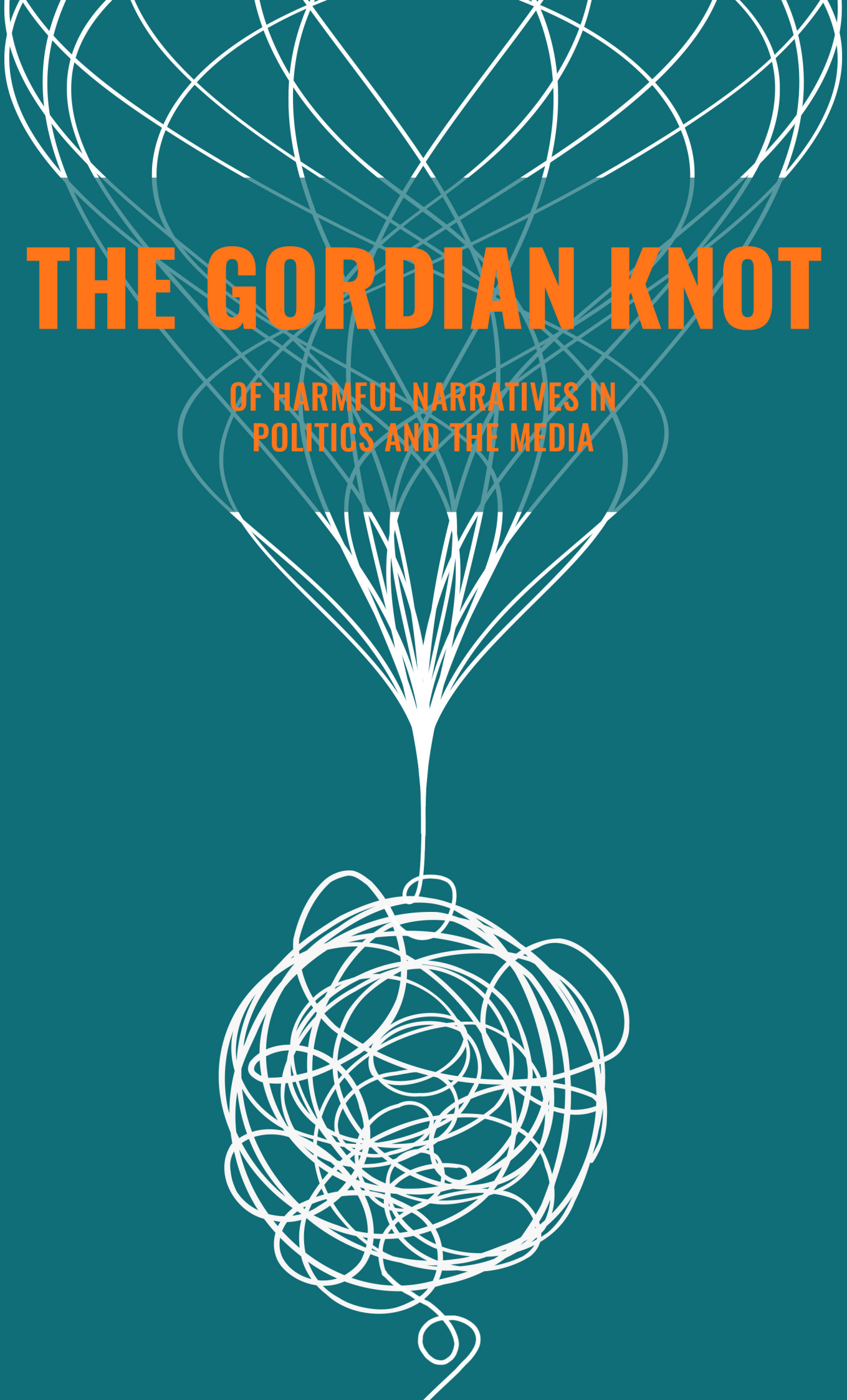
THE GORDIAN KNOT

OF HARMFUL NARRATIVES IN POLITICS AND THE MEDIA



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ABOUT THE GUIDE

The Guide *The Gordian Knot of Harmful Narratives in Politics and the Media* is the finale of the extensive research 'Determining Political Harmful Narratives' (HARM-TIVE)[1], conducted by the Institute of Communication Studies (ICS) in collaboration with a large number of researchers and experts in the field of communications and media, journalists and media professionals, and with the support of the British Embassy in Skopje.

Over a period of nine months, from September 2023 to May 2024, the narratives of political actors in the Republic of North Macedonia were monitored. The monitoring covered the posts on the official websites and Facebook profiles of ten parliamentary political parties, their leaders, and the ministers in the then/current Government. Additionally, texts broadcast on eleven informative online media outlets and news in the central informative programs of nine television stations were analysed.[2]

The choice of this period was not accidental, but carefully chosen due to the holding of presidential and parliamentary elections. Pre-election periods offer a clear picture of the political culture and the way in which political discourse develops in a society. This time context also allowed for an analysis of media reporting and the role of the media in shaping public opinion before and during elections.

This topic is particularly significant, especially given the global trend of increasing manipulative and disinformation rhetoric. The lack of research in this field creates a critical gap in understanding the evolution of political discourse and how political actors utilize the media to shape public opinion and influence political processes, with a strong emphasis on the detrimental effects of such practices.

This Guide aims to present and explain harmful narratives in Macedonian political discourse, using various case studies that were detected during the nine-month monitoring. The guide analyses in detail a total of sixteen politically harmful narratives, addressing the consequences they leave, summarizing the observations regarding the violation of standards and principles of political communication and media reporting, and at the same time offering recommendations intended for political actors and journalists.

[1] https://respublica.edu.mk/istrazhuvanje-shtetna/

[2] For more information about the methodology: https://respublica.edu.mk/istrazhuvanje-shtetna/metodologija/

Moreover, the Guide aims to raise public awareness and emphasize the importance of transparent and accountable political communication, respect for political opponents and diverse opinions, and fostering a culture of argument-based debate. We hope that it will serve as a useful educational tool for politicians, journalists, researchers, students, and all those interested in this topic, and also promote positive change in the development of public discourse in the future.

It is no coincidence that in the preparation of this publication we also collaborated with the Association of Journalists of Macedonia (AJM). They provided us with support in reviewing the publication, as well as in organizing three focus groups with the editors of national and local electronic and online media so that we could hear their original thoughts on the topic.

We express our deep gratitude to the team involved in the project: all researchers, experts in the field of communications and media, political scientists, journalists, psychologists and linguists, who professionally and devotedly worked on monitoring the media, collecting data, and analysis. Their work contributed to the creation of significant scientific materials related to this topic.

Finally, we extend special thanks to the team at the British Embassy in Skopje, who recognized the importance of this research and the need for continued investment in transparency and accountability as tools for advancing democratic development in the Republic of North Macedonia.

INTRODUCTION

Narration, in various forms, is present in all segments of human life, from written texts, oral conversations and stories, films, music, to media reporting and the discourse used in political communication. In a broader sense, narratives are ways in which we understand and share our experiences. They can be personal stories, cultural myths or messages created by the media that shape our understanding of the world: 'We dream in narratives, we think in narratives, we hope, we believe, we doubt, we plan, we analyse, we criticize, we construct, we gossip, we learn, we hate and we love in narratives.'[3]

The narratives conveyed by the media to the general public influence social norms, beliefs, and perceptions. For example, the way the media creates and disseminates the narrative concerning climate change and environmental protection influences how society will view this problem and how much it will advocate for improving the situation.

Political discourse is also based on narrative forms. Politicians, the media, and various groups in society use political narratives to shape the public opinion, to influence policies, and to achieve various political goals. They often simplify complex political realities into simple stories, with heroes, villains, conflicts, and solutions that appeal to the emotions and values of the public. Thus, they simplify complex situations into a sequence of events that is much more understandable to people. The characteristic of political narratives, to present political ideologies and agendas in a way that is familiar and easily understood, makes them a very powerful tool for persuasion. For example, narratives related to national identity, justice, corruption, economic development, and the like, are regularly found in the speeches and campaigns of political actors, with the aim of gaining voter support or discrediting opponents. The media helps spread these narratives, often ignoring established standards of professional reporting. In this process, the use of **harmful narratives** is increasingly noted, intentionally distorting information or manipulating the emotions of citizens, fostering fear, division, or hatred.

Harmful political narratives refer to stories, ideas or messages promoted by individuals, groups or political entities that have negative consequences for society, democracy or the well-being of individuals. These narratives can manipulate public opinion, sow division and undermine the principles of informed, rational and critical decision-making in the political sphere.[4]. They are often based on discrimination, stereotypes or rhetoric that polarises society. They can undermine trust in institutions, deepen social conflicts, and reduce political debate to manipulative strategies instead of rational arguments and constructive dialogue.

[3] Hardy, B. (1968). Towards a poetics of fiction: An approach through narrative. Novel: A Forum on Fiction, 2(1), 5–14.

[4] Institute of Communication Studies. (2024). Determining Political Harmful Narratives (HARM-TIVE) – First Report. Zaneta Trajkoska (ed.). Skopje: Institute of Communication Studies. Retrieved on from https://respublica.edu.mk/wp-content/uploads/2024/01/shtet-na_prv-izveshtaj-celosna-verzija.pdf

Especially during election periods, harmful narratives generated by political actors have significant potential to influence the societal climate and public opinion. These narratives are often aimed at discrediting opponents, manipulating public emotions and polarizing voters. Political actors consciously use narratives that highlight fear, uncertainty and division in order to mobilize their supporters or to smear opponents.

Communication is not just a tool for persuasion but also a reflection of a politician's leadership abilities. The language they use and the narratives they promote in the public sphere mirror their policies and commitment to shaping the kind of society they envision for citizens. Their words demonstrate how they uphold the trust placed in them and advocate on behalf of the people. Politicians must recognize that their public statements have the power to unite or divide, build consensus, or deepen polarization on critical issues affecting citizens' interests. Political rhetoric that uses vilifying and sowing divisions threatens social cohesion, while responsible rhetoric builds bridges between communities and creates inclusive dialogue in society.

The media play a key role in conveying these narratives. Unfortunately, there are examples in which they serve as a platform for politicians to spread their messages, often without sufficient analysis and critical scrutiny. Furthermore, some media outlets, instead of focusing on the content and credibility of political narratives, emphasize sensationalism, which further reinforces divisions and fuels a negative political climate. This is especially pronounced in the context of paid political programming in the media, before elections.

In the run-up to elections the media sometimes play the role of transmitters of harmful narratives, and instead of acting as correctives and fact-checkers, they sometimes contribute to creating a distorted picture of political reality, which can significantly undermine the democratic process and the public's awareness. This makes the public more susceptible to manipulation and weakens the capacity for critical thinking at times when it is most needed.

HARMFUL NARRATIVES IN THE MACEDONIAN POLITICAL DISCOURSE

In societies that are deeply polarized along various lines, harmful political narratives can seriously undermine democratic processes and public trust. In addition, they create long-lasting consequences for political culture, the way public discourse is formed and developed, and the relationship between citizens and institutions. The gradual acceptance of harmful narratives in politics leaves a mark on democratic processes and normalizes insults, intolerance, hate speech, lies, manipulation and malinformation.

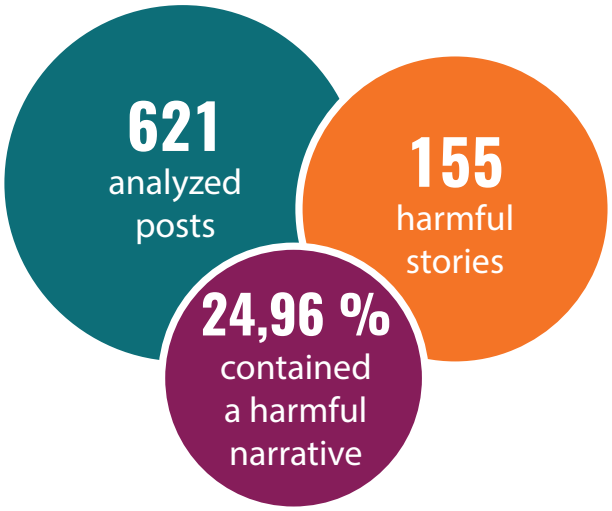
The research 'Determining Political Harmful Narratives' (HARM-TIVE) conducted by the Institute of Communication Studies (ICS) aimed to recognize and identify harmful political narratives in public political communication of political parties and politicians in the Republic of North Macedonia, as well as the manner of media reporting on them, i.e. the manner of their transmission and dissemination. The main conclusion that emerges after nine months of monitoring is that harmful narratives are very often included in the political communication of political parties and their leaders.

When analysing **political party** posts on their websites and Facebook pages, researchers found **1,104 posts** with harmful narratives among **5,062 analysed posts**. This means that every fifth post by political parties (**21.81%**) contained a harmful narrative.

Political party announcements on their websites and Facebook pages

Additionally, the analysis of the communication of **political party leaders on social networks** showed that out of a total of **621** posts, **155** posts contained harmful narratives, which is one quarter or **24.96%**.

Analysis of communication of political party leaders on social networks



The analysis of the reports broadcast in the central news programs of TV stations and online media also showed a serious presence of harmful political narratives. This is especially alarming in the online media, where during the nine-month monitoring a total of 1908 reports with harmful narratives were registered, in contrast to the TV stations where 669 such reports were recorded for the same period. This significant difference between TV stations and online media shows the situation in online journalism, where due to a lack of serious editorial filters and clear legal frameworks, nearly all harmful narratives created and spread by political actors pass through.

Both TV stations (77%) and online media (84%) most often had political actors as the creators of harmful narratives, while the media's role was primarily to convey them, often without interference, and less frequently with approval or opposition. Although it is encouraging that journalists and media were not involved in creating harmful narratives, the absence of healthy filters to detect harmful political narratives remains a serious problem that must be addressed.

CHARACTERISTICS OF HARMFUL POLITICAL NARRATIVES

Harmful political narratives are a communication tool through which the political actors manipulate the public and public opinion, sow division and undermine the principles of informed, rational and critical decision-making of citizens. They can distort reality, create fear or hatred and undermine democratic values by promoting division, discrimination or authoritarianism. What are the main characteristics present in harmful narratives?

Dissemination of disinformation and lies

Harmful political narratives often rely on false or half-truthful information to create confusion or push a political agenda. Such narratives aim to influence the public opinion and to shape the citizens' perceptions of a particular issue through manipulation and dishonesty. Political actors who deceive their citizens stray from true democratic values, as dishonesty deprives people of the ability to make informed choices and vote freely.

Divisions and polarization

One of the most dangerous characteristics of harmful political narratives is their ability to divide societies. These narratives constantly emphasize differences, such as religion, ethnicity, gender identity and sexual orientation, social status, etc., but also political affiliation, 'red', 'blue', 'right', 'left', constantly creating an atmosphere of 'us against them' or, more specifically, 'us - the good versus them - the bad'. Frequent practice of this type of public political communication can lead to major social divisions, and sometimes to extremism and violence.

Accusations and search for culprits

Harmful political narratives often centre on blaming political opponents, along with minority or non-minority communities, for societal issues. These unfounded accusations not only promote discriminatory policies and behaviour but also undermine rational and democratic discussions on important societal matters.

Sowing fear

Creating an atmosphere of fear and portraying reality through threats (collapse of the economy, national interests, deviation from the right path, etc.) is another specific feature of harmful political narratives. Political narratives created in this way create uncertainty and anxiety and influence citizens to accept positions and measures they do not agree with, simply because of the fear that it could be worse.

Undermining trust in institutions

Harmful political narratives also undermine public trust. By spreading conspiracy theories or unsubstantiated portrayals of these institutions as corrupt, unprofessional, or ineffective, harmful political narratives weaken democracy and create cynicism among the public, who lose trust in the entire system. Therefore, baseless political criticism of institutions should not be mistaken for the scrutiny, analysis, and critique carried out by the media and civil society, which serve as watchdogs of democracy and democratic processes.

Reinforcement of stereotypes

Finally, another important characteristic of harmful political narratives is the reinforcement of negative stereotypes towards certain groups in society. By repeatedly reinforcing these stereotypes, oversimplifying complex issues, and offering instant solutions based on generalizations and blame, harmful political narratives justify inequality and perpetuate discrimination in society.

TYPES OF HARMFUL NARRATIVES

Drawing on the key characteristics of harmful narratives, along with theoretical insights and international research on the subject, 16 harmful political narratives have been identified, defined, and analysed within the country's public communication space.[5]

Each harmful narrative is explained, highlighting its most important characteristics, how it develops and spreads in the Macedonian context, especially in a specific pre-election period, as well as the consequences it can have on democracy and democratic processes.

1. DISINFORMATION

Disinformation *is information or claims that are not true, intended to cause harm or manipulate public opinion.*[6]

Many theorists throughout history have devoted considerable attention to the role and impact of lies and disinformation in society, and their use in political contexts. Some have condemned this practice, while others have justified it.

Niccolò Machiavelli argued that while honesty is preferable, one should lie if it benefits the individual or the state. He claimed that those involved in politics must be ready to deceive and manipulate when it serves their interests. According to Machiavelli, people are inherently dishonest and immoral, so there is no obligation to be truthful with them.[7]

In contrast, Immanuel Kant maintained that lying has no place anywhere, including in politics. He argued that the absolute prohibition of lying should apply equally to politicians and ordinary citizens, even when the stakes are higher in politics. A politician who resorts to lies treats people as mere tools to achieve personal goals, demonstrating a lack of respect for the dignity of voters and their right to shape their own lives.[8]

A person who lies to others seeks to convince them that reality is different from the truth. This premise is especially important in a political context, because in this way political actors try to establish power by shaping the will of citizens with the help of lies according to their own desires, and not according to objective reality. If truth is power, concealing the truth deprives people of power. In such manner, all power is transferred from those who are lied to the one who lies.[9]

Unfortunately, lies in modern politics are not at all easy to identify and recognize. Unlike Napoleon, who distorted the truth whenever possible, today's politicians strive for accuracy with facts, as they can be verified at any time. Insincerity can be detected not only in the way they present facts but also in their intentions and the promises they make about what they will do if they earn the trust of citizens.

[5] For more information about the methodology: https://respublica.edu.mk/istrazhuvanje-shtetna/metodologija/

[6] Wardle, C., & Derakhshan, H. (2017). Information Disorder: Toward an interdisciplinary framework for research and policymaking. Council of Europe Report.

[7] Machiavelli, N. (2005). The prince (P. Bondanella, Trans.). Oxford University Press.

[8] Kant, I. (1993). The metaphysics of morals. Izdavačka knizarnica Zorana Stojanovića, s. 429.

[9] Svensen, LH (2024). The philosophy of lies. Geopolitik, s. 47–48.

In the research 'Determining Political Harmful Narratives' (HARM-TIVE), blanket accusations against political opponents without evidence and no arguments were very often registered. Although, most often, these cases were in some 'grey zone' and it was not easy to categorize, the way in which political actors generalize things, accuse without evidence and present reality in a way that suits them, places them in the category of disinformation.

In October 2023, the Government of Prime Minister Dimitar Kovachevski announced that the value added tax (VAT) on certain products would increase from 5% to 10%. His explanation was that the Republic of North Macedonia has the lowest VAT in the region, and the decision was made in consultation with the Ministry of Finance, experts, and representatives from academia and chambers of commerce.

The decision to raise VAT was criticized by the opposition, especially the largest opposition party VMRO-DPMNE, which said that 'the state budget lacks money because it was spent on dubious tenders and crime.'

> ***...Citizens should understand that every denar they now pay more for products that were cheaper just yesterday is directly funding tenders under the 'four eyes' principle of the DUI and SDSM Government. This money goes directly to individuals within the DUI and SDSM coalition. (Republika, 7 October, 2023, LINK).***

Such statements that money was spent on criminal tenders that were awarded privately are difficult to verify, and they are intended to discredit political opponents. Generalizations and accusations without any evidence misinform the public and influence the creation of a picture of social events that is not based on facts and accurate information.

The statement was broadcast by several media outlets because it was given at a public event (part of the visit to Veles on the occasion of VMRO-DPMNE's campaign 'It's important! Changes depend on you'), but what is specific about the text posted on the online media outlet Republika is that the second side is not presented at all, i.e. the statement by the then Prime Minister Kovachevski, who defends and explains the decision.

Apart from such blanket accusations that were very often part of the pre-election discourse of almost all political parties, there were also statements in which political actors presented inaccurate and/or semi-accurate information, which could easily be verified.

At the opening of the photovoltaic power plant in Novaci in September 2023, several media outlets reported the statements of Prime Minister Dimitar Kovachevski and Economy Minister Kreshnik Bekteshi that 'the largest photovoltaic power plant in the Balkans has been put into operation' in Novaci and that 'the solar insolation in our country is the best compared to all countries in the world.'

I am convinced that this photovoltaic power plant will provide 20 to 25 percent more than the projected capacity of 85,000 megawatt hours, because the solar insolation in our country is the best compared to all countries in the world,' said Prime Minister Dimitar Kovachevski at the opening of the power plant.
(MTV 2, 29 September, 2023).

The facts presented by government representatives could be easily verified, and it turned out that FEC Novaci is not the largest solar power plant in the Balkans (there are much larger ones in Greece and Bulgaria[10]), nor is the solar insolation in the Republic of North Macedonia the best compared to all countries in the world.[11]

Politicians are careful when it comes to facts and do not often say inaccurate things that can be easily verified, as is the case with FEC Novaci. Statements with unverified findings are more numerous, but also findings that are difficult to verify and confirm, and serve to smear a political opponent and their policies.

When discussing disinformation and fake news, it is important to recognize the tendency of many political actors to use these terms as a defence against certain accusations or information. Rather than presenting arguments, they often resort to disqualifications like, 'That's not true, and that's fake news.'

An example is the rhetoric of the then minister and senior party official of SDSM, Bisera Kostadinovska-Stojchevska, who claims that VMRO-DPMNE is engaged in the production of fake polls and fake news. The page posted a black and white image of the VMRO-DPMNE party coat of arms with the inscription 'Headquarters for fake news and fake polls'.

According to her, VMRO-DPMNE has an entire operational system for distributing and publishing fake polls and fake news, which seriously endangers the electoral process. She calls on citizens not to believe anything that comes out of the 'White Palace'[12] because VMRO-DPMNE's propaganda reminds us of a dark past in which there is no European future and freedom for citizens.

The European Union has identified Hristijan Mickoski as a source of disinformation. Today it was confirmed that VMRO DPMNE has an entire operational system for distributing and publishing fake polls and fake news, which seriously threatens the election process.
(Facebook page of Bisera Kostadinovska-Stojchevska, 3 April, 2024, LINK)

[10] The largest is currently considered to be in Apriltsi, Bulgaria, with 834,000 solar panels installed with a capacity of 400 MW: https://balkangreenenergynews.com/biggest-solar-power-plant-in-balkans-takes-shape/#:~:text=Apriltsi%20is%20the%20biggest%20solar,Anatolia%2C%20in%20Turkey's%20Asia%20Minor.

[11] Source: www.balkangreenenergynews.com

[12] This refers to the headquarters of the VMRO-DPMNE party (our remarks)

The existence of a system that produces and distributes fake polls and fake news is a very serious accusation and regardless of the fact that SDSM presented documents, there was never an investigation by the Public Prosecutor's Office following a rumour, nor is it known in the public that SDSM submitted the documents as a case to the Prosecutor's Office. Consequently, such accusations remain only a tool for mutual political calculation and collecting political points. On the other hand, the claim that the European Union has pointed out the president of VMRO-DPMNE as a source of disinformation is a serious accusation for which no evidence has been offered (an EU report or a statement containing such a finding).

Unsubstantiated, inaccurate and half-accurate accusations, as well as the disqualification of political opponents, with the response that the accusations are fake news, contribute to the disappearance of dialogue in a society in which there is no debate with reasoned positions and viewpoints, but only blanket accusations and generalizations.

Likewise, blanket accusations and unsubstantiated claims that are difficult to verify are equally dangerous because they cast doubt on legitimate institutions, individuals, or processes without any concrete evidence to support them. For example, claims of conspiracies, financial fraud, or abuses by politicians and public figures are often based on speculation and are rarely supported by evidence.

Such blanket accusations have a strong effect because they tap into our emotions and cognitive biases. When a claim is difficult to verify or refute, people remain uncertain and often prefer to believe what best confirms their already formed opinions. This makes disinformation particularly powerful in political contexts, where opponents are portrayed as corrupt or illegitimate, and the public is left without a clear picture of the truth.

2. MALINFORMATION

Malinformation *is information that is true but is intended to inflict harm, an individual, an organization, or a country. It is personal or confidential information whose dissemination is intended to embarrass or humiliate someone, expose them to the public, or expose them to violence (for example, publicly revealing someone's address, place of work, or telephone number), and sometimes to cause fear or panic.*[13].

In contrast to misinformation, which is untrue but not intended to cause harm, and disinformation, which is untrue and intended to cause harm, malinformation involves the selective use of accurate and truthful information in order to cause harm to individuals or manipulate the public. This makes it particularly dangerous, as it misuses real data or events to serve malicious agendas.

In a political context, we often see the misuse of private information, as well as selective truths concerning the political opponents (for example, disclosing a past event without explaining the full context), with the intention of discrediting and defaming them.

[13] Institute of Communication Studies. (2023). Digital Dictionary of Media Literacy. Retrieved on 21 January, 2025, from https://recnik.medium.edu.mk/

The text posted in the online media outlet Tetova Sot, titled 'PHOTO/ Russian connection of Bilal Kasami and Besa', reveals private information about party members who studied in Russia. The fact that the mother of one of them is from Russia and was a member of the Russian Society in Republic of North Macedonia is linked to the party's ties with Russia and Russian propaganda in the country:

> ***According to information, Haris and Kaltrina studied in Russia. As if it were not enough that they studied in Russia, sources from the municipality report that Haris Sefuli's mother is also from Russia. A search on Facebook shows that Haris' mother is Tatjana Sefuli. (Tetova sot, 28 February, 2024, LINK).***

In this typical example of malinformation, the media outlet misuses the personal data of party members in a highly unprofessional and unethical manner and presents speculative relationships with the intent to harm individuals and the party.

Moreover, throughout the entire election campaign, the political party DUI accused the entire opposition of ties to Russia and Russian policies, saying that a possible victory of the opposition parties would distance the country from EU prospects and bring it closer to Russia. At the same time, the media's release of private information about party members aims to persuade citizens that such connections are real and deeply rooted (e.g., a parent of Russian origin, Russia as an education destination, etc.)

An example of malinformation is the publication of a photo of the then presidential candidate Gordana Siljanovska-Davkova, shortly after her promotion as a presidential candidate in early March 2024, together with Bulgarian MEP Andrej Kovachev. Kovachev is known in the Macedonian public for his non-recognition of the Macedonian people and for his negative statements about Republic of North Macedonia. This photo sparked public reactions, especially given that the SDSM's official statement on the party's website claimed, 'The photo of Siljanovska with Kovachev confirms the cooperation between the Macedonian and Bulgarian VMRO' and 'Siljanovska proudly stands next to Kovachev, who denies us as a people' (SDSM website, 7 March, 2024, LINK). It was later confirmed that the photo was genuine, but it was taken five years ago. In response, VMRO-DPMNE held a press conference on the matter.

Malinformation, such as the placement of this photo, is broadcast with the intention of manipulating the public or leading them to the wrong conclusion, and thus distorting the picture of what is reality and what is a lie. In both instances, the information is either fully or partially true (for example, the photo of Siljanovska-Davkova and Kovachev is genuine, but it was taken in a different time and context). This information is used to make broad claims about individuals, parties, or institutions, suggesting that they follow a particular (harmful) agenda or policy that works against the interests of the state and its citizens.

In democratic contexts, malinformation has the potential to undermine trust in elections, governance and the rule of law by distorting public perception and manipulating voters' opinions. It creates divisions and creates echo chambers in which prejudices and stereotypes (traitors, corrupt, dishonest...) are reinforced. This can, in turn, cause serious political and social polarization.

3. UNDERMINING TRUST IN INSTITUTIONS AND THE MEDIA (WITHOUT EVIDENCE)

Undermining trust in institutions *refers to actions or behaviours that erode public trust in government and societal structures. It contributes to creating a perception among the public that institutions are not working in their favour, leading to a decrease in trust.*[14]

The deliberate undermining of trust in institutions is one of the more serious harmful political narratives that lead to the weakening of the democratic order. Political actors and media that support such narratives, instead of reasoned criticism, most often spread unfounded accusations that institutions such as the judiciary, electoral bodies or the media are corrupt, biased or incompetent, thereby creating public distrust, raising doubts about the legitimacy of institutions that are tasked with protecting the public interest.

When the trust in institutions is shaken, citizens become more susceptible to manipulation and do not respect the decisions or recommendations of those institutions. This leads to a violation of the rule of law and reduces the ability of political leaders to be held accountable.

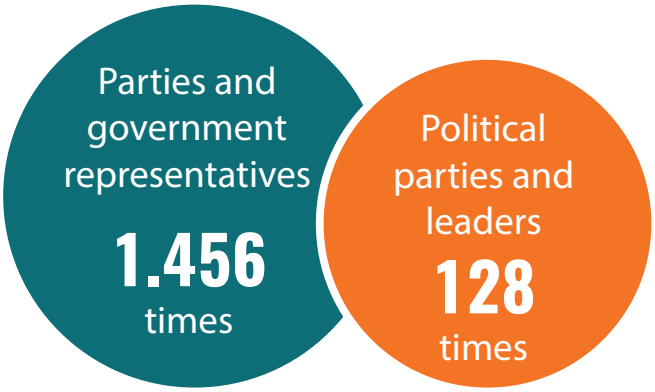
Also, when the media presents itself as an enemy or someone's tool, the public may lose faith in its credibility and objectivity. This in turn 'opens' the space for disinformation and propaganda, which further deepens polarization and makes public debate difficult.

On the other hand, this does not mean at all that the accountability, professionalism and transparency of institutions and the media should not be discussed or that they 'must not' be criticized. On the contrary, in democratic societies, institutions and the media should be subject to constructive criticism, as well as processes aimed at improving their functioning. However, criticism should be part of an argumentative debate, in which the weaknesses of the system will be analysed, criticized and pointed out and solutions will be offered. Broad accusations and sweeping generalizations like 'everyone is corrupt' or 'the entire judiciary serves the government' hinder meaningful solutions and deepen societal divisions.

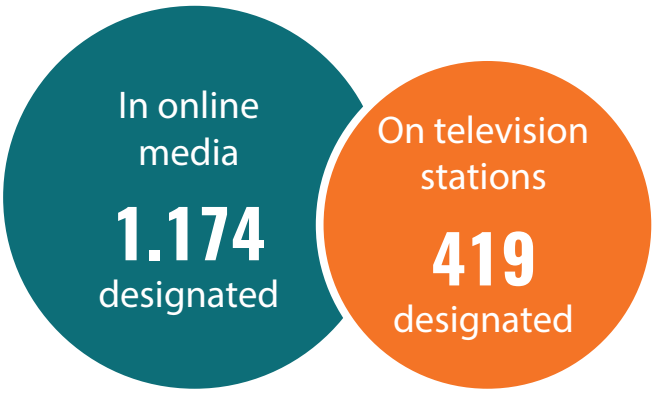
[14] OECD. (2017). Trust and public policy: How better governance can help rebuild public trust. OECD Publishing. https://www.oecd.org/content/dam/oecd/en/publications/reports/2017/03/trust-and-public-policy_g1g74ea6/9789264268920-en.pdf

The unsubstantiated undermining of trust in institutions and the media is the most common harmful narrative registered during the monitoring of harmful narratives before and during the election campaign for the 2024 presidential and parliamentary elections. The analysis showed that this narrative dominates the political communication of parties and government representatives (**1,456 times**), political leaders (**128 times**), as well as media reports (**419 reports** on TV stations and **1,174 reports** on online media).

Harmful narrative - damaging trust in institutions and the media in political communication



Harmful narrative - damaging trust in institutions and the media



Several media outlets broadcast a story in April with an identical headline: 'Kovachki to Loga: How does it feel to be an Ahmeti's pendant with 2% trust in the judiciary controlled by DUI?' The text, which is actually a completely copied Facebook post by the then VMRO-DPMNE MP, Dragan Kovachki, is an accusation directed at DUI for destroying the judiciary.

> ***If you were not the Minister of Justice, the public would hardly be aware of your existence. However, the impact of your incompetence is well known and ranks among the most alarming reports on the state of justice. You serve as Minister of Justice at a time when public trust in the judiciary is below 3%. […] This judiciary is controlled by DUI, ensuring that neither DUI nor their allies from SDS face any accountability.***
> ***(Kurir, 20 April, 2024, LINK).***

Although, according to all research and reports by international institutions, the independence of the judiciary is one of the most serious problems that the state must focus on[15], such blanket attacks and attribution of blame to one entity are not productive and do not lead to real change. The independence of the judiciary is a complex and systemic problem that requires fundamental reforms and political will.

Blaming a single person or political party and claiming they are solely responsible for the situation misrepresents the issue and shifts focus away from the real problem, distracting from essential reforms. Thus, the illusion of solving the problem is created, while systemic shortcomings remain unresolved. Judicial reforms require transparency, accountability and institutional improvements, not blanket political attacks or exclusive targeting of certain entities.

On the other hand, trust in institutions such as the judiciary, which Kovachki also speaks about, is also undermined by this type of unsubstantiated accusations and smearing. Spreading serious accusations without evidence or making broad claims that discredit the entire judicial system not only fails to address the issues but also further erodes public trust in these institutions. This creates a climate of distrust and cynicism, which can have far-reaching consequences for the stability of the rule of law and democratic processes. Ultimately, the overall societal climate and reckless political statements that weaken trust in institutions have led to only 25% of the population and 20% of companies

[15] The European Commission (EC) 2024 Rule of Law Report on the Republic of North Macedonia raises serious concerns about the independence of the judiciary and its capacity to protect itself from influence. The report notes that the perception of judicial independence remains very low despite ongoing reforms and a new strategy aimed at improving the independence, efficiency and professionalism of the judiciary.
According to the EC report, only 25% of the general population and 20% of companies consider the level of independence of courts and judges to be good or very good. The primary reason for the perceived lack of judicial independence is interference or pressure from the Government or politicians. https://commission.europa.eu/document/download/e7197a43-7f00-4eac-b02d-818ac71345f0_en?filename=61_1_58090_coun_chap_north-macedonia_nm.pdf.

(not 2%, as claimed by Kovachki and reported in the media) viewing the independence of courts and judges as good or very good.[16]

The undermining of trust in institutions also involves baseless attacks on political parties, which are an integral part of a democratic society. A significant portion of election campaigns has been focused on unfounded accusations against political opponents, making it unsurprising that many cases stem from this damaging narrative.

SDSM and DUI very often used rhetoric in their statements that linked the opposition (most often the VMRO-DPMNE and Levica parties) to connections with Russia and proximity to the Russian political agenda. Well, in one case of also unsubstantiated attacks on VMRO-DPMNE in which various accusations of corruption and crime are listed in one sentence, SDSM responds with an attack that VMRO-DPMNE is a party that continues to implement the Russian agenda: 'VMRO remains alone in the pro-Russian agenda, against the EU and without coalition partners.' (MTV 2, 19 January, 2024).

This example is singled out to demonstrate the way in which, in addition to trust in institutions, trust in political entities and the political system is constantly undermined throughout the campaign.

Baseless attacks and accusations fuel ongoing division and polarization, causing people to listen to each other less and ultimately stifling meaningful debate.

Listening to others is the foundation of democracy – it unites people in a community and enables communication. Today, we increasingly hear only our own voices, unable to hear the views and attitudes of others. In the post-truth era, statements are increasingly less based on facts, and truth is devalued.

4. BIASED SELECTION

Biased selection *is the deliberate selection of evidence or facts that support a particular point of view, while ignoring or distorting evidence that favours the opposing point of view*[17].

The harmful political narrative bias involves selectively choosing and presenting information to manipulate public opinion. In political discourse, instead of presenting all relevant aspects of an event or topic, bias selection involves using only certain facts or data that support a desired political agenda, while ignoring or suppressing other information.

This creates a distorted picture of reality, leaving the public with an incorrect or incomplete picture of the situation. For example, political actors or the media may highlight only the negative aspects of a particular policy or group, thereby reinforcing polarization and reducing the space for objective analysis and discussion. In this manner, biased selection prevents understanding of the complexity of issues and encourages the public to make decisions based on limited or incorrect information.

This narrative is harmful because it undermines critical thinking and reduces citizens' capacity for informed participation in democratic processes.

[16] European Commission (EC) Report on the Rule of Law in the Republic of North Macedonia in 2024, https://commission.europa.eu/document/download/e7197a43-7f00-4eac-b02d-818ac71345f0_en?filename=61_1_58090_coun_chap_northmacedonia_nm.pdf.

[17] Jaradat, I., Zhang, H., & Li, C. (2024). On Detecting Cherry-picking in News Coverage Using Large Language Models. arXiv. https://arxiv.org/abs/2401.05650

In the competition for votes, particularly to gain the support of one of the largest voter groups—pensioners—SDSM announced a pension increase of up to 3,000 denars.

> ***Pensioners receiving up to 14,000 denars per month will see an additional 3,000 in their accounts, while those in the two other income brackets, up to 19,000 denars, will receive a smaller increase. This financial aid will continue for the next five months. (TV Sitel, 28 November, 2024).***

VMRO-DPMNE, on the other hand, completely ignored this announcement and the party leader accused the government of not wanting to increase pensions for pensioners because it has turned into an elitist party. Ignoring the government measure and the statement of SDSM, Mickoski accused SDSM of not supporting their proposal to increase pensions. Although these are pre-election games and promises, such a statement still shows how biased selection of facts and opinions is being made.

> ***I really regret that SDSM and DUI decided to be against pensioners and immediately after my announcement that within a year after the VMRO-DPMNE Government is elected, pensions will be linearly increased by 5,000 denars, instead of supporting it, they decided to be against this decision and to be against pensioners. Nonetheless, I am not surprised that SDSM and DUI are political parties that have grown into political elite. (TV Kanal 5, 28 November, 2023).***

Unlike this example where political actors are seen to be biased in selecting facts and events, there have also been cases where journalists and media outlets, intentionally or unintentionally, focus on only one aspect of an event, completely ignoring important segments that are necessary for the public to get the whole picture.

Such is the text broadcast in the online media Nova TV, from an event dedicated to EU integration held in Skopje in October. Although one of the main speakers at the event was Dutch Ambassador Dirk Jan Kopp, his 'sharp' statement criticizing the lack of reforms is not included in this news item at all, but the statements of government representatives that provide answers to the ambassador's dilemmas are included.

> ***Grkovska emphasizes that Dutch Ambassador Dirk Jan Kopp, who is among the participants in the conference, is often known to be critical, especially regarding judicial reforms, and indicated that his criticisms are well-founded.***
> ***(Nova TV, 19 October, 2023, LINK).***

The government representative's response is crucial for context, yet the main statement it addresses is omitted. This practice of disregarding and excluding key statements and details—essential for helping viewers or readers fully understand the situation and form a complete picture of events—directly contradicts professional journalistic standards.

A similar example of the journalist/media's selectivity is the text broadcast in the online media outlet Republika under the title:

> ***Kovachevski is quaffing alcohol and is revelling 'laughing' in Belgrade with public money, until the people are sinking into poverty***
> ***(Republika, 28 November, 2024, LINK).***

In the photos, then-Prime Minister Dimitar Kovachevski is standing with a glass of wine in his hand, and the journalist accuses him of drinking and partying while the economy is collapsing. What this text does not include is the most important information, that Kovachevski was a guest at the International Wine, Food and Tourism Fair in Belgrade and that the photo with a glass of wine is part of the ambiance of such an event.

Such selectivity in the choice of information and the way of framing events does not offer the reader a complete picture and additionally contributes to polarization, divisions along political and ethnic lines. When the media or political actors deliberately emphasize only certain aspects of the story, they distort reality and reduce it to partial or incomplete narratives. Instead of professionally informing, they 'reinforce' existing divisions and conflicting positions between different groups.

The growing division within societies is driving increased polarization, where affiliation with a particular political group, ideology, or belief becomes a defining aspect of one's identity. These emerging 'modern tribes,' regardless of whether they lean left or right, leave little room for dissent or the rejection of certain views or perspectives.[18] Discourse is replaced by faith, by sacredness, and truth becomes secondary. By accepting the claims of our own tribe, regardless of whether they are based on arguments or not, we identify ourselves and build belonging to the group. We consider everyone outside our tribe to be enemies, and thus we automatically reject all attitudes, opinions, and arguments of the opposing camp as wrong and harmful. Herewith, we lose the dimension of otherness, of difference, we do not respect anything that is or thinks differently from us, we distance ourselves from everything that represents democratic values.

One aspect of social division is **biased selectivity,** in which only one's own story is presented as the only possible and only correct one. Anything that deviates from such a narrative is considered wrong, regardless of the arguments offered. Democracy is a community of listeners, people who listen to each other, regardless of whether they agree or not. In excluding other opinions from the discourse, we remain in our echo chambers, hearing only our own voice.

5. ТЕОРИИ НА ЗАГОВОР

Conspiracy theories *are beliefs that behind all phenomena in the world, foreseen and unforeseen, social events or natural disasters, there is a group or groups of extremely powerful and wealthy people who cause and control such phenomena*[19].

Conspiracy theories are highly harmful political narratives that, above all, undermine trust in science, but also in institutions, the media, and democracy itself. Political actors who use conspiracy theories as part of their rhetoric often exploit these narratives to manipulate the public and distract attention from real problems. These 'conspiracy' theories create 'internal' and 'external' enemies, accusing groups or individuals of secret plans that harm 'ordinary' people. This tactic serves to divide society and mobilize support through fear and distrust of others.

Also, the creation and dissemination of conspiracy theories helps political actors avoid responsibility for their actions and policies, as well as the lack of real solutions to problems. By pointing to 'hidden elites' or 'unseen enemies,' they divert attention away from their own mistakes or contentious choices.

Their harm and widespread influence became evident during the COVID-19 pandemic when various groups spread numerous conspiracy theories. These theories fuelled distrust in disease management strategies, scepticism about the virus's existence, and, most significantly, a rejection of science, healthcare, and medical professionals.

Such narratives were designed and targeted at those groups of citizens who were previously inclined to believe in conspiracy theories, such as the insertion of chips into human bodies, the deliberate release of chemical agents from airplanes, or that the Earth is flat.

[18] Han, B.-C. (2022). Infocracy. Polity.

[19] Institute of Communication Studies. (2023). Digital Dictionary of Media Literacy. Retrieved on 21 January, 2025, from https://recnik.medium.edu.mk/

The statement of the President of DUI, Ali Ahmeti, given in September 2023, is an interesting example of how a certain conspiracy theory is developed (a meaningful conspiracy against him and the party), and on the other hand, in the same sentence he accuses his political opponent of being the victim of another conspiracy theory (the Albanians will take the country from the Macedonians).

> ***This is a well-conceived campaign against me personally and against the Democratic Union for Integration. I can even say that it is a Nazi campaign because they believe that DUI and the Albanians will take over their state and economy.***
> ***(TV 21, 17 September, 2023).***

In order to support the conspiracy against him, his party, and the Albanian community, Ahmeti shares private conversations with former ministers (without revealing their names) who believed that if there had not been open discrimination against Albanians by the system, there would have been no war in 2001. Such a simplified explanation of complex historical and political events, combined with unofficial and unverifiable claims, is a classic element of conspiracy theories. Not only does it not offer a complete and objective picture, but it also reinforces prejudice and distrust in the system and society, and in this case affects trust between different ethnic communities and increases polarization along ethnic lines.

Conspiracy theories like this often depend on secret sources and unverifiable private conversations, making them effective tools for public manipulation. They bypass complex political and social contexts, instead providing simplistic explanations that blame specific individuals or groups. Through such narratives, political actors effectively shift focus away from systemic issues, transforming them into personal or ethnic conflicts and deepening public polarization.

The Levica is promoting an intriguing conspiracy theory about a secret alliance between major political rivals—SDSM, VMRO-DPMNE, and DUI—allegedly working together to serve external, likely foreign, interests. This narrative, in various forms, has been a consistent theme for the Levica, particularly during the election campaign. According to the Levica, NATO membership is to the detriment of RN Macdonia, and to the benefit of the imperialist policies of the West. Furthermore, the Levica's attacks are not limited to the ruling parties but also target the largest opposition party, VMRO-DPMNE, which they accuse of being complicit in these policies. They argue that

VMRO-DPMNE's silence on the submissive foreign and security policies of SDSM and DUI only serves to support and encourage their continuation by the government. Whose interests, then, are the political elite truly serving? (Nezavisen, 24 November, 2024, LINK).

A similarly specific narrative was promoted by DUI throughout the campaign, portraying the opposition as an extension of Russian policies in Republic of North Macedonia. While research in recent years has confirmed Russian influence in various aspects of society, DUI's pre-election narrative can still be viewed as a conspiracy theory. DUI saw Russian elements and the promotion of Russian policies in every statement and action of the opposition (including VMRO-DPMNE, Levica and the Albanian united opposition). For example, the DUI statement from April 2024 highlights their concerns that VMRO-DPMNE is distancing itself from Republic of North Macedonia's international partners while advocating Russian and Serbian policies. They also urge the Albanian opposition not to support pro-Russian policies.

The Democratic Union for Integration expresses deep concern about the policy of division and isolation of VMRO and Mickoski, while openly proclaiming Russian and Serbian policies towards the Republic of Kosovo and Albanians in general. We also call on the Albanian opposition to support the policies and positions of our international partners and not to promote pro-Russian policies that seek to destabilize North Macedonia and the region as a whole. (Sloboden Pechat, 16 April, 2024, LINK)

Conspiracy theories are especially prevalent in times of crisis, and the world is in a global political and economic crisis, and, as theorist Chul-Han says, in a serious narrative crisis. Digitalization has replaced narrative with information, and this has contributed to us being well-informed, but also disoriented.[20] Information alone, without context, is insufficient for truly understanding and grasping the essence of things. In such confusion, conspiracy theories become the quickest and easiest way to 'make sense' of events.

[20] Han, Byung-Chul. Infocracy. Cambridge: Polity, 2022.

What makes conspiracy theories unique is their role in shaping our identities. By uncritically accepting a conspiracy theory, we align ourselves with a group or community that shares our beliefs and attitudes, reinforcing our sense of belonging. In this context, they serve as a powerful tool for validating stereotypes and prejudices about other groups and communities.

What is specific about conspiracy theories is that fiction is transformed into a strange, twisted reality. Their success is therefore also linked to their resistance to fact-checking attempts, because conspiracy theories are narratives that, despite their fictional character, provide a basic framework through which their adherents perceive reality. Their all-encompassing explanations—or universal falsehoods—eliminate stressful uncertainty and doubt, offering a simple answer to life's complexities.

6. CHARACTER ATTACKS AND/OR DEMONIZATION OF OPPONENTS

Character attack *(Latin: ad hominem) is a criticism of the character, habits, or appearance of an opponent, rather than of their ideas, claims, or the facts their presents.*[21]

Demonization *is the humiliation, smearing, or demonization of a person or group, most often through an attack on the personal characteristics of a person or the leader of the group*[22].

Character attacks and demonization of opponents are a harmful narrative that undermines 'healthy' public discourse. This type of narrative is not aimed at rational debate or constructive criticism, but rather at personalizing issues by attacking individuals rather than their positions and viewpoints. Character attacks, also known as ad hominem attacks, are often used to discredit an opponent without delving into the substance of the arguments they present. This tactic not only creates a toxic environment for debate but also hinders efforts to find solutions to real problems.

The main purpose of ad hominem attacks is to diminish the value of the opponent and their arguments in the eyes of the public. This often leads to a distraction from the real issues and a focus on character attacks, which degrades the quality of the discussion. This is detrimental to constructive dialogue because instead of an exchange of ideas and facts, the debate is reduced to mutual attacks that exclude the possibility of a rational exchange of opinions. In other words, ad hominem attacks blur the boundaries between facts and emotions and drastically reduce the quality of the debate.

When the opponents are demonized, they are portrayed as dangerous and harmful, which is another way that society is polarized and divided into 'us, the good guys' and 'them, the bad guys.' This type of rhetoric is particularly harmful in political and media contexts, as it fuels public fear and distrust of those who hold different views or beliefs. Instead of building dialogue or understanding, demonization creates deep divisions and prevents cooperation and constructive dialogue.

[21] Institute of Communication Studies. (2023). Digital Dictionary of Media Literacy. Retrieved on 21 January, 2025, from https://recnik.medium.edu.mk/

[22] Institute of Communication Studies. (2023). Digital Dictionary of Media Literacy. Retrieved on 21 January, 2025, from https://recnik.medium.edu.mk/

Political debate, especially in the period before elections, is expected to be sharp and combative. However, even in such conditions, public office holders and candidates for public office are expected to communicate in a decent and civilized manner, based on evidence, without insults, attacks and demonization of political opponents, in accordance with democratic practices of ethics and professionalism. However, an analysis of media coverage, official websites, and the social media profiles of political parties and their leaders revealed the opposite. Attacks, insults, and demonization were among the most prevalent harmful narratives, alongside efforts to undermine trust and selectively present information.

The political party Levica and its leader Dimitar Apasiev broadcast content with a large number of insults towards political opponents[23] on their official website and Facebook profiles. They called their opponents on the political scene 'servants', 'criminals', 'anti-people' and 'quislings' authorities, 'UCHKs', 'terrorists', 'ballists' and 'bandits'.

In a post on his Facebook page, party leader Dimitar Apasiev shares news about the President of Guyana, Mohamed Irfan Ali, namely his interview in which he criticizes the West and Western policies. Apasiev, welcoming such views in the Facebook post, writes:

> ***This is the kind of PRESIDENT I want! Not the scumbag Pendarovski (post on Apasiev's Facebook page, 31 March, 2024, LINK).***

In addition to Pendarovski, the leader of the Levica also insulted the then-Prime Minister of the Caretaker government, Talat Djaferi:

> ***Did the Prime Minister-TERRORIST of Severdjanistan condemn the terrorist attacks in Moscow and why not? #Kolyegi (Colleagues) (post on Apasiev's Facebook page, 23 March, 2024, LINK).***

[23] The Levica Party had a total of 53 posts on their website and Facebook profile during the researched period, containing insults and demonization of the political opponent, while the party leader, Dimitar Apasiev, had a total of 45 posts.

Referring to the two highest state positions in such an insulting manner is not just a sign of disrespect but also a direct attack on democratic principles. In a democracy, criticism of political leaders is both expected and necessary, but when it devolves into personal insults, it undermines meaningful debate and shifts focus away from important political issues. Instead of focusing on political or professional aspects, such attacks degrade the discussion and create a culture of intolerance, where political opponents are not seen as part of a pluralistic system, but as enemies to be attacked, insulted and discredited.

Insults against public officials do not strengthen democracy, but rather weaken it, as they divert attention from genuine political arguments and challenges to shallow character attacks. This encourages public discourse to become toxic and discourages constructive dialogue, which is crucial to maintaining a democratic system.

The Levica called SDSM 'SDS', 'SDS of Our Country', as well as 'quislings', 'transitional kleptomaniacs'. For the Levica, the then Deputy Prime Minister Bojan Marichikj was a 'fat-head', and Vredi, just like DUI, were labelled as 'neo-ballists'. Regadring VMRO-DPMNE, the Levica used expressions such as 'false patriots', 'neo-leaders from DPMNE', 'unsuccessful vmroids', 'vmroid nits', 'vmroids', and the party leader Hristijan Mickoski was called 'duke' and 'Micika'.

Insults, name-calling, and inappropriate nicknames were not just the decor of the Levica's political narrative. Similar insults were noticeable from a large number of political actors and parties, although not as vulgar and radical as those from the Levica.

In a Facebook post, Izet Medjiti, the leader of the Democratic Movement, called then-Deputy Prime Minister Artan Grubi - 'Artan the casino man' and insulted him, concluding that nothing can be expected from people who treat childhood complexes in politics and console themselves with the fact that no one loves them, no matter how hard they try (post on Izet Medjiti's Facebook page, 10 March, 2024, LINK).

The insult 'casino man' does not refer to Grubi's alleged gambling habits but rather to the Draft Law on Games of Chance at the time, for which the DUI party was the strongest advocate for amendments.[24] According to the Albanian opposition coalition Vredi, DUI's insistence on changing the law is related to their business interests, hence the offensive nickname for Grubi.

DUI, on the other hand, called the Albanian opposition 'a chicken that has put on eagle's wings,' alluding to their insufficient patriotism and lack of potential to defend Albanian interests.

Grubi called the representatives of the Albanian opposition 'vassals of Mickoski', SDSM said of VMRO-DPMNE that they were a 'regime' and would put the country in 'darkness', and for the opposition VMRO-DPMNE the focus was on the then Prime Minister Dimitar Kovachevski, whom they called an 'incompetent' and 'dishonest' politician. The President of the country, Pendarovski, was a 'puppet' for the opposition, Arben Taravari from the Alliance for the Albanians 'lost his mind', Ali Ahmeti 'lost his compasses or was called 'commander snail'.

[24] The law was passed in a shortened procedure, with a European flag. The Assembly then, with 55 votes 'in favour', adopted the amendments that stipulated that betting shops and casinos should be at least 500 meters away from primary and secondary schools. However, the law was not signed by President Stevo Pendarovski, with the explanation that the European flag had been misused, so during the re-vote, the amendments to the law did not receive enough votes.

The use of such terms by political actors in public discourse encourages the normalization of the use of offensive vocabulary on the public stage and in public communication. When offensive language goes unchallenged and unrestricted, it can eventually become part of everyday vocabulary, facilitating the spread of harmful narratives and degrading the standards of public discourse. Politicians often use such language, believing it resonates with the electorate and gains approval, while the media sees it as a chance for greater viewership/readability. However, the media especially news programs should not serve as a platform for this kind of inappropriate speech, which offers nothing but empty spectacle and cheap populism.

7. UNFOUNDED ACCUSATIONS OF FOREIGN INFLUENCE

Foreign influence *refers to efforts by foreign governments, organizations, or individuals to influence or have an effect on the policies, decisions, or activities of other countries to pursue their own interests* [25].

Unfounded accusations of foreign influence *are claims or accusations of involvement or influence by foreign actors that are not supported by credible evidence. These accusations are often used to discredit certain individuals, organizations, or ideas, creating suspicion and distrust among the public.*

Accusations of foreign influence, as a harmful narrative, are frequently employed by political actors and the media to instil fear and suspicion among citizens, particularly in times of political, economic, or social tension. This narrative shifts blame for internal issues onto external forces, implying that a foreign state, organization, or group is manipulating events, policies, or public opinion. While foreign influence is a reality in international politics, this rhetoric is often used to discredit domestic actors and political opponents while deflecting responsibility for one's own shortcomings.

This narrative is harmful because it fuels nationalism and xenophobia, fostering fear of foreigners and distrust of international partners. It creates a polarized environment where any disagreement or criticism can be interpreted as the result of foreign influence, rather than as part of a legitimate democratic debate. Thus, such accusations often serve to silence critics or manipulate the public. The narrative of foreign influence also has the potential to discredit political actors and institutions internationally and to threaten the country's international reputation.

The most harmful aspect of this narrative is that it diverts attention from the real issues in society, for which no genuine solutions are pursued. Instead of addressing structural weaknesses or policy failures, leaders often shift blame to foreign influences as a means of evading responsibility and maintaining their power and positions.

Of particular concern is the trend in some European countries, where laws against 'foreign agents' are being proposed, which is a restriction on civil space. These measures, presented as protecting national sovereignty, can very easily be misused to label and discredit organizations, media outlets and activists who promote transparency, human rights and democratic values.

[25] University of South Florida. (n.d). What is foreign influence? Compliance & Ethics. Retrieved on 20 January, 2025, from https://www.usf.edu/compliance-ethics/foreign-influence/resources/what-is-fi.aspx

In analysing harmful political narratives, two opposing accusations of foreign influence emerged. On one side, the ruling parties, SDSM and DUI, accused the opposition of promoting Russian influence and advancing a pro-Russian agenda in Republic of North Macedonia. On the other side, the opposition party Levica accused the government of blindly following the United States and other 'imperialist powers.' Both narratives sought to convince citizens that powerful foreign influences were shaping the country, with the support of domestic political actors.

During the promotion of Professor Biljana Vankovska as the presidential candidate of the Levica, the party's statement said that Levica is throwing down the gauntlet in the face of bourgeois parties and entering the fight in the presidential elections! This statement uses words such as foreign chauvinism, imperialist policies, and the president must not become 'a puppet of foreign embassies and a vassal of foreign state interests.'

> ***...in an era when the Macedonian people and state are under strong attack from foreign chauvinism and imperialist policies, we are facing the challenge in which the Macedonian people must emerge as a WINNER, and that we should not allow a president who will be a puppet of foreign embassies and a vassal of foreign state interests.***
> ***(Official website of Levica, 7 February, 2024, LINK).***

Obviously, the Levica is trying to portray itself as a party that will represent exclusively Macedonian interests, but it does so through narratives that accuse all other political parties of pursuing foreign interests.

In the period leading up to the elections, DUI frequently employed the harmful narrative of foreign influence against the opposition, specifically targeting VMRO-DPMNE and Vredi. They not only accused these parties of facilitating Russian influence in the country but also of having close ties to Russia and aligning with its policies. DUI's campaign was built on the slogan 'YES to the EU – NO to Russia,' framing the election as a choice between moving toward the EU or falling under Russian influence, with DUI positioning itself as the guarantor of the country's European path:

We demand that VMRO-DPMNE declares itself against Russia, for Europe, and distance itself from the poetic pro-Putinist views of their once-defeated Russo-nostalgic candidate Davkova... 'Russian influence that has engulfed our economy, critical infrastructure, political parties, media, religious communities, civil society and aims to destabilize our society. Fragile multi-ethnic, multi-religious and multicultural to promote a domino effect throughout the region.
(Official website of DUI, 24 February, 2024, LINK).

A similar narrative has been used by SDSM, accusing the opposition of anti-EU sentiment and ties to Russia and Russian policies. However, the way SDSM does this is more subtle and indirect, usually accusing the opposition of distancing the country from the West and the European Union.

DPMNE has not supported a single decision on the country's Euro-Atlantic integration. Quite the opposite, it did everything to block the country's European future. Under the hostage-taking of the pro-Russian Levica, it organized protests against the European proposal, hysterically spread lies about Bulgarianization and assimilation... For 11 years, DPMNE kept the country in isolation, outside the EU and NATO, and today it is the main obstacle to European integration.
(Video post on the SDSM Facebook page from a press conference by Darko Kaevski - spokesperson and MP from SDSM, 2 October, 2023, LINK).

VMRO-DPMNE, in turn, leveraged the dispute with Bulgaria not only to highlight foreign influence but also to emphasize SDSM's ties to certain political figures from the country.

A post on the party's Facebook page featured manipulative, edited audiovisual content from interviews with Pendarovski and Kovachev, alleging that Pendarovski disgracefully attributed Bulgarian ethnic origins to Goce Delchev—claiming 'he behaved as if he were a member of the historical commission, but from the Bulgarian side.' (Facebook, 10 March, 2024, LINK)

Foreign influence in Macedonian society is a sensitive topic, and political actors should be very careful how they use it. Politicians who lead or claim to lead the country, and who point to foreign influence in the country, need to provide evidence of specific undemocratic mechanisms through which influence is exerted and where the danger lies in order for citizens to be clear about how their vote for a particular political option is connected to the choice between the EU and Russia.

Thereto, it is essential to differentiate between general influence on states, societies, or cultures and what constitutes **malignant or harmful foreign influence**. Harmful foreign influence involves **undemocratic means** used by certain foreign states to exert control over specific spheres within other societies. These methods may include supporting political actors who align ideologically with certain foreign leaders, helping them gain power to establish strategic partnerships that serve broader political objectives.

8. FOMENTING DIVISIONS

Polarization *is the act of dividing something, especially something containing different people or opinions, into two completely opposing groups*[26].

Divisiveness is considered one of the most dangerous and harmful political narratives in contemporary societies, as it actively promotes the dehomogenization and polarization of different groups in society, whether they are ethnic, religious, political, social or economic communities. This narrative creates an 'us versus them' mentality, where clear and firm boundaries are formed between different groups, presenting them as irreconcilable opponents. This undermines people's ability to engage in constructive dialogue and cooperation, resulting in deep societal fragmentation and hostility.

Divisions are often fuelled by political actors or the media who have an interest in strengthening their own authority by creating artificial conflicts. Instead of promoting unity and problem-solving, these actors use the strategy of division to mobilize people against a common 'enemy.' This narrative makes the political scene unstable, because instead of discussing policies or ideas, identities and loyalties are discussed. Such a political environment is fertile ground for manipulation and disinformation.

The harm of fomenting divisions can be observed on many levels. At the individual level, this rhetoric reinforces stereotypes and prejudices, making people less open to diversity. At the societal level, divisions undermine social cohesion and the trust between citizens that is essential for stable and prosperous communities. Research shows that societies with high levels of social polarization are less effective in dealing with crises, as distrust between different groups makes joint problem-solving efforts more difficult.[27].

The previously mentioned division into tribes is a direct result of this type of narrative, fostering a strong attachment to and identification with one's own group, political affiliation, religion, or worldview. In such an environment, meaningful dialogue that considers different perspectives becomes nearly impossible. Blindly accepting everything that aligns with one's group is not just a matter of opinion but an identity issue—a way of shaping one's sense of self through collective belonging.

[26] Cambridge University Press. (n.d.). Polarization. In Cambridge Dictionary. Retrieved on 20 January, 2025 from https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/polarization#google_vignette

[27] Levin, SA, Milner, HV, & Perrings, C. (2021). The dynamics of political polarization. Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences, 118(50), e2116950118. https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.2116950118

The LDP party's profile has broadcast an interview with Monika Zajkova for the domestic online media outlet Frontline, which notes unverified findings and formulations that smear a certain group of people in order to cause divisions and discord between us/ ours and you/ yours, and populist formulations that promote one's own ideology.

For example, in the quote:

> ***When you see that we are blocking ourselves from within, somehow these are differentiated, as you call them the European front or the front that is against Europe,***

a claim is made that is difficult to verify or prove, and with 'these are differentiated' and 'front against Europe' a polarizing narrative is developed that promotes the division of political fronts, the division of this and that, pro- and anti-EU, i.e. the ones good and the bad ones.

What is more, Zajkova states in the interview:

> ***I do not believe they are against Europe either, so I do not understand the reasons and motives behind obstructing the entire process. Winning daily political points at the expense of state interests is a very bad game.' Once again, unverified claims are presented, and the 'other side' is baselessly accused of undermining state interests for personal gain, while their political actions are labelled as a 'bad game.'***
> ***(LDP Facebook profile, 6 October, 2023, LINK).***

Such examples were frequent, especially among the opposition, which tried to present the government as part of the elite, uninterested in the real problems of the people.

One such example is the TV Alfa news item, which broadcasts the statement of the president of VMRO-DPMNE, Hristijan Mickoski, in which he smears the government and portrays the political opponent as an elite party that represents the interests of only a narrow group of the most influential citizens.

> ***SDSM and DUI are political parties that have grown into a political elite and only serve the interests of a few who are part of that political elite, or to be more precise, only the top of that political elite. (TV Alfa, 28 November, 2023).***

On top of, the harmful narrative is reinforced in the preview of the news item, where the main words that are part of this narrative are repeated and emphasized: 'The leader Hristijan Mickoski accused the two ruling parties of being against a higher standard for pensioners because only a few of their political elite are important to them.' (TV Alfa, 28 November, 2023)

This conclusion that emerges suggests that the opposition, by using terms like 'elite' and 'the top,' deliberately constructs a narrative that depicts the government as disconnected from the real problems of citizens. This strategy, evident in the TV Alfa report and Mickoski's statements, seeks to strengthen the perception that the ruling parties prioritize the interests of a small, privileged group rather than those of the broader population. The repeated use of such language in the media further amplifies this negative narrative, deepens divisions between political actors, and fosters public distrust.

Another example in which we can see how a political opponent is vilified, thereby inciting divisions, is the statement by SDSM, which accuses the opposition that the country is stagnating in EU integration precisely because of them, and this is confirmed by the European Commission report:

> ***The European Commission report confirmed the facts; DPMNE, Mickoski and Levica are the obstacles on progress towards the EU. The key problem with the European Commission report and the remarks in it is that the Parliament is blocked by the opposition. (MTV 1, 8 November, 2023).***

This type of statement, where political actors blame each other for various problems in society, without providing arguments in order to find real solutions, results in serious divisions and increasing polarization along political lines and ideologies.

The harmful narrative of fomenting divisions undermines democracy. When divisions are fostered, democratic institutions and the media are pressured to favour one part of society over another. Politicians who use such narratives can exploit this division to gain support and power, but in the long run, this leads to the erosion of democracy, because society is turning into an arena of conflict instead of a platform for cooperation and compromise.

9. SEXISM

Sexism *is a set of prejudices and discrimination against people based on sex or gender*[28].

Sexism can be an act, gesture or behaviour through which a person is considered to be in a subordinate position because of their sex or gender and is associated with harmful gender stereotypes. It can manifest itself publicly or privately and is intended to violate the dignity of individuals or to create a hostile, intimidating or offensive environment in which individuals will not have the opportunity to realize fully their potential or enjoy their human rights. It is observed in the form of insults, labelling, belittling of certain people, prejudice and discriminatory behaviour towards a person or group solely because of a different gender identity. Sometimes it can also be expressed through humour, idioms, proverbs from folklore that are sexist and are most often directed at women, illustrating a situation with inappropriate examples that are sexist or expressing it in words or tone that are derogatory for people belonging to the group who are the subject of sexism[29]. Likewise, with the emergence of social networks, cases of misuse of private photos available on profiles have emerged, and in recent years this has become increasingly common. Such misuse can not only cause great harm to the individuals concerned, but also constitutes a violation of the Law on the Protection of Personal Data.

The harmfulness of sexism as a narrative in the public discourse, especially in public communication by political actors who are policymakers and decision-makers, lies in its contribution to the spread of offensive and degrading language toward individuals and members of specific groups.

The research notes a very rare use of sexist discourse in the monitored period. One post by the leader of the political party Levica, Dimitar Apasiev, on his Facebook profile stands out, which is a comment by Apasiev on various topics in society. The Facebook profile was the main medium through which the leader of Levica usually communicated his political views to the public. They were often without the expected political correctness for a leader of a political party, in clear and simple language, understandable to the general public, written in a harsh tone or with insults, labelling and discriminatory discourse towards the political opponents.

[28] Institute of Communication Studies. (2023). Digital Dictionary of Media Literacy. Retrieved on 21 January, 2025, from https://recnik.medium.edu.mk/

[29] Council of Europe. (n.d.). Elements for a Council of Europe definition of sexism. Retrieved on 21 January 2025 from https://rm.coe.int/16806fbc0d

The text in the post (Facebook profile of Dimitar Apasiev, 18 December, 2023 LINK) is as follows:

'In the clutches of the governor' (colorized)😍',

And the hashtags used are #VassalMentality and #GospozhaMinisterka (#f).

The post with sexist elements is a short message accompanied by a photo of US Ambassador Angela Ageler and then-Minister of Culture Bisera Kostadinovska-Stojchevska, in which they are cordial towards each other.

The hashtag #GospozhaMinisterka (#MadamMinister) can be considered a sexist discourse given that the pejorative term 'gospozha (madam)' is used instead of 'Ms', and the phrase 'gospozha ministerka' in the Macedonian language is used to insult women, especially women who hold positions in the public sphere.

The post also contains an offensive term such as 'governor' about the US ambassador to the country, i.e. a person who heads a governorate.[30], thereby equating the Republic of North Macedonia with a territory that does not have its own independence as a state.

Politicians and public officials, including members of Parliament and the executive branch, who are entrusted by citizens to serve in public office on their behalf, should engage in political discourse that is free from discrimination and gender-based offensiveness. If politicians frequently use sexist language and it goes unchallenged by political actors or the media, the public remains unaware and unsensitized to what sexism is and its harmful effects. As a result, sexist discourse in the public sphere risks becoming widespread and normalized. Decision-makers and policymakers are expected to foster an inclusive society where all citizens are equal, actively work to eliminate gender-based violence, prejudice, stereotypes, and discrimination, and create an environment in which women can fully and equally exercise their rights and participate in private, public, and political life.

10. XENOPHOBIA (FEAR OF FOREIGNERS/OUTLANDERS)

Xenophobia *are the attitudes, prejudices and behaviours that reject, exclude and often smear people, and are based on the perception that they are outlanders or foreigners in a particular community, society or national identity*[31].

Xenophobia, derived from the Greek words *xenos* meaning 'foreigner' and *phobos* meaning 'fear,' literally translates to 'fear of the foreigner.' In public discourse, xenophobia often manifests as rhetoric that suggests foreign cultures are harmful and do not positively influence domestic society. It also promotes the idea that the presence of foreigners, or outlanders, can result in negative consequences for society.

[30] Governor - the head of a province, an administrative area, during the time of Tsarist Russia. Administrative units - provinces still exist in Russia.

[31] European Migration Network. (n.d). Glossary. European Commission. Retrieved on 21 January 2025, from https://home-affairs.ec.europa.eu/networks/european-migration-network-emn/emn-asylum-and-migration-glossary/glossary/xenophobia_en

Xenophobic narratives are fertile ground for propagation, especially when ethnocentric or nationalist narratives are also prevalent in public discourse. In such a context, the speech of intolerance or inflammatory speech in public can be nurtured, thereby enabling radical individuals or groups who show resistance to the foreign, to immigrants, to closer relations with certain states or peoples to gain greater visibility. The spread of xenophobic discourse, i.e. negative discourse about foreign cultures and foreign nationals, can encourage intolerance, inflammatory speech and even hate speech, which can lead to polarization in society or, in extreme cases, to hate crimes. The Council of Europe in Recommendation No. R (97) 20[32] states that 'hate speech' encompasses all forms of expression that spread, incite, promote or justify racial hatred, xenophobia, anti-Semitism or other forms of hatred based on intolerance, including: intolerance expressed through aggressive nationalism and ethnocentrism, discrimination and hostility against minorities, migrants and people of immigrant origin.

UNHCR's guidelines on addressing xenophobia and racism cite the proposed definition by the UN Special Rapporteur on contemporary forms of racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and related intolerance that 'xenophobia is behaviour that is specifically based on the perception that others are foreign or come from outside the community or nation.'[33] Xenophobia is also seen when individuals are denied equal rights based on their real or perceived geographic origin, or the values, beliefs, and/or practices associated with them, thereby labelling them as foreigners or outlanders.

The research did not identify any xenophobic statements from the political actors or media coverage that were monitored.

11. ETHNOCENTRISM

Ethnocentrism *is a worldview that considers one's own culture as the standard by which people from other cultures are judged. It manifests as a preference for one's own ethnic group.*[34]

Ethnocentric discourse emerges when seemingly well-argued statements are made to assert that one community is superior in some aspect, while another is placed in a subordinate position and this is often justified using genetics, development, cultural traits, or ways of life. The principle of *pars pro toto*[35] is commonly used, where a singular negative example within a specific group is used to label the entire community as criminal, inferior, or underdeveloped.

[32] Council of Europe. (1997). Recommendation CM/Rec(97)20 of the Committee of Ministers to member states on combating hate speech. Retrieved on 21 January, 2025

[33] United Nations Special Rapporteur on Contemporary Forms of Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance. (2016). Report to the UN Human Rights Council on xenophobia (A/HRC/32/50, 13 May 2016). Retrieved on 21 January, 2025, from https://undocs.org/A/HRC/32/50

[34] Institute of Communication Studies. (2023). Digital Dictionary of Media Literacy. Retrieved on 21 January, 2025, from https://recnik.medium.edu.mk/

[35] Lat. pars pro toto means 'part for the whole' or that a part of something is used to represent the whole. This figure of speech is the opposite of totum pro parte, where the whole is used to represent a part of it.

In the Macedonian society, the ethnocentric discourse is most commonly present in the statements made by the political actors regarding the relations between the two largest ethnic communities, the Macedonian and the Albanian community. The monitoring of the research has shown that during the pre-election period, especially during the dual campaign for the presidential and the parliamentary elections, there was an increased emotional charge in the public political communication, where ethnocentric views were expressed by the political actors, echoed in the media reporting, thereby creating an environment that fosters hate speech and inflammatory rhetoric.

The ethnocentric discourse is mostly found in the statements and the public appearances of high-ranking representatives of the political parties who have dedicated themselves significantly to the identity politics in their agendas.

An example of an ethnocentric statement is the solemn academy held on the occasion of 28 November, Flag Day, a national holiday in Albania that is also celebrated by the Albanians in the Republic of North Macedonia. Deputy Prime Minister Artan Grubi delivered a speech during the celebrations in November 2023, which included various symbols containing elements of ethnocentrism and nationalism. DUI was portrayed as the defender party of the Albanian national identity, in contrast to other political entities that do not comply with the Ohrid Agreement, do not recognise Kosovo's independence, do not acknowledge the Albanian flag and language, and oppose the EU and NATO:

> ***If November had an ethnic identity, it would be Albanian. And we shall finish our work, as we have entrusted the nation's fate to the one whom we have given our trust, Ali Ahmeti. Long live the Albanian nation and flag. May Albania be eternal.***
> ***(Facebook post by Artan Grubi, 28 November 2023 LINK)***

Apart from the ethnocentric and nationalist discourse used in this post related to a party event, it was also published on the official Facebook profile of the then First Deputy Prime Minister in the Government, thereby misusing an official account for party propaganda.

Ethnocentric speech is also present among other high-ranking DUI officials, such as Bujar Osmani, who was the Minister of Foreign Affairs from DUI and their presidential candidate. The post criticised the Albanian opposition, labelling them as

> ***derivatives who remained outside the process of lustration and reform of DUI' and who now seek to replace the strong Albanian hand – DUI***
> ***(Facebook page of the MFA Bujar Osmani, 11 February, 2024 LINK).***

The post also contained accusations against VMRO-DPMNE, alleging that they had instigated foreign, Serbian influence, along with negative labels for the media, accusing them of boycotting the activities of the first Albanian prime minister. This contributed to an ethnocentric narrative suggesting that these allied forces sought to take revenge on Ali Ahmeti. Additionally, criticisms and accusations were directed at the Macedonian media for boycotting the activities of 'the first Albanian prime minister' from the very first day of his appointment. The post also stated that a campaign was being led to destroy DUI because the party was a true representative of the interests of the Albanians. It further claimed that the party's president was being targeted for revenge for the 2001 conflict and the equality he had brought, portraying Ahmeti once again as the true leader of the Albanians in the Republic of North Macedonia. The post was deleted from Minister Osmani's Facebook profile after several hours; however the theses it contained were central to DUI's campaign, which argued that other Albanian parties lacked the level of patriotism DUI exhibited and were serving the interests of Russia and Serbia. DUI's campaign motto was 'Yes to Europe, No to Russia', positioning themselves populistically as the pro-European political option, while suggesting that the attempts to remove DUI from power were efforts to steer the country away from the European path, thus fomenting intra-ethnic divisions within the state.

Ethnocentrism is also evident on the Facebook page of Levica in a post dated 20 November titled 'SILENCE ABOUT THE SCANDALOUS AD OF 'BECHTEL AND ENKA' ABOUT THE NORTH MACEDONIAN LANGUAGE':

> ***the results of the rule of the treacherous SDS and the secessionists from DUI are extremely disastrous for the country and the general welfare. The corporate dictatorship, which they formalized with a European flag to allow Artan GRUBI to get rich. The Government, which consists of impotent quislings from SDS and ethno-tribalism secessionists from DUI, allows a corporation to complete the project of redefining the state's identity markers. The anti-Macedonian politics of the traitorous SDS and DUI results in a complete redefinition of the anti-fascist Macedonian identity into a NATO North Macedonian identity.***

In the text one can notice unverified findings, insults and labelling, claims of corruption, but one can also notice the ethnocentrism that blames the company and the parties in power for 'flagrant degradation of the Macedonian language' and identity. The ethnocentric narrative also develops into extreme patriotism with the populist formulation:

> ***Levica in its programme advocates the annulment of the so-called Prespa agreement with Greece and the criminal illegal constitutional amendments resulting from it for disrespecting the right to self-determination!'***

Additional polarisation and spread of harmful narratives occur due to the lack of condemnation from other political actors and the absence of calls to de-escalate the tensions when such public appearances take place. Instead, there is often a counter-reaction from other political actors, which further reinforces the polarisation, rather than a rational approach aimed at depolarising the public discourse. The public office holders and candidates seeking the trust of the citizens to govern the state on their behalf must pay due attention to the manner and the content of their communication with the public. Ethnocentrism can foment further divisions in the society and create intolerance among the communities, particularly in states like the Republic of North Macedonia, where interethnic relations are fragile. It is essential for the politicians to make continuous efforts to build an inclusive society and to reduce, rather than exacerbate, the interethnic tensions.

One example is the interview with Elvis Hodja from Self-Determination, broadcast on Alsat M (interview with Elvis Hodja, 20 November 2023 Alsat-M LINK), where the guest addresses the Macedonians as Slavo-Macedonians, and the Albanians, he says, should be opposed to Macedonia, because it has not proved to be their country:

> ***Albanians should be opposition-minded, be opposed to this country. Macedonia is not a country for the Albanians, it has never proved itself to be one. DUI is the regime party in Macedonia, in which the Albanians do not exist and in which they are not the creators of the Government in Macedonia.***

The dissemination of such speech in the media without disclaimers or public condemnation in a multi-ethnic society can foment intolerance and fuel nationalist or ethnocentric sentiments within certain communities. The glorification of one's own ethnic community at the expense of other (perceived as less valuable) communities has the potential to incite violent actions as well and must, therefore, be appropriately condemned. Although the media and the journalist in this particular case are not the ones creating such arrative, their role is to ensure condemnation and distancing, which they have failed to do.

Ethnocentric rhetoric is not unfamiliar in the Macedonian political scene, but its frequent use can contribute to the development of 'politics of fear', creating intolerance or hatred towards a particular ethnic group. This group may then be used as a 'scapegoat' for the issues in the society,

constructing the notion that a certain group poses a danger to the nation or ethnic community. When ethnocentric rhetoric goes unchallenged and its use is not eradicated, over time, it can become embedded in the public political discourse. This, in turn, enables the spread of harmful narratives, poor communication practices in the public communication, as well as increased polarisation and intolerance among different ethnic groups in the society.

12. HATE SPEECH AND/OR DISCRIMINATORY SPEECH

Hate speech *is a form of verbally aggressive discourse that contains hatred and humiliation of the interlocutor based on various grounds, including national or gender chauvinism, xenophobia, racism, vulgarities, and insults*[36].

In recent times, in addition to all previous forms, hate speech has been directed at migrants and individuals of immigrant origin, as well. It is particularly dangerous in public spheres and on the social media platforms, where it acts as an inflammatory force and quickly gains supporters, with such verbal violence having the potential to translate into real-life. Hate speech also manifests as discourse of intolerance among politicians or political groups, which is especially concerning as it hides behind freedom of expression and can translate into systemic solutions of discrimination against individuals or groups.[37] In some cases, hate speech can serve as a catalyst or a trigger for individuals or groups to commit hate crimes.

While there are both broader and narrower interpretations in literature, the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe implicitly defines hate speech as a term encompassing all forms of expression that spread, incite, promote, or justify racial hatred, xenophobia, antisemitism, or other forms of intolerance-based hatred. This includes intolerance expressed through aggressive nationalism and ethnocentrism, discrimination, and hostility towards minorities, migrants, and people of immigrant origin[38]. The European Court of Human Rights, in its rulings on hate speech, adheres to this definition of hate speech, understanding it as any form of speech that spreads, foments, promotes, or justifies intolerance-based hatred.

Hate speech is subject to sanctions in many countries and can also be restricted in terms of freedom of expression in order to prevent its spread and potential hate crimes. In the Republic of North Macedonia, hate speech and the dissemination of materials via the internet that promote or foment hatred, discrimination, or violence against any person or group based on any discriminatory ground are criminal offences. The amendments to the Criminal Code, enacted in early 2014 (Official Gazette of RM 27/14), introduced prison sentences for individuals who incite or ignite hatred, discord, or intolerance based on gender, race, skin colour, sex, marginalised group affiliation, ethnicity, language, nationality, social origin, religion or belief, other types of beliefs, education, political affiliation, personal or social status, mental or physical disability, age, family or marital status, economic status, health condition, or any other ground prescribed by law or ratified inter-

[36] Institute of Communication Studies. (2023). Digital Dictionary of Media Literacy. Retrieved on 21 January, 2025, from https://recnik.medium.edu.mk/

[37] Institute of Communication Studies. (2023). Digital Dictionary of Media Literacy. Retrieved on 21 January, 2025, from https://recnik.medium.edu.mk/

[38] Recommendation No. R (97) 20 of the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe on 'hate speech' http://www.coe.int/t/dghl/standardsetting/media/doc/cm/rec%281997%29020&expmem_EN.asp in Freedom of expression and hate speech, 2013 https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/e/8/116610.pdf

national agreements. Additionally, prison sentences are stipulated for individuals who disseminate racist and xenophobic material via computer systems or other public information media.

Hate speech based on political and/or ethnic affiliation is the most common form observed in the public communication among the political actors covered in the 'HARM-TIVE' research, although its use has been noted as infrequent.

One of the actions undertaken by Levica was contesting the Guidelines adopted by the Minister of Justice, Krenar Loga, as well as the amendments to the Law on Civil Registry, which introduced a section for ethnicity in the birth certificates. Levica submitted an initiative to the Constitutional Court of the Republic of North Macedonia, after which the Constitutional Court issued a temporary measure preventing the inclusion of nationality in the birth, marriage, and death certificates. Subsequently, a final decision was made—nationality would no longer be recorded in these documents. Regarding the decision of the Constitutional Court, Levica issued a press release titled:

> ***Levica Defeated Krenar Loga the Ballist:***
> ***The ethnicity section in the certificates has been abolished, preventing further segregation of the state.***
> ***(official website of Levica, 28 February, 2024 LINK)***

The party presents itself as the defender of the interests of the citizens, which succeeded in preventing 'segregation' of the state.

The press release states that the 'attempts to disintegrate the Macedonian nation and state, through the secessionism of the so-called 'Albanian parties' allowed by SDS and DPMNE, with extreme right-wing and Nazi practices for segregation and division of the society - by undermining the concept of one state, ONE NATION, are going to redefine the state concept through apartheid policies. Levica resolutely opposes these destructive processes'.

The then Minister of Justice, Krenar Loga, was named as 'Loga the ballist'. Additionally, it states that 'Levica and the Constitutional Court struck ethno-tribalism, which, lacking ideas to improve the lives of the citizens and aiming to dismantle the Macedonian national unity, is promoted by the criminal parties of DUI, Besa and the Alliance for Albanians, which is silently supported by the anti-Macedonian SDS and the false patriots from DPMNE."

The term 'ballist' in the Macedonian language dictionary[39] is defined as a term used for 'a member of the Albanian nationalist organization, Albanian fascist,' which Levica uses to refer to the Minister of Justice, Loga. The neologism 'ethno-tribalism' is used to label the political parties like DUI, portraying them as political entities that practice policies leading to divisions and polarisation in the society.

[39] Official Digital Dictionary of the Macedonian Language. (n.d.). Ballist. Makedonski.gov.mk. Retrieved on 25 January, 2025, from https://makedonski.gov.mk

The elected and appointed officials, as well as the candidates for political positions, manage state resources based on the trust granted by the citizens through the election process and it is essential that they make decisions and create policies on behalf of the citizens while refraining from using hate speech, as they set a communication model that the wider public may adopt and replicate. Hate speech can deepen the social divisions in an already polarised society like the Macedonian society, incite hostility among different groups, and undermine the social cohesion. The language targeting specific communities can incite violence and discrimination, putting certain, often marginalised, communities at risk and leading to hate crimes.

Politicians who resort to hate speech risk losing the public trust, as it undermines their own reputation, credibility, and integrity, which can also result in legal accountability. Hate speech stifles the constructive public discourse and prevents the development of a culture of dialogue, trust, and inclusive society. The politicians are responsible for setting an example of fair, open, and accountable communication in public, promoting inclusivity and respect to foster healthier political environment and, consequently, a more harmonious and democratic society.

13. MANIPULATIVE AUDIOVISUAL MEDIA CONTENT (MAVMC)

Manipulative Audiovisual Media Content (MAVMC) *refers to altered or transformed visual content created to achieve a desired effect, often involving techniques that change the visual appearance.*[40]

The use of altered photos/images, videos, and audio recordings to deceive/confuse the public or promote certain narratives is considered manipulative audiovisual media content. It differs from satire and parody, where people are intentionally and openly/clearly mocked through photoshopped photographs/images and added elements. MAVMC uses existing audio recordings, photos, or footage that are modified, edited, and contextualized in certain situations to be used for criticism and discrediting certain individuals or legal entities. They can be created using design software or by utilizing artificial intelligence tools. Given that increasingly advanced tools are emerging on a daily basis that can be used to alter or generate audio, photo, and video content, and artificial intelligence allows for the creation of nearly perfect products, MAVMC can be an effective tool for dissemination of harmful narratives by the political actors.

The research noted that among the monitored political actors in the Republic of North Macedonia, MAVMC were occasionally used to confuse the public, promote specific narratives, or undermine trust in the political opponents, thus influencing the public opinion and voters' choices in the election cycle. Additionally, it was observed that MAVMC are rarely used independently, but are instead accompanied by another narrative, supporting a political view or discrediting the political opponent.

A notable example of MAVMC used during the pre-election period were video clips disseminated by the main opposition party VMRO-DPMNE, critical of the then-president of the state, Stevo Pendarovski, who was also a candidate in the 2024 presidential elections. The video materials were a product of edited and montaged statements from interviews and public appearances by Pendarovski, related to specific positions he held on matters of national and public interest, and upon their release, VMRO-DPMNE expressed a critical stance.

[40] Fiveable. (n.d.). *Image manipulation*. Retrieved on 25 January, 2025, from https://library.fiveable.me/key-terms/cognitive-psychology/image-manipulation

VMRO-DPMNE released a video (Facebook page, 2 March LINK) in which it is stated that

> ***before the elections, Pendarovski said he would listen to the people, but later stated that the official should tell the people what to do and should not ask the electorate.***

The video is edited to include a statement by Pendarovski at an election rally during the 2019 campaign, where he says, 'I don't usually explain, I have the habit of listening to the people and I want to hear from them what should be done next.' The video also includes clips from his TV interview, where he states that an official should tell the people what to do and not ask the electorate, related to a statement that if the authority had listened to the people about the name change, it wouldn't have happened. At the beginning of the video, the text reads: 'We will not conduct a smear campaign against SDS and Pendarovski, but will consistently point out his statements, the public can judge for themselves. ' The final caption created by the political party reads as follows: 'JUDGE FOR YOURSELF what kind of a person is Stevo Pendarovski'. This video compilation is an example of manipulative audio-visual content in which biased selection is used to present incomplete statements, undermining trust in Pendarovski as a politician.

The purpose of these video materials was to demonstrate that Pendarovski holds inconsistent and harmful positions regarding the state. The materials contained harmful narratives, such as undermining trust in the institutions, character attacks, populism, and allegations of foreign influence, showcasing the multiple 'benefits' certain political actors could get from MAVMC as a separate type of harmful narrative.

By publishing and disseminating the manipulative audiovisual media content, the public is manipulated, facts are distorted, and an unclear picture is created about what is true and what is false. MAVMC are detrimental to the public discourse because the publication and dissemination of altered photos, videos, or audio content can spread false information, disinformation, or malinformation. This can lead the public to form opinions or conclusions about certain policies, activities, or views of the political actors based on manipulated information, resulting in potentially incorrect conclusions. On the other hand, if the political actors frequently distribute MAVMC in their public communication and these are confirmed to be manipulative, the public may lose trust in certain political actors. If such content is published by the media, it could undermine trust in them and call their credibility into question.

Additionally, MAVMC can contribute to the polarization of the society because some of them may provoke strong emotions among the citizens, as well as spread offensive content in the public discourse. The frequent occurrence of MAVMC can normalize undemocratic expression in public, the use of fake news, and also distract from the main issues that should be the subject of democratic debate. In this regard, the political actors, as well as the media, have an obligation not to produce MAVMC, but also to prevent their dissemination, identify and expose them, and thereby inform the public when it comes to manipulated information.

14. SPREADING PANIC, FEAR AND UNCERTAINTY

Spreading panic, fear and uncertainty *(Eng. fearmongering) is an activity through which various stories are disseminated for the purpose of frightening or unsettling people*[41].

Sharing statements with the aim of spreading panic, fear, and insecurity among the citizens regarding a particular political issue, social event, external influence, or processes emerging within the society— or portraying an external or internal enemy— is not a new tactic in politics. Election processes around the world are often an opportunity for activation of these techniques of communication with the public, with fearmongering being a useful technique for mobilising the electorate to achieve a higher voter turnout and garner support for a particular policy.

In Macedonian politics, the spread of fear, panic, and insecurity among the population is not a new phenomenon in political rhetoric.

During the monitoring period of the research, multiple statements from the political actors were recorded in which fear, panic, and insecurity about the stability of the state were spread. These harmful narratives were particularly present during the pre-election and election periods, when politicians' rhetoric became harsher and more offensive towards their opponents.

The largest ruling Macedonian party, SDSM, often disseminated the narrative that if the opposition party, VMRO-DPMNE, came to power, the society would not progress, the country's prospects for European integration would be lost, and, as a result, the opportunities for economic development would also diminish. One such press release containing this type of messages was made in the days before the elections, in which the party declared that 'with the return of VMRO-DPMNE, we are allowing a guaranteed blockade of Macedonia and internal ethnic tensions' (official website of SDSM, 1 May 2024, LINK). The then leader of SDSM, Dimitar Kovachevski stated that nothing had changed within VMRO-DPMNE and that their return to power would mean the restoration of the 'regime' –

> ***If a right-wing party like VMRO gains such power, with all state resources at its disposal, we could be facing the end of our European perspective. VMRO will postpone the European integration indefinitely, just as Gruevski did.***

Such a narrative spreads panic, fear, and insecurity among the citizens regarding the uncertainty of their future, as well as the future of the country and its membership in the European Union.

[41] Oxford Learner's Dictionaries. (n.d.). *Fearmongering*. Retrieved on 21 January, 2025, from https://www.oxfordlearnersdictionaries.com/definition/english/fearmongering

The largest opposition party, VMRO-DPMNE, based its communication agenda during the pre-election and election periods on messages portraying itself as the main protector of the citizens and standing on the side of the people. It emphasised that the state should be returned to the people and that if SDSM and DUI were allowed to win, the country would be in danger. Such messages were also found in posts of the party leader as well as other high-ranking party officials.

During the visit to Switzerland in the pre-election period and the meeting with the overseas committees and the Macedonian diaspora, published by the party, there was a synchronisation of messages from the leader of VMRO-DPMNE, Hristijan Mickoski, and MP and member of the Central Committee of VMRO-DPMNE, Dragan Kovachki. In one of the posts (Facebook profile, 3 February, 2024 LINK) of the leader of the party, Mickoski, there is expressed concern about the

> ***state being taken away from the people, due to crime, attacks on the identity, foreign agendas and the erasure of Macedonianism. That the only way out is through the changes that are achieved with togetherness, unity and a strong commitment to Macedonia.***

The text is accompanied by photos from the meeting, where the state flag, the former state flag with the sun from Vergina and the party flag are displayed.

The post of the party official, Kovachki (official website of VMRO-DPMNE, 4 February, 2023 LINK) states that

> ***together we will succeed in removing this unpopular government that has captured Macedonia and that the ruling parties have a common interest, who will plunder Macedonia more.***

Additionally, the statement contains a call to the diaspora to come to Macedonia and vote,

> ***to unite for the Macedonian national cause because this is the last moment, it is the last generation of Macedonian politicians who can save Macedonia, because if these people stay in power, know that we will not have a state.***

In addition to the populist discourse conveyed in these statements, they also contain a narrative that spreads panic, fear, and insecurity among the population by suggesting that the country could become destabilised.

DUI led its campaign under the slogan 'Yes for Europe, No for Russia!' and formed a coalition before the elections, including several smaller parties under the name 'European Front'. During the campaign, a narrative was disseminated suggesting that certain forces were working to prevent the Republic of North Macedonia from joining the EU, aiming to polarise the society along the ethnic lines. This, in turn, fuelled nationalism among the ethnic Albanians to mobilise the electorate to turn out for the elections. DUI primarily directed its campaign messages at the Albanian opposition, which was united under the coalition Vredi. However, beyond Vredi, DUI also addressed VMRO-DPMNE, particularly in response to the frequent statements from Mickoski, who insisted that VMRO-DPMNE would not form a coalition with DUI, labelling the party as corrupt and claiming that it was time for it to go into opposition.

In one of the press releases of DUI (official website of DUI, 7 April, 2024 LINK) it is said that Vredi are at the service of the pro-Russian agenda, it continues its efforts to divide Albanians through fake news and slander, always at the service of VMRO and Levica; and that Izet Medjiti and 'other derivatives of Moscow' want to present the Albanians, at any cost, as a criminal and corrupting factor in the Republic of North Macedonia.

In addition to the Albanian opposition as DUI's main political rival, DUI also adopted harsh rhetoric against VMRO-DPMNE and its leader, Hristijan Mickoski, during the election campaign. This was particularly in response to his frequent statements that VMRO-DPMNE would not form a coalition with DUI, that DUI was a corrupt party, and that it was time for it to go into opposition. In one press release (website, 20 April LINK) it is stated that the leader of VMRO-DPMNE, Hristijan Mickoski and VMRO-DPMNE 'are openly calling for a Macedonia without Albanians. He even openly calls on all Macedonians to unite against Ali Ahmeti and DUI. At the rally in Kratovo, Mickoski asked for the unification of all Macedonians to ensure that Albanians would not secure a single MP in the third electoral district... We invite the Albanian opposition to come to their senses and not become a tool of the Russian agenda promoted by VMRO'.

The political actors, as well as the media, must be aware that freedom of expression, while being a right and an opportunity, also carries ethical, political, and legal responsibilities. Statements made by political actors, as well as the media reporting, bear 'different weight' compared to those of the ordinary citizens. When a political actor makes statements alleging scenarios of destabilisation or referring to external and internal enemies, the responsibility is even greater, as the citizens may take such statements seriously, potentially leading to a widespread public perception that the state is facing serious challenges.

15. ENCOURAGING EXTREME PATRIOTISM AND NATIONALISM

Extreme patriotism, *or 'super-patriotism'*[42] *is the belief that an individual loves their own country above everything else. 'Nationalism is an ideology that emphasises loyalty, dedication, or allegiance to the nation or nation-state, asserting that such obligations outweigh other individual or group interests. It is often associated with a sense of national superiority and glory'.*[43]

Nationalism is a concept linked to personal feelings of belonging and loyalty to one's nation. However, it can often escalate into fanaticism or, as the political theory describes it, destructive or aggressive nationalism. Political public communication that includes narratives of extreme patriotism and nationalism can foster sentiments that the state must be defended from an enemy, evoke emotions of pride, and create a perceived need to strengthen national consciousness and protect one's nation or state. In such cases, the nation is often equated with the state.

Nationalist rhetoric is a near-constant feature in the communication of the political actors in the Republic of North Macedonia, particularly as the major political parties tend to have a dominant ethnic community among their members and supporters (so-called ethnic nationalism). Among the largest Macedonian and Albanian parties, ethno-politics still dominates as the main course of the politics, meaning that the political parties primarily address only the Macedonian or Albanian voters. Major Macedonian parties typically communicate only in Macedonian, while the Albanian parties communicate exclusively in Albanian. Moreover, the electoral platforms of the latter are largely focused on advancing the status and the rights of the ethnic Albanians in the Republic of North Macedonia, with limited elaboration on broader social issues such as economic development, social policies, or environmental concerns.

Such rhetoric was particularly prevalent during the pre-election period and the campaign for the presidential and parliamentary elections in 2024. Almost all major political parties participated in the elections with nationalist theses centred on defending the interests of the people. VMRO-DPMNE primarily accused SDSM of lacking patriotism, while SDSM countered by claiming that the Republic of North Macedonia led by VMRO-DPMNE would regress into darker times. Among the Albanian parties, the statements frequently highlighted which party or political actor had contributed more to advancing the rights of the Albanians in the Republic of North Macedonia, and which party or Albanian politician served the interests of the Macedonian politicians, thereby criticizing certain Macedonian party.

[42] Cambridge Dictionary. (n.d.). Super-patriotism. Retrieved on 21 January, 2025, from https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/super-patriotism

[43] Encyclopaedia Britannica. (n.d.). *Nationalism*. Retrieved on 10 January, 2025, from https://www.britannica.com/topic/nationalism

In the public appearance of Krenar Loga, the then Minister of Justice and secretary of the branch of the political party Alliance for Albanians, led by Zijadin Sela, during an interview for TV Shenja (Facebook profile, 23 February 2024 LINK), there were harmful narratives of various kinds, including nationalist discourse. Among other things, he criticises that the institutions and the political actors in the Republic of North Macedonia who are part of the Macedonian community work against the Albanian community and good interethnic relations. In the interview, among his statements, notable comments include: 'Macedonians are boycotting the Prime Minister' (referring to the caretaker Prime Minister Talat Djaferi, who led the caretaker government for organising the 2024 elections), that the Macedonian Academy of Sciences and Arts (MANU) is the 'cradle of Serbianism' and that

> ***the president of MANU, who speaks against the balancer and in favour of restoring the unitary state, is the father of a VMRO-DPMNE Young Forces Union member.***

He also states in the interview that 'the Macedonian oligarchy and the deep Macedonian state have taken over the judicial system', that

> ***the Macedonian super-nationalism is camouflaged with a European appearance—dressed in European clothing, they want to dismantle the instruments that grant us rights***

and that 'the elections on 8 May will mark the beginning of the real confrontation between the Macedonians and the Albanians'.

A specific discourse is evident in the statements of the high-ranking DUI official, Artan Grubi, who was a high-ranking government official at the time as well. His communication with the public, although generally aligned with DUI's stance, often promotes his own personal style, which is more provocative and sharp, characterised by cynicism and irony, further contributing to greater polarisation in the society.

In one post (Facebook profile, 20 April, 2024 LINK) in which Artan Grubi calls for the attendance at the DUI rally on 21 April, the Albanian opposition is accused of not reacting to the statements of Mickoski, VMRO-DPMNE and Levica because they don't dare because they told them:

> ***Shut up, I don't want to hear your voice! Macedonia only to the Macedonians, to VMRO and Levica, it might be worth for Vredi, but it does not cross the line of the Front, the front for equality, the front for integration, the European front. Go out to the square, take everyone you know with you, invite everyone, let the song of Shkurte and Ilir44 resound together with our voices from the centre of Skopje in the ears of those who do not want to hear it together with their mercenaries in the 'Albanian' opposition.***
> ***Sunday, 21 April 20:00 hrs., Macedonia Square, Skopje.***

With such discourse that glorifies one's own ethnic identity, DUI is promoted as the defender of the interests of the Albanians, as a greater advocate for the rights and the status of the Albanians in the Republic of North Macedonia than the Albanian opposition, which criticises the opposition in the same way it criticises VMRO-DPMNE, arguing that neither are political parties that truly care about the well-being of the Albanians, contributes to the spread of inflammatory rhetoric and polarisation of the society while reinforcing a nationalist approach in politics.

On the second channel of the public broadcaster, MTV 2, a statement by Bujar Osmani, the then Minister of Foreign Affairs and presidential candidate from DUI, was broadcast, containing elements of nationalism:

> ***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.***

[44] Ilir Shakjiri is a singer of patriotic songs from Kosovo. The song 'Mora Fjale' is a very popular Albanian song in the republic of North Macedonia, Kosovo, and Albania. It is sung at many celebrations, national holidays, and is considered a second anthem among the Albanians. It is especially played and sung when the Albanian national football team competes.

Statements of political actors qualifying their political opponents as nationalists must be supported by arguments in order to help the public understand the political context and the harmfulness of such narratives, rather than replacing theses. They must be extremely cautious when making statements that touch upon the national sentiments in a multiethnic society, as such discourse can lead to serious consequences. Additionally, the media, as intermediaries between the political actors and the public, bear the responsibility of ensuring accurate and balanced communication. They must not contribute to the spread of harmful political discourse; if they do convey it, they should explain its harmfulness and highlight the political communication principles that are being violated. In this regard, all journalists must adhere to the Code of Ethics, guided by the principles of professionalism, objectivity, and responsibility towards the public.

In a multiethnic society like the Republic of North Macedonia, it is well known that the political actors frequently resort to nationalist rhetoric, which can easily mobilize the citizens to protest for a certain cause or influence the voters toward a particular political option. The public is often exposed to extreme patriotism and nationalism mixed with populism, which can deepen the social divisions and instead of advancing the public communication, normalize the discourse that fuels intolerance.

The political actors—both those in office and those aspiring to take office—should serve as models for promoting a culture of tolerance and coexistence among different communities, instead of contributing to interethnic tensions through their statements and normalization of harmful political discourse in the public communication.

16. POPULISM

Populism *is a political philosophy that represents or tries to represent the interests of the common people*[45]*.*

Populism is easy to use because it serves as a 'communication framework directed at the people, identifying with them and presenting itself as their voice… a fundamental frame that can be applied to a wide range of topics'.[46]

Political communication is shaped by the intent to influence the political environment. What makes the communication 'political' is not the source of the message but its content and purpose[47]. The effective communication of the political actors, both those making decisions on behalf of the citizens and those aspiring to lead the institutions, is especially important during crises, elections, or key strategic processes for the state. During such times, it becomes clearer what their intentions, capacities, and commitments to the public interest and the citizens are. In practice, the political actors frequently communicate populist messages and information that the public finds interesting but which may not necessarily serve the true public interest. The public interest includes 'rights and obligations of the individuals and the community towards the state, as well as the responsibilities of the state institutions to protect and promote certain rights as

[45] Institute of Communication Studies. (2023). Digital Dictionary of Media Literacy. Retrieved on 21 January, 2025, from https://recnik.medium.edu.mk/

[46] Jagers, J., & Walgrave, S. (2016). Populism as political communication style: An empirical study of political parties' discourse in Belgium. in T. Aalberg, F. Esser, C. Reinemann, J. Strömbäck, & C. H. de Vreese (Eds.), *Populist political communication in Europe* (p. 13). Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315623016

[47] McNair, B. (2017). An introduction to political communication (6th ed.). Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315750293

defined by law (constitution, legislation, bylaws, international agreements, etc.)."[48]. In that sense, although the politicians are expected to provide accurate and verified information, as well as communicate policies, positions and information that benefit the public interest, the experience has shown that populism is on the rise.

Research shows that populism is significantly present in the statements of the political actors in the Republic of North Macedonia. Populism was detected across almost all parties, particularly the larger ones. A key feature is that the social and economic issues, as well as corruption, were exploited to build a populist narrative. Here, the political actors present themselves as close to the people, understanding their struggles, while portraying the 'others' as the elite and corrupt entities that only serve their own interests.

According to the ruling parties, SDSM and DUI, they are leading the country in the right direction, towards a European future for the Republic of North Macedonia. SDSM promotes itself as an ally and a saviour of the citizens, while portraying VMRO-DPMNE as 'anti-European', 'anti-democratic', 'anti-EU', and a 'blocker of the European integration'. However, they fail to explain why they themselves represent the European option, while their opponents do not, thus merely spreading a populist discourse.

Example of using a social issue - the construction of social housing, funded by the state, i.e. the public budget financed by all citizens, used by the then ruling party to gain political points. The party published a press release (official website of SDSM, 19 November, 2023 LINK) where, instead of information and an explanation about the undertaken measures and policies, the focus is on the construction of the largest building with 312 apartments in the Municipality of Butel. It is added that

> ***for SDSM everyone is important, caring for everyone is important. If a comparison is made with the period of DPMNE, the value of this building of EUR 10 million is equal to 4 lions - monuments from Skopje 2014. This is an essential difference between SDSM and DPMNE. SDSM cares about improving the lives of the citizen, while DPMNE cares about monuments. SDSM does not plant palm trees and weeping willows in Vardar, but invests in the needs of the citizens.***

Press releases that only publish specific figures showcasing positive results from the work of certain political actors serve for self-promotion and to fill the informational space, without adding any additional quality to the media reporting of a particular government issue or the work of the key political actors.

[48] Gocevski, D., & Ilievska, F. (2015). Deconstructing the Concept of Public Interest in the Republic of Macedonia: (Ab)use in the Name of the Citizens Skopje: Institute of Communication Studies.

In the populist posts of SDSM, the party typically positions itself on the side of the people, claiming that their political option brings stability and development to the country, unlike their political opponents. The populist statements are frequently found in several SDSM officials, including the party president, government officials, MPs, or candidates for public offices.

The then Minister of Culture, Bisera Kostadinovska-Stojchevska, in a post on her official Facebook profile, commented on a statement by the then leader of VMRO-DPMNE, Hristijan Mickoski, regarding potential coalitions with several parties, including Levica as a possibility. In her post, she refers to Levica and VMRO-DPMNE as potential coalition partners that share same values and 'from a partner of the democratic world, the USA and the EU

> ***they 'want to bring back the country to the period when it was isolated and captured. It will bring economic uncertainty, setbacks and blockages. The citizens do not want anti-European politicians. The citizens want politicians who work for a secure future, higher salaries, a better standard of living, so that young people can build their future in a European country, at home, in their homeland (Facebook post of Bisera Kostadinovska-Stojchevska, 26 November, 2023, LINK).***

In the populist discourse of VMRO-DPMNE, alongside the usual political rhetoric about working in the interests of the people, ensuring the well-being of all, and benefiting the society as a whole, a patriotic tone is also evident, with the party presenting itself as a defender of the national identity. Additionally, the government is portrayed as not working for the citizens, while VMRO-DPMNE's ideology is promoted as superior to that of its political opponents - SDSM.

An example of populist discourse is the message from the leader of VMRO-DPMNE, Hristijan Mickoski, addressed to the citizens before the election silence for the second round of the presidential elections (Facebook post, 6 May 2024, LINK). In the message titled 'MESSAGE TO EVERY CITIZEN OF MACEDONIA' he promotes the political offer of VMRO-DPMNE and criticizes the political opponents. The text reads

> ***we commit ourselves and give you our word that we will not let you down'; 'the road will be difficult, but there is no obstacle that we cannot overcome together***

It also reads in a populist manner

> ***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 message represents a populist discourse where no concrete steps are presented on how changes will be achieved or how a better environment for the development of the society and its citizens will be created. Instead, general political empty phrases are used, promising well-being and care for the people while criticising the political opponent. This is a common populist approach, employing rhetoric that can 'elastically' cover a wide range of topics without specifically explaining decisions, policies, or political actions. In contrast, the populist discourse found in the political party Levica typically revolves around a dichotomy of the so-called working class versus elitism.

A statement during the promotion of professor Biljana Vankovska as a presidential candidate of Levica (official website, 7 February, 2024 LINK) says that

> ***Levica has thrown down the gauntlet to the bourgeois parties and enters the #Fight in the presidential elections! In this historic hour, we propose Biljana VANKOVSKA, an eminent leftist who has been defending Macedonian nationhood throughout her professional career, as a presidential candidate.***

The text contains populist expressions through which Levica positions itself as a party working in the national interest, in contrast to other political parties. It portrays itself as the representative of 'the people'—the working class—and declares its goal to 'take Macedonia from the elites' and return it to where it belongs 'in the hands of the people!', i.e., Levica, following the leftist ideology, presents itself as a party that is not part of the political elites, but is together with the people.

Among the Albanian parties, the populist speech is mainly focused on who does more for the interests of the Albanians in the Republic of North Macedonia. For example, the opposition Albanian parties direct their statements towards DUI, while Vredi promotes itself as the pro-European coalition. Such statements have become particularly common since early 2024, following the unification of the Albanian opposition parties as a counterweight to the main ruling Albanian party, DUI, and their increasingly certain joint engagement. As a result, they have used every public appearance and event to promote their agenda.

In one of Vredi's statements given at a press conference (Facebook post, 23 February 2023, LINK), it is stated that DUI falsely claims to support the EU and oppose the Russian influence. DUI is portrayed as an elitist and corrupt structure, unlike Vredi, which claims that

> ***citizens are increasingly joining the real pro-European coalition every day, they are joining the opposition coalition for which it is WORTH (VREDI) (VLEN). That is why Arben Taravari will convincingly win as a presidential candidate, because the citizens know who is truly WORTH (VREDI) (VLEN)! On 8 May the stone you try to throw at others will fall on your head and on 9 May the country will be freed from Russia, while the pro-European and pro-American spirit will triumph, because that's the only way it's WORTH (VREDI) (VLEN)!***

Similar is the example from a post by Alternativa (Facebook post, 11 February 2024, LINK) from the promotion of the coalition with a brief message – a quote and a photograph of the leader, Afrim Gashi, which was published both on his profile and the profile of the party:

> ***As of tonight, our political battle has become even clearer. The question in the elections on 8 May will be: 'Are you with Vucic of Serbia and Ali Ahmeti or are you with the united Albanian opposition - European Union for Change and Albin Kurti?.' It doesn't get any clearer than that. It is also easier to decide.***

Populism falls into one of the easiest harmful narratives to use because its formula consists of communicating messages that would appeal to the electorate. These messages are superficial, without elaborating on how a particular measure or policy is implemented, but rather emphasising how much a certain political option or actors care for the people. It can be accompanied by other harmful narratives that amplify its effect, thereby creating a blurred picture for the public regarding the main positions of the political actors. In this way, citizens' ability to form a complete and truthful understanding of the social developments and political offer is restricted, limiting their ability to make an informed choice when exercising their democratic right—the right to vote.

OBSERVATIONS AND RECOM-MENDATIONS

VIOLATIONS OF THE ETHICAL STANDARDS IN THE POLITICAL COMMUNICATION

Internet and the new digital media provide instant access to information, immediacy in reporting, and increased transparency of the political parties and the institutions. However, they also contribute to the rapid dissemination and communication of harmful narratives. The online space is highly fertile ground for conveyance of the harmful narratives created by the political actors, creating a particular type of political culture that negatively impacts the democratic processes in the society.

The political actors have a special responsibility when communicating with the public, as their messages reflect the values they uphold, the policies they advocate for, and the decisions they make on behalf of the citizens. When the political actors hold positions of power, their public appearances reflect the state policy and the way they manage its resources in the name of the citizens.

As a basis for identifying harmful narratives promoted by the political actors, the 'HARM-TIVE' research was guided by several documents that establish the standards and the principles for non-discriminatory and transparent political communication, including:

- Joint Declaration on Freedom of Expression and Elections in the Digital Age from 2020 issued by OSCE;
- 2021 Joint Declaration on Politicians and Public Officials and Freedom of Expression issued by OSCE;
- The 2022 Enhanced Code of Practice on Disinformation, issued by the European Union;
- Recommendation CM/Rec(2022)16 of the Committee of Ministers to member States (Council of Europe) issued by the Council of Europe;
- Code of Ethics for Public Officials of the Government of RM;
- Code of conduct for SDSM officials and members[1].

The research identified the most frequent violations of the standards and the principles of responsible and ethical communication, where the most frequently used harmful narratives employed by the political actors include undermining trust, biased selection, character attacks, populism and fomenting divisions.

VIOLATION OF THE PRINCIPLE OF COMMUNICATION IN SUPPORT OF THE PUBLIC INTEREST

In using harmful narratives to undermine trust in institutions, the political actors often make allegations against their political opponents regarding corruption and lack of transparency without supporting these claims with facts and arguments. This can mislead the public into drawing incorrect conclusions and erode the legitimacy of the democratic institutions, the media, or public officials—key components of a functional democracy. The loss of trust in institutions and the system is reflected in apathy, a lack of citizen engagement in the social changes, decreased voter turnout, and the public perception that all politicians are the same, leading to the belief that positive change in society is unattainable.

In a society where the citizens are frequently presented with information about corrupt, unlawful, and non-transparent activities of the political actors without such claims being substantiated with facts and arguments, a negative perception of the institutional efficiency develops, further diminishing trust in the functionality of the institutions. Constant exposure to information that communicates negative news about the conditions in the society, the work of the institutions and politicians—whether in power or opposition—can contribute to a general sense of insecurity among the population.

DISSEMINATING DISINFORMATION AND SELECTIVE INFORMATION IN PUBLIC

Biased selection is noted as a common occurrence in the statements of the political actors, where data about an event is presented in a way that confirms a particular position while ignoring other data that contradicts it. This can mislead the public into drawing incorrect conclusions because the political actors selectively present the information, preventing a comprehensive understanding of the events or the stances of the politicians.

When engaging in biased selection, certain political actors may criticise opponents on issues such as national interests, unlawful or corrupt practices, budget spending, expenses of the officials, agricultural subsidies, and the privileges of the officials without presenting facts and arguments to substantiate claims of illegality. This deliberately fosters insecurity and distrust among citizens.

The politicians are obligated to adhere to certain standards in the public communication, ensuring transparency and accessibility to the media. They must advocate for the public interest in their communication and refrain from being sources of disinformation or unverified information. The political actors must not use hate speech or discriminatory language and should uphold and protect freedom of expression. The manner in which the political actors communicate reflects the identity of the group they belong to and the audience they address.

OFFENSIVE LANGUAGE, CHARACTER ATTACKS AND DEMONIZATION OF THE POLITICAL OPPONENTS IN PUBLIC

The language used by the political actors reflects their political culture, their perspective on the society, their identity, the positions and policies they advocate and the behavioural culture they promote in public. When the political actors resort to character attacks and demonization of the

political opponents, they contribute to further polarisation of the society, provoke strong negative emotions, and undermine the political system. As a result, the citizens may perceive politics only as a battleground for personal revenge rather than a platform for constructive dialogue.

The frequent use of harmful narratives containing elements of discrimination, character attacks, or division helps normalise an atmosphere of intolerance and reduces the space for open and constructive public dialogue. This inappropriate speech, which has the potential to impact the social cohesion in the society, undermines all efforts of individuals, groups, and civil initiatives working towards a common goal – creating an inclusive, healthy, and democratic society.

USE OF POPULIST RHETORIC IN PUBLIC COMMUNICATION

Populist discourse is often observed in the rhetoric of the political actors as they present themselves as the best option for the people. Different political parties use various topics to portray themselves as being on the side of the people and the best choice for them.

The use of populist rhetoric can lead to a restricted public debate in the society where discussions are driven by emotions and superficial claims rather than facts and arguments. Populism can encourage rejection of expert opinions, scientific facts, and critical thinking, portraying them as elitist, abstract, unreal and detached from the needs of the people. Although populism can be effective in the short term by engaging with the citizens directly and speaking on the behalf of the people, in the long term, it can diminish the quality of the public discourse and hinder the democratic development.

SPREADING OF HATE SPEECH AND DISCRIMINATORY SPEECH

The rhetoric of division and labelling of the political opponents as 'we – the good' versus 'you – the bad' can have broader social consequences. The use of harmful narratives that easily attack the political opponents can deepen the social divisions, setting groups of political supporters, voters, or communities against each other. When individuals who significantly influence the public opinion, such as the political actors, engage in such discourse without facing criticism, condemnation, or consequences, it sends a message to the wider public that attacking certain individuals or groups, spreading hate speech, and using discriminatory speech are socially acceptable.

Divisive messages strengthen the social polarisation, normalise the harmful political communication, and foster distrust and increased intolerance between different communities. This, in turn, further hinders the constructive dialogue and the creation of a democratic environment in the society.

VIOLATIONS OF THE JOURNALISTIC PROFESSIONAL STANDARDS

In the process of monitoring and identifying the harmful narratives, as well as the violations and non-compliance with the professional journalistic standards, the existing regulations governing media operations and ensuring freedom of expression were used as the basis. Additionally, regarding adherence to the professional journalistic standards and principles, key references included codes of ethics of the guild associations and the journalistic manuals:

– **Code of Ethics of the Journalists of Macedonia** of the Association of Journalists of Macedonia;
– **Guidelines for Ethical Reporting for Online Media (Application of the Code of Ethics of the Journalists in the Online Sphere)** of the Council of Media Ethics of Macedonia;
– The values, the professional standards and practices listed in the **Handbook for the Public Interest in Journalism** of the Institute of Communication Studies;
– The Handbook for Journalists and Editors **Recognize and Prevent: Journalist's Tools for Tackling Disinformation** of the Institute of Communication Studies.

During the analysis process, it was essential to determine how the journalists handled topics, whether they provided context, balanced perspectives, and fact-checked statements before publication.

Particular attention was given to identifying instances where the media, despite formally adhering to the rules—such as providing space for all political stakeholders as required by the Electoral Code—were instrumental in spreading harmful narratives by uncritically reporting statements or excluding voices that could offer alternative perspectives, potentially undermining the political pluralism in reporting. In such cases, the lack of professional journalistic approach often results in undermining the public interest and biased reporting.

UNCRITICAL DISSEMINATION OF ACCUSATIONS AND INCOMPLETE, UNVERIFIED INFORMATION

The majority of harmful narratives recorded during the monitoring of the TV stations and online media outlets originated from the political actors, with journalists often reporting these narratives without any intervention or stance, except in rare cases where the journalists reported the harmful narrative with approval or condemnation.

This indicates that the journalists frequently act as passive conveyers of information rather than active intermediaries who analyse and critically examine the statements of the political actors. Pursuant to the first article of the Code of Ethics of the Journalists of Macedonia, '[...] A journalist shall publish accurate, verified information and must not conceal essential data or falsify documents. If given information cannot be confirmed or if it is a matter of assumption, i.e. speculation, that should be noted and published. Correctness of the information ought to be verified as much as possible[49].'

[49] Association of Journalists of Macedonia. (2001). Code of Ethics of the Journalists of Macedonia Retrieved on 18 November, 2024, from https://znm.org.mk/kodeks-na-novinarite-na-makedonija/

The monitoring revealed examples of media outlets employing the 'he said, she said' approach, reporting the party statements and accusations exactly as they were delivered, believing that this maintained the objectivity and the balance by giving equal space to all stakeholders.

Unfortunately, this practice leads to superficial reporting that only superficially meets the objectivity and balance criteria. By reporting the statements without analysis or fact-checking, media risk legitimising propaganda, populism, and manipulation. This uncritical approach leaves the citizens without the necessary context and understanding of complex issues, affecting their level of informedness. Instead of genuine objectivity, a form of neutrality emerges that does not reflect the actual power dynamics and the real picture of events.

The first duty of the journalist, as stated in the first principle of the Global Charter of Ethics for Journalists of the International Federation of Journalists, is to 'Respect for the facts and for the right of the public to truth[50]'. In this process, as the preamble of the Charter highlights, the journalist's responsibility towards the public takes precedence over any other responsibility, in particular towards their employers and the public authorities. To ensure that the truth reaches the citizens and genuine objectivity and balance are achieved, journalists must actively fact-check, expose the manipulative narratives, and provide context that allows the public to view information from multiple perspectives. If given information cannot be confirmed or if it is a matter of assumption, i.e. speculation, that should be noted and published.

UNCRITICAL REPORTING OF STATEMENTS THAT SPREAD PANIC AND FEAR, UNDERMINING TRUST IN INSTITUTIONS

There are instances where the media has uncritically reported the statements made by the political stakeholders, even when their intention was to incite fear and panic, thereby influencing the trust of the citizens in the institutions. Such narratives, which emphasise divisions between 'us' and 'them', have fuelled divisions and discord and reinforced a sense of constant danger—whether it be the threat of losing the state, external influences, destruction of the national identity, or the abandonment of the European agenda.

In a politically charged atmosphere, such as during the elections, the media must be extremely cautious in how they report the political statements. They should avoid sensationalism and false exclusivity while remaining aware that the choice of words, terminology, and framing of events directly impacts the society and influences the public perception. This is particularly important when the political statements have the potential to incite intolerance, hate speech, or foment divisions among different social groups. The responsibility of the media is to ensure objective, balanced, and ethical reporting that does not reinforce prejudices or encourage discrimination.

This principle is also highlighted in the Global Charter of Ethics for Journalists of the International Federation of Journalists, which states that: Journalists shall ensure that the dissemination of information or opinion does not contribute to hatred or prejudice and shall do their utmost to avoid facilitating the spread of discrimination on grounds such as geographical, social or ethnic origin, race, gender, sexual orientation, language, religion, disability, political and other opinions.[51]'

[50] International Federation of Journalists (IFJ). (n.d.). Global Charter of Ethics for Journalists. Retrieved on 18 November, 2024, from https://www.ifj.org/fileadmin/user_upload/Global_Charter_of_Ethics_EN.pdf

[51] International Federation of Journalists (IFJ). (n.d.). Global Charter of Ethics for Journalists. Retrieved on 18 November, 2024, from https://www.ifj.org/fileadmin/user_upload/Global_Charter_of_Ethics_EN.pdf

Additionally, the Guidelines for Ethical Reporting for Online Media emphasise that when reporting on political disputes and accusations, the media should strive to report objectively and impartially. Moreover, they should also 'avoid using inflammatory rhetoric and accusations themselves[52].'

EXTREMELY BIASED DISCOURSE AND EMPHASISED DISREGARD FOR THE PROFESSIONAL STANDARDS

Reporting on political processes, especially elections, must be impartial and balanced, and 'the journalist must make professional distance from the political entities[53]. 'Unfortunately, such professional distance is not always upheld. In some cases, biased reporting is easily recognisable due to its overtly tendentious approach, while in others, it is concealed through the framing of the news items, the selection of the sources and the interviewees, and various other practices that subtly influence the public perception and create a distorted view of the political processes. These practices not only undermine trust in the media but also endanger democracy by manipulating the public opinion.

Such a role of the journalist contradicts the journalistic standards and violates the principles of professionalism, impartiality, and balance. 'All journalists have their personal opinions, but to ensure comprehensive and professional coverage of news and current events, they must rise above their personal viewpoints', as stated in the Ethical and Professional Principles of MRT for Media Coverage of Election Processes.[54] According to these principles, published by the Public Broadcasting Service in 2016, it is crucial to establish balance in reporting, ensuring that programmes are 'neither in favour of nor against any party, coalition, or candidate. Balance should be achieved both in qualitative and quantitative terms.[55]"

Media reporting of the programmes of the parties or the debates between the candidates 'should be conducted in a way that enables the citizens to compare and draw their own conclusions based on the information presented[56]' as highlighted in the Guide for Ethical Media Coverage of Elections.

[52] Council of Media Ethics of Macedonia. (2021). Guidelines for Ethical Reporting for Online Media (Application of the Code of Ethics of the Journalists in the Online Sphere). Retrieved on 29 November, 2024, from

[53] Association of Journalists of Macedonia. (2001). Code of Ethics of the Journalists of Macedonia Retrieved on 18 November, 2024, from https://znm.org.mk/kodeks-na-novinarite-na-makedonija/

[54] Macedonian Radio Television. (n.d.). Ethical and professional principles of MRT for media coverage of election processes. Retrieved on 29 November, 2024, from https://semm.mk/wp-content/uploads/2014/10/Eticki-kodeks-na-MTV1.pdf

[55] Macedonian Radio Television. (n.d.). Ethical and professional principles of MRT for media coverage of election processes. Retrieved on 29 November, 2024, from https://semm.mk/wp-content/uploads/2014/10/Eticki-kodeks-na-MTV1.pdf

[56] Tuneva, M., Chadikovski, M., Bislimi, N., Janevska, E. (2020). Guide for Ethical Media Coverage of Elections. Skopje: Association of Journalists of Macedonia. Retrieved on 29 November, 2024, from https://znm.org.mk/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/prirachnik-za-etichko-izvestuvane-od-izbori-vo-severna-makedonija.pdf

USE OF INAPPROPRIATE LANGUAGE, INSULTS, AND DEMONIZATION OF THE POLITICAL OPPONENTS

Insults and demonization of the political opponents were one of the defining features of these political elections. Many serious topics, important to both the citizens and the society, were not debated through meaningful discussion but rather conducted through insults and political accusations. This approach, based on insults and demonization, not only undermines the fundamental democratic principles but also fosters an atmosphere of intolerance, which can erode public trust in the political process.

Freedom of speech is a right for everyone, including the politicians and the public figures, and journalists should ensure their access to media space. However, this right should never be misinterpreted as a free pass for indecent language, insults, and demonization. If the political actors have abandoned the principles of respectful and civil political communication, professional journalism has the duty to intervene, condemn such narratives, and challenge them.

The role of the journalists in these situations is crucial for preserving the democratic principles and serving the public interest. When the political statements are inappropriate or contain insults, journalists have a responsibility to report them in context, analyse them, and deconstruct them so that the public not only receives the information but also understands the harmful nature of such dialogue.

In such cases, the media have a dual responsibility: to uphold the right to free speech while preventing the spread of hate speech, vulgarity, and indecency. This is especially important during election campaigns when the public trust in institutions is being tested. Professional journalism must recognise the potential for escalation of the political rhetoric and take an active role in condemning such narratives.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE POLITICAL ACTORS

01

Politicians should contribute to a healthy and constructive political en-vironment that fosters dialogue in the interest of the society as a whole.

Harmful narratives in the political communication create a toxic public sphere, deepening divisions and intolerance. It is a democratic obligation for the politicians to work towards the depolarisation of the public discourse. Complex issues concerning national development cannot be resolved through the 'we – the good' versus 'you – the bad' approach, as this only exacerbates the divisions among the citizens and the voters. Discussion and dialogue between the political opponents are necessary.

The political actors should engage in discussions and aim for dialogue with their political opponents rather than exacerbating divisions, as this would encourage productive debates. They must refrain from spreading hate speech, discriminatory speech, manipulations, disinformation, false information, and malinformation, lies, character attacks, which could erode public trust in the electoral process and the institutions[57].

02

Politicians are responsible to be transparent in their communication with the public, providing timely, accurate, and clear information about their work to prevent the spread of disinformation.

Harmful narratives that lack transparency and fail to provide supporting evidence for their claims restrict the constructive public debate. Toxic rhetoric overshadows the key issues and prevents the society from engaging in meaningful dialogue on how to address matters of public interest.

In this regard, the political actors have a duty to comply with the principle of transparency[58]. Politicians have a big responsibility towards the society due to the positions they hold, which are entrusted to them by the citizens. They are therefore obliged to maintain a high level of transparency before the public and the media on matters of public concern. Transparency is considered one of the key prerequisites in the fight against corruption. The political entities must practise active transparency in their work and publish various materials that are of public interest.

[57] Institute of Communication Studies. (2023). Standards and principles of political communication. HARM-TIVE. Retrieved on 10 February, 2025, from https://respublica.edu.mk/istrazhuvanje-shtetna/shtetni-narativi-i-indikatori/standardi-i-nachela-za-politichkata-komunikacija/

[58] Institute of Communication Studies. (2023). Standards and principles of political communication. HARM-TIVE. Retrieved on 10 February, 2025, from https://respublica.edu.mk/istrazhuvanje-shtetna/shtetni-narativi-i-indikatori/standardi-i-nachela-za-politichkata-komunikacija/

The use of harmful narratives, particularly when allegations of unlawful or corrupt practices are made without presenting facts, data, or submitting criminal charges to the competent authorities, renders the political communication superficial and sensationalist rather than substantive. For this reason, the political actors must contribute to improving the quality of the public discourse in a democratic society and ensure that voters have access to information on the key issues of public interest.

03

Politicians have a responsibility, through their communication with the public, to respect and exercise freedom of expression as both a right and an obligation.

When the politicians use harmful narratives to distract the public, they avoid answering real questions of public interest. However, when they are responsible towards the public, i.e., communicating with honesty and integrity, they can establish themselves as credible political actors who earn public trust.

The politicians must particularly respect and exercise freedom of expression without infringing on the rights of others, as the way they communicate in public shapes the political culture of the society. The politicians must be open to criticism from the public and the political opponents. However, when responding to attacks or presenting information about their opponents, they should do so responsibly—ensuring that the information is accurate, supported by facts and arguments, and does not harm the dignity or integrity of others.

Additionally, the political actors must make significant documents and data available to the public, such as their statutes, party structure, decision-making process, financial reports and other relevant documents related to their work by which they will show accountability to the public about their work.

04

Elected and appointed officials, as well as party officials, are obliged to practice ethical communication when interacting with the public and the media.

The politicians must uphold the principle of ethical communication in their communication with the public[59]. The political parties are encouraged to adopt codes of conduct that oblige their members, officials, candidates, and elected or appointed representatives to address speech that incites intolerance, discrimination, or hatred. They should also treat the participants in their press conferences with respect, ensure equal opportunities for questions, and refrain from labelling the journalists or human rights activists[60].

[59] Institute of Communication Studies. (2023). Standards and principles of political communication. HARM-TIVE. Retrieved on 10 February, 2025, from https://respublica.edu.mk/istrazhuvanje-shtetna/shtetni-narativi-i-indikatori/standardi-i-nachela-za-politichkata-komunikacija/

[60] OSCE. (2021). Joint Declaration Politicians and Public Officials and Freedom of Expression. Retrieved on 10 January, 2025, from https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/9/4/501697_0.pdf

When acting as government representatives, the political actors must adhere to the principles of professionalism and impartiality in communication.[53] Elected and appointed officials not only have access to their party communication channels but also to the official communication channels of the institutions they manage. In this regard, they should use the government communication channels for informing the public about government policies, decisions, and measures, ensuring a clear distinction between the work of the institutions and of the political parties, and preventing the misuse of the official communication channels for party promotion. Additionally, elected and appointed officials have access to the public officials responsible for communication within these institutions. These officials must remain impartial, maintain objectivity, and prioritise their professional duties over personal interests.

05

The political actors should use the social media as a platform for po-litical debate characterised by honesty, timeliness, conciseness, and creativi-ty, rather than for disseminating harmful narratives.

Social media are an effective tool for political communication and can be used effectively by the political actors to engage directly with diverse audiences. However, the social media can also become a battleground for spreading harmful narratives, insults, and attacks on the political opponents or even specific social communities, given the vast number of users. Therefore, the politicians should practice respectful and civic communication, even in the face of criticism, and avoid inflammatory speech—especially as their supporters can easily be influenced by toxic rhetoric.

The politicians should also use the social media to gauge the public opinion, rather than merely promoting their work and views. They can use these platforms to engage with their voters, seek feedback, and understand different perspectives, demonstrating a commitment to serving the citizens whose trust they seek during the elections.

06

The political actors should not use the election processes as a plat-form for character attacks.

Character attacks often involve insults, character smears, or demonization of the political opponents during the election campaigns, rather than focusing on issues, positions, or policies represented by the opponents. In the post-truth era, where communication is heavily influenced by emotions, it is often easier for the political actors to capture the attention of the public through personal insults or by highlighting negative traits of their political opponents rather than presenting fact-based arguments.[61]

When politicians resort to such tactics, they shift the focus away from the key issues, spreading harmful narratives and preventing meaningful public discourse. If such discourse is tolerated or re-

[61] Institute of Communication Studies. (2023). Standards and principles of political communication. HARM-TIVE. Retrieved on 10 February, 2025, from https://respublica.edu.mk/istrazhuvanje-shtetna/shtetni-narativi-i-indikatori/standardi-i-nachela-za-politichkata-komunikacija/

ciprocated by the opponents instead of being condemned, it fosters a toxic atmosphere. In such an environment, the voters are not informed about the political platforms in the election process but are instead exposed to the personal animosities between the politicians. This poses a risk of discouraging civic political engagement, eroding trust in politicians, and reducing the elections to superficial personality contests rather than competitions of policy ideas and decision-making approaches.

The political actors have a responsibility to refrain from character attacks, avoid creating a toxic atmosphere, and uphold the principle of ethical communication and preventing spreading of hate speech and discriminatory speech[62].

As key stakeholders in the social life, the political actors, with their behaviour, influence vast number of citizens. Therefore, in the interest of the public good, they should contribute to constructive debate rather than toxic and polarised political debate and negative behaviour of the public figures. Additionally, the politicians who engage in character attacks risk damaging their own credibility as leaders, as citizens expect them to provide solutions in the national interest. This, in turn, can lead to a decline in the trust of the voters in the politicians.

07

Political actors should refrain from communication that fuels ethno-centrism, nationalism, and extreme patriotism during election cycles.

Election cycles are typically a period of heightened emotional charge in the public communication from almost all political actors involved in the process. In the Republic of North Macedonia, experience shows that during elections (i.e., the pre-election period and the election campaign), politicians' rhetoric is often infused with ethnocentrism and nationalism, contributing to an inflamed and polarised political debate.

The discourse containing elements of ethnocentrism, nationalism, or extreme patriotism can lead to divisions between different ethnic communities, as well as between different political groups, and sometimes even within a single ethnic community. Calls for 'restoration', 'protection' or 'preservation' of the national identity and unity, accusations against the political opponents of 'serving' foreign interests, or glorification of one's own nation or political leader as an ethnic community leader, can be inflammatory rhetoric that fosters hostility, discord, and intolerance among different communities.

Election processes are a sensitive period during which the political actors are under increased public scrutiny, and their actions and statements attract greater attention. If they frequently use ethnocentric and nationalist discourse during the election cycle, they may gain short-term popularity. However, if elected officials continue using such discourse, it may contribute to divisions in the society, especially in a multicultural and multiethnic society.

Political actors should focus on communicating their political platforms, positions on matters of public interest, and improving social conditions, solutions that will bring better life for the citizens. They should refrain from identity politics that cause divisions and alienation among different groups. Instead, responsible politics should aim for integration, prioritising issues such as innovation, inclusion, or economic development in the society that values peace, democracy, and human rights.

[62] Institute of Communication Studies. (2023). Standards and principles of political communication. HARM-TIVE. Retrieved on 10 February, 2025, from https://respublica.edu.mk/istrazhuvanje-shtetna/shtetni-narativi-i-indikatori/standardi-i-nachela-za-politichkata-komunikacija/

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE MEDIA AND THE JOURNALISTS

01

Journalists should not create or report harmful narratives.

Journalists have a duty to the public, which includes avoiding the creation or dissemination of harmful narratives produced by the political actors.

Such practices have serious consequences for the political culture and the way public discourse is formed and developed. A public discourse dominated by harmful narratives has long-term effects on democracy, as the gradual normalisation of the harmful narratives in politics leaves a lasting mark on the democratic processes and normalises insults, intolerance, hate speech, lies, manipulation, and malinformation.

Journalists must counter the harmful narratives through responsible journalism that prioritises the public interest. This means avoiding all forms of insults, disinformation, inappropriate language, populism, nationalism, etc. It also requires critically examining the statements of the political actors and refusing to disseminate content that promotes harmful narratives and foments intolerance and division.

02

Journalists should not merely report the statements of the political ac-tors but verify, analyse, and explain them in the given context to bring the truth closer to the citizens.

Journalists should not be passive reporters of information but active mediators who analyse and critically assess the statements of the political actors. They should adhere to the Code of Ethics of the Journalists of Macedonia, which, in its first article, emphasises the importance of verifying and confirming information '[…] The journalists shall publish correct, verified information and shall not conceal essential information or forge documents. If given information cannot be confirmed or if it is a matter of assumption, i.e. speculation, that should be noted and published. Correctness of the information ought to be verified as much as possible[63]'.

Additionally, the Guidelines for Ethical Reporting for Online Media highlight that 'When transmitting claims of political entities or other sources, online media shall strive whenever possible to verify those claims, that is, not to be mere transmitters of 'served facts' by someone else. By doing so, they shall enable the audience to make a distinction between facts and speculations or misinformation, especially when it comes to important and current events and topics.'[64]

[63] Association of Journalists of Macedonia. (2001). Code of Ethics of the Journalists of Macedonia Retrieved on 18 November, 2024, from https://znm.org.mk/kodeks-na-novinarite-na-makedonija/

[64] Council of Media Ethics of Macedonia. (2021). Guidelines for Ethical Reporting for Online Media (Application of the Code of Ethics of the Journalists in the Online Sphere). Retrieved on 29 November, 2024, from

03

The journalist must make professional distance from the political enti-ties.

Reporting on political processes, especially elections, must be impartial and balanced, and 'the journalist must make professional distance from the political entities[65]. 'This obligation is not only a matter of ethical responsibility but also a key prerequisite for building public trust.

The role of the professional journalist is to ask the important questions and verify information and claims. The journalist should not act as a conduit for the political propaganda but rather as a critical observer who ensures that the public has a clear and accurate understanding of the events.

It is important to emphasise that the journalist's role is not to create counterpositions or engage in public disputes, but to scrutinise and contextualise the claims of all those participating in the public dialogue. This approach safeguards the public interest and contributes to informed and rational decision-making among the citizens.

A critical approach towards all events and political actors in the society is fundamental to impartial and balanced journalism. Only through a consistent commitment to objectivity and integrity can journalists maintain their role as guardians of democracy.

04

Journalists should avoid sensationalism and false exclusivity in their reporting.

Journalists must be aware that their choice of words, terminology, and the framing of events influence the dynamics in the society and shape the perception of the citizens. This is particularly important when reporting on sensitive issues, as well as when reporting political statements intended to incite fear and panic, potentially undermining the trust of the citizens in institutions. Journalists shall ensure that the dissemination of information or opinion does not contribute to hatred or prejudice and shall do their utmost to avoid facilitating the spread of discrimination on grounds such as geographical, social or ethnic origin, race, gender, sexual orientation, language, religion, disability, political and other opinions.[66]'

Journalists have a dual role. Besides the responsibility to avoid inflammatory rhetoric and sensationalism in their reporting, they must also carefully analyse the statements of the political actors to ensure their dissemination does not contribute to tensions, fear, or divisions in the society. This means thorough context verification, removal of exaggerations, and focusing on the core facts rather than emotional or confrontational dimensions. By doing so, the media serve as a factor of stability and objectivity rather than a catalysts for divisions and conflicts.

[65] Association of Journalists of Macedonia. (2001). Code of Ethics of the Journalists of Macedonia Retrieved on 18 November, 2024, from https://znm.org.mk/kodeks-na-novinarite-na-makedonija/

[66] International Federation of Journalists (IFJ). (n.d.). Global Charter of Ethics for Journalists. Retrieved on 18 November, 2024, from https://www.ifj.org/fileadmin/user_upload/Global_Charter_of_Ethics_EN.pdf

05

The journalist should not use inappropriate language, insults, or vul-garities.

The journalist is obliged 'to uphold a culture of speech and ethics. Impolite manner of communicating with the public is on the contrary with the journalistic profession.'[67] This article is amended in the Guidelines for Ethical Reporting for Online Media, which state that journalists shall avoid using impolite or vulgar language in their journalistic content (swearing, abusive words, derogatory expressions). The Guidelines state that the use of vulgar or impolite language must be editorially justified in terms of the public interest and the expectations of the audience, regardless of the journalistic genre in which it is used.[68]

06

The journalist must not use *inflammatory language directed at various ethnic, religious, sexual groups and communities.*

Article 10 of the Code of Ethics of the Journalists of Macedonia clearly states that the journalist 'shall not use hate speech and shall not encourage violence and discrimination of any sort (nationality, religion, race, sex, social class, language, sexual orientation, political orientation...).[69]'

In addition to this, it is crucial for the journalists to recognise, analyse, and condemn such speech when it comes from the political actors. Inflammatory speech targeting specific communities or groups, especially those in the minority, openly fosters a discourse of intolerance/stigmatisation, which can easily lead to violent mobilisation.

07

The journalist ought to make clear distinction between facts and opin-ions

Especially during election reporting, the journalist must make clear distinction between facts and opinions. 'Presenters and journalists must not express their own political views and opinions in the news. Media may reference different sources of information and then verify the facts behind statements, exposing false claims through argumentation. This means avoiding bias in favour of or against any particular side.[70]'

This principle is the principle of professional and inclusive reporting, offering the public a broad perspective and ensuring fair conditions for all political actors to convey their viewpoints.

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[67] Association of Journalists of Macedonia. (2001). Code of Ethics of the Journalists of Macedonia Retrieved on 18 November, 2024, from https://znm.org.mk/kodeks-na-novinarite-na-makedonija/

[68] Council of Media Ethics of Macedonia. (2021). Guidelines for Ethical Reporting for Online Media (Application of the Code of Ethics of the Journalists in the Online Sphere). Retrieved on 29 November, 2024

[69] Association of Journalists of Macedonia. (2001). Code of Ethics of the Journalists of Macedonia Retrieved on 18 November, 2024, from https://znm.org.mk/kodeks-na-novinarite-na-makedonija/

[70] Tuneva, M., Chadikovski, M., Bislimi, N., Janevska, E. (2020). Guide for Ethical Media Coverage of Elections. Skopje: Association of Journalists of Macedonia. Retrieved on 29 November, 2024, from https://znm.org.mk/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/prirachnik-za-etichko-izvestuvane-od-izbori-vo-severna-makedonija.pdf

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