of 3 news items in which a total of 7 harmful narratives were noted. A similar conclusion can be made in connection to MTV 2, which refers to the small number of news items with harmful narratives, which is in accordance with the role they fulfil as a service to the citizens.

On MTV 2, we can also say that there is a trend of 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 with harmful narratives, February 10, March 7, April 5, in May only 3 news items with harmful narratives occur.

The most common harmful narratives were biased selection (3) and undermining of trust (1). Two of them were only with one side, while in one news item there were several sides. All news items were related to domestic politics topics.

The statement of Bujar Osmani from DUI, which we singled out on this occasion, shows the manner in which it is possible to cause fear, mistrust, but also to inflame nationalism through blanket accusations of nationalism without supporting arguments and evidence:

'VMRO-DPMNE and their allies repeat nationalist theses every day, flirt with pro-Russian currents, openly threaten the famous war of 2001, and incite tensions between the ethnic and the religious communities in the country.' **(MTV 2, 2 May, 2024)**.

12 Electoral Code – Refined text March 2024.https://drive.google.com/file/d/1ZJMruqcNl-yC5VuWSzpfT9BFeKphm5An/view?usp=sharing. Accessed on 26 May, 2024.

The political actors must be very careful with the statements that touch on the national sentiments in a multi-ethnic society, because such discourse can produce serious consequences. Nonetheless, the media must also be careful in what manner they convey such statements, whether they will reinforce such a narrative or mark themselves as dangerous and distance themselves.

TV Alpha

Although TV Alfa is again the television station with the largest number of news items with harmful narratives, 12 (and a total of 29 harmful narratives), it must be emphasized that on this television station we are following a trend of decreasing harmful narratives, especially in April (14) and May (12). Compared to February (40) and March (35), the number of 12 registered news items with harmful narratives is an indicator of a positive downward trend.

The most common harmful narratives appearing in May were undermining trust (8), fomenting divisions (7) and biased selection (6). The news items were mostly one-sided (7 or 70%), while three news items (30%) were multi-sided.

In the entire period of the monitoring from September 2023 to May 2024, the highly tendentious attitude of the media towards the political entities was evident, where one political party was promoted at the expense of its opponents. We monitor that, although on a reduced scale, in May as well, especially in the preview of the news items in the central news editions. This month there were 4 cases where only the journalist/editor created the harmful narrative through the tendentious way of informing and one case where the journalist and the political actor created it. Notwithstanding in this category as well, we observe a positive shift, and a reduced number of harmful narratives produced by the journalist (as a comparison, the journalist, together with the political actor, participated in the creation of 18 harmful narratives in March 2024).

An example of such a tendentious relationship is the preview of the news item in the central news editions broadcast on 30 May:

'The taste of the defeat is bitter, but it is even bitterer when you go to the opposition. DUI cannot accept that their power is slipping away like sand through their fingers, and in the recent struggle they are already running out of trump cards. The experts believe that DUI's anger is expected, even though only four years ago it was important for them to have 61 MPs to form a government, and now they have changed their rhetoric, so they are playing on the card that the winning parties from the Macedonian and the Albanian blocks should have formed a coalition. [...] Protest? I do not believe that the citizens would come out. There are even more problems because it needs to keep the coalition partners. [...] A pain that does not go away for DUI is that VMRO-DPMNE decided to form a coalition with the 'Vredi' Coalition. The European Front won more deputies than them, but taking into account the colourfulness of their coalition, it is impossible to know how many of the votes belonged to Ahmeti's party.' **(Alfa TV, 30 May, 2024)**.

Apart from the obvious fan relationship towards a political bloc, the journalist also puts forward several problematic theses, such as that the votes of the European Front are also votes from other ethnic communities, not only Albanian votes, which calls into question their result in the elections.

In the journalistic reporting it is very important to make a clear distinction between the facts and the opinions. The role of the journalist, especially during elections, is to inform the citizens regarding the various ideas and the political offers, while having a balanced attitude and avoiding bias towards any party.

TV Kanal 5

The monitoring of the central news editions on TV Kanal 5 in May registered only 3 news items, but a total of 9 harmful narratives (3 per news item). The most common were undermining trust (3) and biased selection (2). All the harmful narratives were created by the political actors, and the journalists just reported them in the news items, without any intervention. Two news items were with only one side, while one had several sides.

'What I will not accept are the criticisms from VMRO-DPMNE and from Hristijan Mickoski, Nikola Gruevski's student. The fact that Mickoski and his presidential candidate Siljanovska are trying to sabotage the future of the state again means that nothing has changed in VMRO in the past period.' **(TV Kanal 5, 6 May, 2024)**.

The singled out news item is from the speech of the president of SDSM, Dimitar Kovachevski, which discredits the political opponent on a personal basis, calling him a Nikola Gruevski's student, while he considers the opposition party to be working against the interests of the state and its future.

TV 21

In May, 8 news items were registered on TV 21, with a total of 10 harmful narratives. The most common among them were biased selection (4) and character attacks, i.e. demonization (4).

The news items were mostly either with 2 sides (3 or 37.5%) or with three or more sides (3 or 37.5%), while only 2 news items were with only one side (25%).

The singled out news item contains the frequent accusations against the DUI party, but without context and without any arguments offered.

'From a party, DUI turned into 'Cosa Nostra''. **(TV 21, 2 May, 2024)**.

Although a lot of things are allowed in the political struggle, yet equating the opponent with the most famous Sicilian mafia, without offering arguments, cannot contribute to raising the level of the political debate.

Sitel TV

In May, 3 news items recorded on TV Sitel, with a total of 5 harmful narratives. Most often, these were the undermining of trust and biased selection. The analysis singled out the news item broadcast on 2 May, in which the spokesperson of VMRO-DPMNE, Nikola Stoilkovski, accused employees in the Agency for Youth and Sports of embezzlement. The manner Stoilkovski does it, but also the manner in which the journalist frames the news item, by deliberately not conveying the whole picture and omitting details that are important for the whole context, is an example of a tendentious attitude and disregard for the presumption of innocence, especially if you consider that there is no official statement from the Public Prosecutor's Office.

'How did he, with the first employment as a party youth as the director of Agency of Youth and Sport, at the age of 30, accumulate four million in the bank and his own apartment? asked Stoilkovski at the press conference of VMRO-DPMNE, right after he accused of embezzlement of millions of euros, and the journalist clarified that according to his information, it was about 5 million euros. Thus, the viewer gets the impression that the money in the account of the director of Agency for Youth and Sports was millions of euros, and not four million denars (or 64,000 euros), as is actually the case.

Finally, the spokesperson Stoilkovski says: 'SDS has never once explained how it came to the concept of toerags entering politics, and then they became millionaires,' **(TV Sitel, 2 May, 2024)**.

Hence, an on-going investigative process serves as an example to prove that a political opponent is corrupt, and during the reign, its members managed to enrich themselves dishonestly. Insults of the type 'toerag entered politics' serve to strengthen the effect and to oversimplify the model of corruption allegedly used by the party in power.

In journalism, apart from the information that is reported and reaches the viewers, it is very important to see how they are framed, i.e., which angle they are approached from. Furthermore, in addition to this, it is very important what information is omitted, and it is important that the viewer gets a clear idea of the whole image, as in the example shown.

TV Alsat-M

In May, TV Alsat M recorded 8 news items that contained 8 harmful narratives. The largest number of them (7) was related to the undermining of trust. Most of the news items (4 or 50%) were with only one side, 3 (37.5%) news items had two sides, while only one news item (12.5%) was multi-sided.

As an example, the statement of the DUI representative Arber Ademi given on 2 May, which aims to warn against Russian influences that aim to divide Albanians, is singled out:

'We decided to move the meeting a day earlier, just so we do not get into Russian scenarios, scenarios of Putin and Moscow, who, with the help of their proxies here, with the help of Kasami and the Albanian opposition, are trying to make the Albanians fight among themselves.' **(TV Alsat M, 2 May, 2024)**.

Putin, Moscow and the Russian influence does not only serve as an element to intimidate the voters, but also as an opportunity to correlate with anyone who is on the opposite side, i.e., to characterize them as collaborators with the evil. In this case it is Kasami and the entire Albanian opposition.

On the contrary, the opposition Vredi builds its rhetoric as regards the alleged corruption of DUI, which, in a panic that it will lose the elections, is resorting to various criminal activities.

'The DUI is panicking [...] and it has been confirmed that they misused the mechanisms of the government, with threats, with blackmail, pressure, etc. Bulgarian train, they tried and distorted the will of the people and the election result.' **(TV Alsat M, 14 May, 2024)**.

Although the SEC decided to re-vote in several polling stations, without concrete evidence, the opposition accuses of specific election frauds that changed the election result.

TV Telma

In May, TV Telma registered 5 news items, with a total of 6 harmful narratives. The most common are spreading panic (3) and undermining trust (2). Most of them were one-sided (4), while only one news item had two sides. All news items were related to domestic politics topics.

The singled out example is from 6 May, the day before the election silence, when in a recorded statement the representative of SDSM, Fatmir Bitichi, alludes that if the opposition wins the elections, the division and the captured state will return.

'Let's not allow ourselves to deviate from what we have been building together and carefully for seven years. [...] Dear all, 7 years ago we emerged from the shadows of division and the captured state, but nationalism and isolation are lurking on our doorstep again.' **(TV Telma, 6 May, 2024)**.

Such a narrative aims to spread fear and panic and is often used as an election tactic. In this fashion, the voters are put in front of a challenge, that if they vote for the opponent or allow the opponent to win by abstaining from voting, they will contribute to the destruction of the state, or in the specific case, to the return of the captured state.

TV 24

In May, we see an increase on TV 24, i.e. 7 news items that contained a total of 12 harmful narratives, which is the most since the beginning of the monitoring until now. The most common were fomenting division (3), character attacks (2), spreading panic (2), etc. A total of 4 of the news items offered only one side, while 3 were multi-sided. All news items were on topics regarding the domestic politics.

Out of the news items, we single out the statement of the president of DUI, Ali Ahmeti, given on 18 May, which again aims to spread fear among the electorate, but also it encourages negative feelings towards the Macedonian community:

'This was carried out by the two largest parties of the Macedonian nationality, whose policies; unfortunately, we fear will have an impact on the inter-ethnic relations, which we do not want. Moreover, this repetition that will be done is carried out with a risky background for us the Albanians to kill ourselves, as it happened at a polling station in the Municipality of Zhelino, we do not want that, nor will it happen again. If someone wants to have a strategy for us the Albanians to shoot each other, it will not be realized.' **(TV 24, 18 May, 2024)**.

This kind of rhetoric is very dangerous, especially in societies that are multi-ethnic and have a history of conflict in the past. In his statement, Ahmeti directly accuses both, as he says, 'the largest parties of the Macedonian nationality' for contributing to the destruction of the complexity and uniqueness of the Albanians, and even wishing they would kill each other.

These narratives, although they may not cause an immediate effect among the citizens, contribute to strengthening the already existing prejudices, increase polarization, and affect trust in the society. The media have the task of informing the citizens apropos the various messages and news items of the parties, however they must also not accept this kind of discourse and further spread it, and in cases where it comes from political actors, their task is to recognize and condemn it.

SUMMARY

May, as the last month of the nine-month monitoring of the online media, is characterized by a noticeable downward trend of news items with harmful narratives.

187 news items with 311 posts, sentences, paragraphs, phrases with negative rhetoric were determined, which can be evaluated as a relaxation of the information space compared to the previous few months when the number of politically 'harmful stories' surmounted 200 to reach to 261 such news items in April. This can be attributed, above all, to the pre-election/election campaign for the presidential and the parliamentary elections, when the political actors in front of the public (voters) waged a fierce battle for power with each other, with attacks, insults, accusations, belittling, discrediting for incompetence, irresponsibility, and corruption of the political opponents, which culminated in April. Hence the largest number of 'harmful posts' produced in the two monitored days (2 and 6 May), so that after the voting on 8 May they subsided and were forgotten.

The main 'creators' of these harmful narratives, the politicians, the political parties and their members, the vice-presidents, the spokespersons, current MPs and contenders for the new parliamentary composition, 'promoted' themselves through their public appearances, expressed views, statements, speeches, visits, interviews in the media, party press releases, press conferences, rallies. At the same instant, the online media proved to be an inexhaustible and free information space, without restrictions for everyone and everything. The most common harmful narratives were undermining trust in the institutions (117 news items), biased selection (68) and fomenting divisions (32), and there were a significant number of examples of attacking and labelling the political opponents, as well as spreading fear and insecurity in the society. The harmful narratives were mostly posted through **the Kurir** portal (28 news items), which months ago had the largest number of news items with harmful narratives, followed by **Vecer.mk (26)**, the **Nezavisen (23)** and the **Tetova Sot (22)**, which in the past period occasionally changed their place on the scale or were replaced by others **(Republika, A1on)**.

As in the previous months, the 'hybrid' genre forms emerged in May, such as party press releases and the politicians' speeches, usually completely taken over (both the title and content) by the party's communication which predictably dictates that they should be processed journalistically un/professionally, usually with one source of information and one side of the story, rarely and incidentally signed with the journalist's name and surname or initials, visually supported by current or archival footage but unmarked (about the entity in the news item, the cameraman, the source of the footage), and regarding the main topic, the domestic politics, the title (usually a headline) is more important than the content consisting of just a few short paragraphs. In reference to the political actors, in continuity, the collective ones, i.e., VMRO-DPMNE, are often apostrophized, far ahead of SDSM or DUI, and of the individual ones, Hristijan Mickoski, the president of VMRO-DPMNE, and behind him Dimitar Kovachevski, the president of SDSM, although this month DUI and its president Ali Ahmeti are at the top, and only then VMRO-DPMNE, SDSM and Hristijan Mickoski, the president of VMRO-DPMNE. This image is influenced by the 'tacit' distribution among some of the portals regarding which will inform concerning which political actors, as opposed to the attributes that they market 'news on the move', 'fast and different', 'accurate and true information' or that they are 'a reflection of the truth.'

In the last month of the monitoring the harmful narratives in the central news editions of the TV stations, the lowest number of such news items had been observed so far, i.e., 51 news items containing a total of 88 harmful narratives. The downward trend, which was already visible in March (79 news items), and continued with a serious decline in April (55 news items), culminated in the last month, in which the second round of the parliamentary elections was held.

Although such a low number is surprising at the height of the election campaign, it must be emphasized that the TV stations (unlike online portals) are subject to legal regulation that imposes special rules on informing, especially during elections. The informing on the television stations during elections is not only subject to regulation of the Law on Audio and Audiovisual Media Services, but also to the Electoral Code. Above and beyond, the reporting in the pre-election period is monitored by several domestic and foreign organizations, including the media regulator, the Agency for Audio and Audiovisual Media Services.

Another positive feature that should be highlighted is that, with few exceptions, the journalists did not participate in the creation of the harmful narratives, but mostly the political actors. Out of 61 indicators of harmful narratives, the journalist alone was responsible for creating 5, while in 4 cases they created it together with the political actor.

The most common harmful narratives in May were undermining trust in the institutions (29), biased selection (19), fomenting division (13), spreading panic (10) and character attacks i.e. demonization (7). Such narratives were created mostly through claims of corruption, non-transparency/unaccountability, unprofessionalism, abuse of office without any attempt to substantiate those claims (30) and the use of words and phrases that smear a certain group of people in order to cause divisions and conflicts between us/we/our and you/ your (16).

As it was usual until now, the largest number of news items are related to topics of domestic politics (46 or 90.2%), while one-sidedness remains one of the most obvious features of the news items with harmful narratives, i.e. only one side of the news item is presented in 29 news items (56.9%), 7 news items were 2-sided (13.7%) and 13 news item were multi-sided (25.5%).

TV Alfa is again the medium with the highest number of news items with harmful narratives (12 or 23.5%), in spite of that the decreasing trend that we have been following for the last three months among all televisions is also evident regarding TV Alfa. What remains a characteristic of this television is the pronounced tendentious discourse, in which one side and one political option is favoured.

As pointed out in the Guide for ethical media coverage of elections in North Macedonia13 which was issued by the Association of Journalists of Macedonia in 2021, the media in their reporting should avoid partiality towards or against any party. 'This principle entails inclusiveness of reporting – considering the wide perspective and ensuring that all existing different views are adequately presented. All journalists have their own opinion, and to be able to cover the news and on-going events fully and professionally, they must rise above their personal views.'14.

Most of the political statements in May were in some way related to spreading fear and panic among the voters. Such strategies are not rare during elections and political campaigns and the political actors who use them intend to show that it is their party that is ready to deal with the various challenges in the society. In the specific case, it is saving the state from 'nationalism', 'isolation' and 'leaving the EU perspectives' or, on the other hand, saving society from 'corruption', 'crime' and 'injustices'.

The problem becomes even more complicated, when inflammable means are used in fear-mongering strategies, i.e., the relations between the different ethnic communities in the society and the national feelings of the citizens. Statements like, others do not wish well for us and want us to divide ourselves, reinforce some negative prejudices and further spread stereotypes relating to other communities. The political elites that do not invest in building mutual trust and bringing together all the different groups in the society, cannot call for coexistence and multi-ethnic societies.

The role of the media in this context is very important. Firstly, under no circumstances they must accept such incendiary rhetoric and become political weapons through which such a narrative will be spread, and secondly, they must analyse, distance themselves from and openly condemn incendiary and dangerous statements, because the consequences of their spreading can be very serious.

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 26 May, 2024.

14 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 26 May, 2024.

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