

# SUMMARY

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## Introduction

The second report Determining Political **Harmful Narratives** (HARM-TIVE) is a sublimation of the data from the monitoring of the communication practices of the political actors in **November and December 2023** in which harmful narratives were identified. Furthermore, the report includes an analysis of the manner in which these harmful narratives are treated in the central news editions of nine television and 11 online media outlets.

Similar to [the first report for September and October 2023](#), here also the content and volume of the harmful narratives propagated by the political actors is empirically captured, as well as the intensity, the topics and entities towards which the negative messages are directed. At the same time, the report indicates the violations of [the standards and principles for non-discriminatory and transparent political communication](#) by the political representatives, as well as [the standards for professional and ethical journalistic reporting](#).

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

The methodological framework, samples and monitoring dynamics, as well as details of the entire research process are available at: [HARM-TIVE](#).

This document presents a summary of the monitoring in November and December 2023.

The entire research can be read [HERE](#).

## KEY FINDINGS

In the last two months of 2023, the political actors in Macedonia increased the use of harmful narratives compared to September and October, and this was reflected in the media, especially in the online media outlets which contribute to the pollution of the media space with one-sided and uncritical reporting. The growth of harmful narratives coincided with the period of preparations for the formation of the caretaker government that should conduct the elections scheduled for May 2024. The results of the four-month monitoring so far indicate a slight increase in the number of determined harmful narratives, which in turn indicates the probability that as the election date approaches, the harmful rhetoric will increase and that it will become more and more present in the media.

## **Unscrupulous rhetoric**

There is a very small number of parties that did not use harmful narratives at all in November and December, and the largest parties (VMRO-DPMNE and SDSM), as in the previous period, lead in their use. The monitoring and analysis of the party public communication for November and December show that in the public discourse on the websites and Facebook posts by political actors in North Macedonia, rhetoric is often used in which unverified findings and unsubstantiated allegations of corruption, non-transparency, unprofessionalism, abuse of office are presented as a basis for accusing political opponents.

SDSM usually does this when it criticizes mayors from the ranks of 'DPMNE', and tends to put 'pro-Russian' Levica and VMRO-DPMNE in the same group and label them as 'anti-people' and 'anti-EU' political bloc, which is quite different from their self-presentation as a 'pro-European bloc', a transparent and EU-oriented party, which is a defender of the people's interests. On the other hand, VMRO-DPMNE frequently presents itself as the saviour and defender of the people, and uses unverified and unsubstantiated allegations when it criticizes the Government of 'SDS and DUI' for corrupt and irresponsible work. Levica, on the other hand, is the harshest in its criticism and refers to a narrative where they are 'one against all', that is, they are fighting against the 'corrupt' and 'susceptible to foreign influence from the imperialist West' Government of 'SDS-DUI-VMRO'.

## **Good and bad**

Harmful narratives that were noted in the monitored period are mostly related to undermining trust in institutions, biased selection and encouraging division between us - the good ones and you - the bad ones. Regarding DUI, there are harmful posts dominated by ethnically motivated discourse and ethnocentrism, especially for the Day of the Albanian Flag, and the self-presentation is mostly in the line of a defender of the rights of Albanians, a pro-Western and pro-European option that works in line with Western values.

Among the opposition parties - Alternativa, Besa and the Democratic Movement, a unified, joint communication can be noted as the European Union for Change - EUC, especially in expressing views that are critical of the ruling parties, and especially of the Democratic Union for Integration - DUI, which is their main opponent. In that way, they are trying to get a message to a wider audience, that is, a larger number of voters, bearing in mind the 2024 election year, and considering that the EUC presents itself as an alternative to DUI. At the same time, in the messages to the public, the EUC is presented as an option that will bring a better future, justice and eradication of corruption.

## **Defamation, labels and insidious attacks**

Practices for slandering political opponents and character attacks were noted in almost all major parties, which are quite communicatively proactive. For SDSM, the focus of negative labels is on the leader of VMRO-DPMNE, Hristijan Mickoski, most often named as 'obstacle', 'blockers' of the European integration processes; the opposition VMRO-DPMNE uses labels and insults towards SDSM and Prime Minister Dimitar Kovachevski, calling him an 'incompetent', 'dishonest' politician. There is a demonization of the personality of Deputy Prime Minister Artan Grubi from DUI, present as a trend in the communication by the European Union for Change, but also in Levica and VMRO-DPMNE. Regarding Levica, the main messages are aimed at SDSM and DUI, often followed by a range of insults such as 'impotent quislings from SDS and ethno-tribalism secessionists from DUI', referring to DUI as 'uchki' and 'thugs', and the President of the Assembly as 'deserter'.

The rhetoric of almost all political parties is based on the use of words and formulations that denigrate a certain group of people in order to cause discord between pro- and anti-European, which is more prevalent on Facebook pages and is used to provoke divisions in society, and occasionally also for spreading panic, fear and uncertainty.

Political appear oblivious that freedom of expression also includes an obligation, not just a right. According to Article 10 of the [European Convention of Human Rights](#), everyone has the right to freedom of expression. This right includes the freedom to express a certain opinion and to receive and give information and ideas without interference from public authorities and regardless of borders. This Article does not prevent States from requiring the licensing of broadcasting, television transmission or cinema undertakings. The exercise of these freedoms, because it also carries with it duties and responsibilities, may be subject to certain formalities, conditions, restrictions or penalties that are prescribed by law and necessary in a democratic society, in the interest of national security, territorial integrity or public safety, to prevent riot or crime, to protect health or morals, to protect the reputation or rights of others, to prevent the disclosure of confidential information or to maintain the authority and impartiality of the judiciary.

## **Government channels for party propaganda**

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

With the posts with party promotion and propaganda on the official Facebook profiles, the Prime Minister and the ministers directly violate the principles of professionalism and impartiality in the communication of government representatives, as well as the Government's [Code of Ethics for Civil Servants](#). This negatively affects the confidence of the public in the ability of the political actors to work impartially for the benefit of all citizens. This type of posts, in which no distinction is made between the activities of persons as holders of party positions and holders of public offices, represents a violation of the principles of professional communication with the public.

## **Lack of critical journalism**

Online media reporting in the last two months of 2023 was characterized by an increase in the number of harmful narratives compared to the previous analysed months. Accusations that undermine trust in state institutions, biased selection, attacking and defaming/demonizing a certain person and populism dominate. Online media give oxygen to these toxic narratives mostly with the established practice of mere reporting of party press releases and speeches of political entities. From the analysed media, Kurir and Republika portals are leading (in more than 1/3 of all identified 'journalistic' texts), and the rest of the portals are far behind them.

By monitoring the news items of the nine TV stations in November 2023 a total of 69 news items with harmful narratives were registered, which does not differ much from the monitoring of the previous months (September – 76, October – 66). On the other hand, a greater number of news items with harmful narratives are noted in November compared to September and October on MTV 1, MTV 2, Kanal 5 and TV 21. In the largest number of cases, such narratives are produced by political actors and not by the journalists. However, the uncritical and unverified reporting of all political statements that abound with unsubstantiated accusations of

corruption, unprofessional work, abuse of office, the multiplication of strong rhetoric and negative labelling of political opponents in the media ether contribute to undermining trust in institutions, deepening polarization and lowering the level of political communication and the culture of speech.

## **Challenges**

One of the goals of this research is to highlight the standards and ethical rules that political actors and the media should adhere to in order to clean the public and media environment of toxic narratives. Political parties, by their very nature and function of existence, have a legitimate aim to articulate the interests of citizens, to criticize harmful policies and to offer solutions seeking the support of voters to come or stay in power. Critical and harsh rhetoric is part of the political game, but in democratic societies there are a set of standards for ethical political communication and due respect for political rivals. Publishing information that is manipulative, disinformation, misinformation and malinformation violates the principle of evidence-based communication. Through such discourse in public communication by political actors, democratic processes and elections can be seriously affected, by creating and spreading lies, character attacks, which can result in a reduction of trust in the electoral process and in the institutions.

Elected and appointed officials, as well as party officials, have an obligation to practice ethics in their communication with the public and the media. With [the OSCE joint declaration](#) the political parties are encouraged to adopt codes of conduct which, among other things, oblige their members, officials, candidates and elected and appointed officials to tackle speech that incites intolerance, discrimination or hatred. Similar to the joint declaration, [Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe](#) calls for the adoption of codes of conduct, which will provide for internal processes for sanctioning hate speech.

On the other hand, in the coming period, the media will have a very important and serious task to report on political election campaigns in a professional and impartial manner and to convey their messages, promises and promotion in a balanced and comprehensive manner. Media workers should not forget that according to Article 14 of [Code of Journalists](#) - reporting on political processes, especially elections, should be impartial and balanced, and the journalist must ensure a professional distance from political entities.

It will also be important that they not be complicit in creating or transmitting harmful narratives and be a tool in the political bipolarization in society. Their task will be to successfully recognise such narratives when they come from political actors and to find a way to avoid them and not give them space in which they will dominate the public discourse.

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

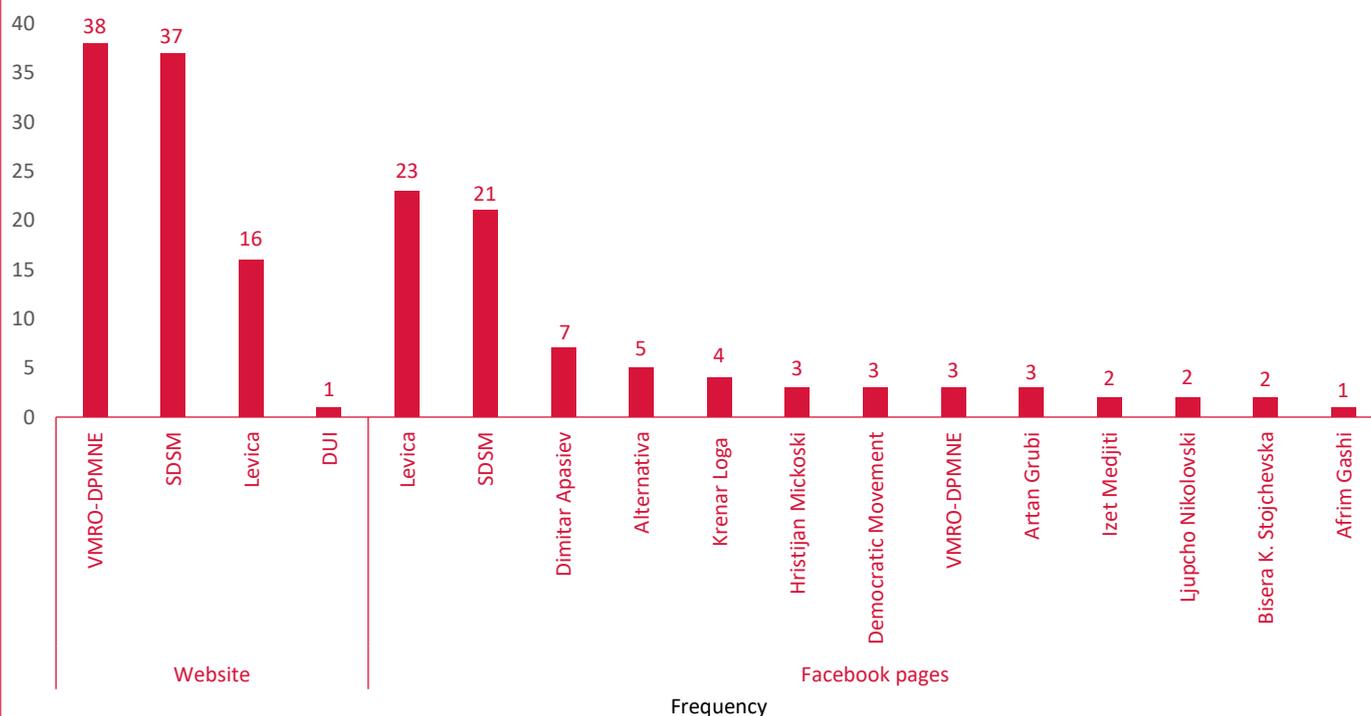
The subject of the monitoring are the websites and Facebook profiles of the 10 political parties that are represented by at least two MPs in the Assembly (Alliance for Albanians, Alternativa, DUI, Democratic Movement, VMRO-DMPNE, Levica, LDP, New Social Democratic Party, SDSM, Socialist Party). The profiles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

During November and December, these actors were analysed on 14 days in November and 16 days in December, according to the dynamics 'every consecutive third and fourth day of the month'.

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

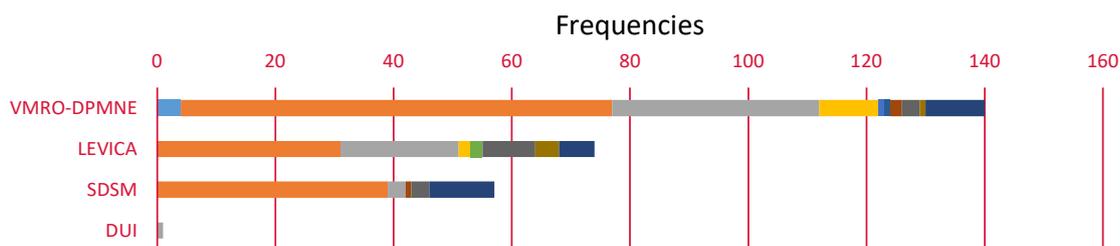
In the period from 1 to 30 November, on the websites and the Facebook pages of the 10 political parties and their leaders as well as the government ministers, a total of 92 posts on the parties' websites and a total of 79 Facebook posts containing a harmful narrative were identified. The monitoring showed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

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



Monitoring of websites shows that unverified findings and claims of corruption, as well as the deliberate failure to convey the full picture of the ‘event’ are most frequently used to develop harmful narratives of undermining trust in institutions and biased selection, but it is seldom noted that the indicator of deliberate omission of information is also used to create disinformation narratives.

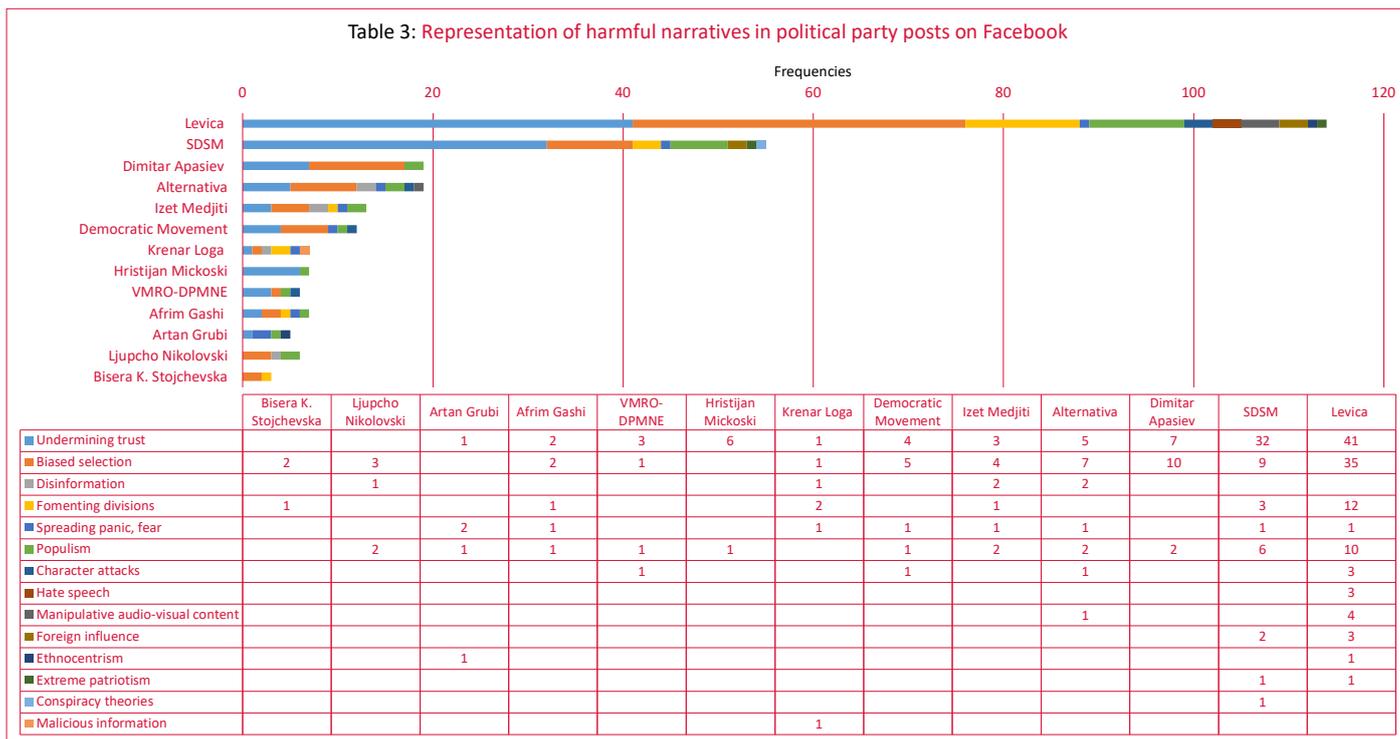
**Table 2: Representation of harmful narratives in the posts of political parties on their websites**



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

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

Table 3: Representation of harmful narratives in political party posts on Facebook

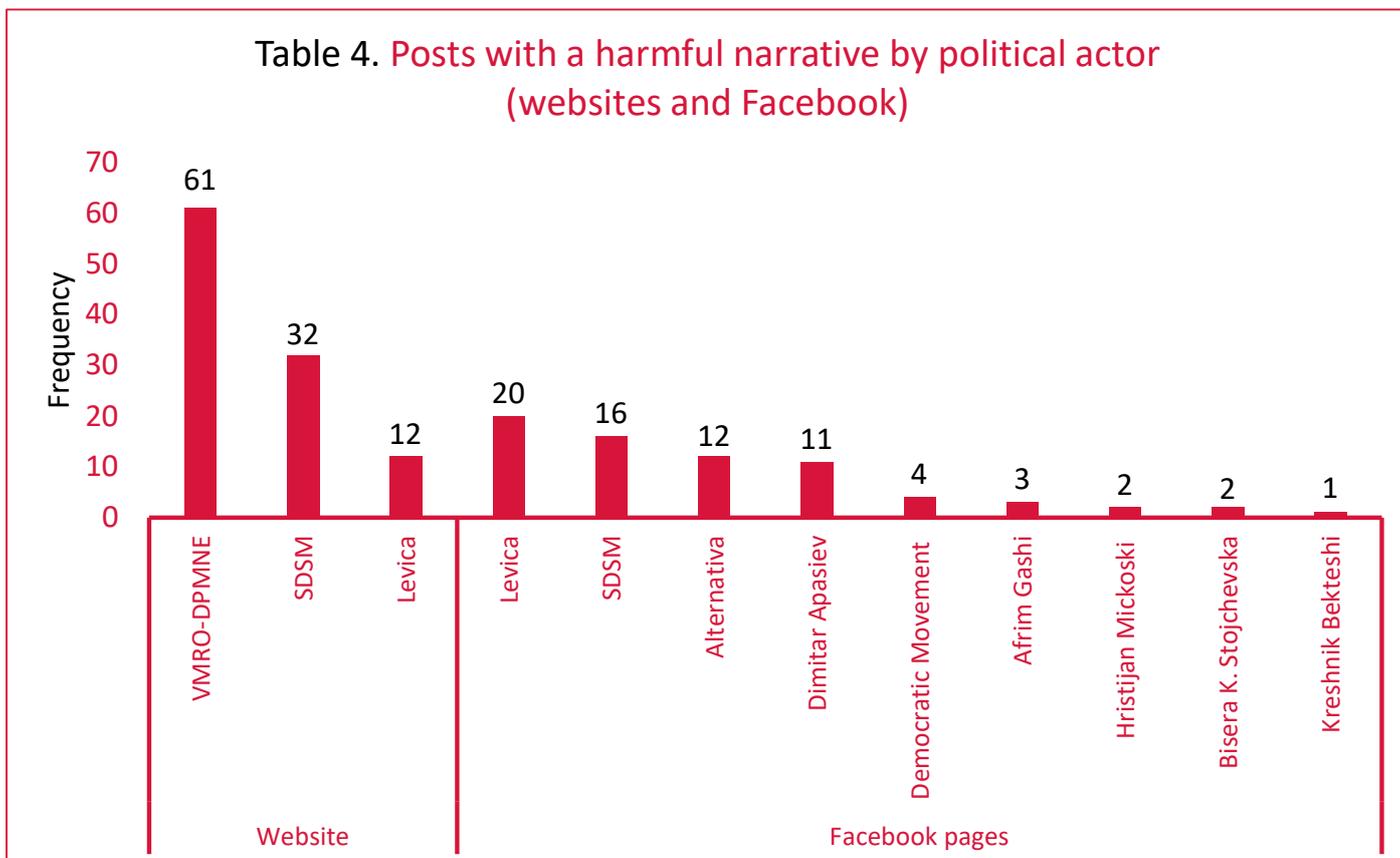


## 1.2. Communication practices of political parties and their leaders in December 2023

In the period from 1 to 31 December, from the monitoring of the websites and Facebook pages of 10 political parties and their leaders, a total of 105 posts on the parties' websites and a total of 71 Facebook posts containing a harmful narrative were identified. More than half, or 58.1 percent of the identified harmful narratives on the parties' websites this month are from the party of VMRO-DPMNE, followed by 30.5 percent from SDSM, and 11.4 percent or 12 posts from Levica.

On the other hand, on the Facebook pages, no posts with harmful narratives were identified by VMRO-DPMNE, except for two posts by the leader Hristijan Mickoski, and the most harmful narratives were noted by Levica, which, together with the posts by the leader Apasiev, have a total of 31 posts (43.7 percent of the total number) with harmful narratives, while for SDSM there are recorded 16 posts (or 22.5 percent of the total number) with harmful narratives. Furthermore, on Facebook, 12 posts with harmful narratives by Alternativa were noted and together with the three posts by the leader Afrim Gashi, they represent 21.1 percent of the total number of Facebook posts with harmful narratives, while for their coalition partner Democratic Movement, four posts with harmful narratives

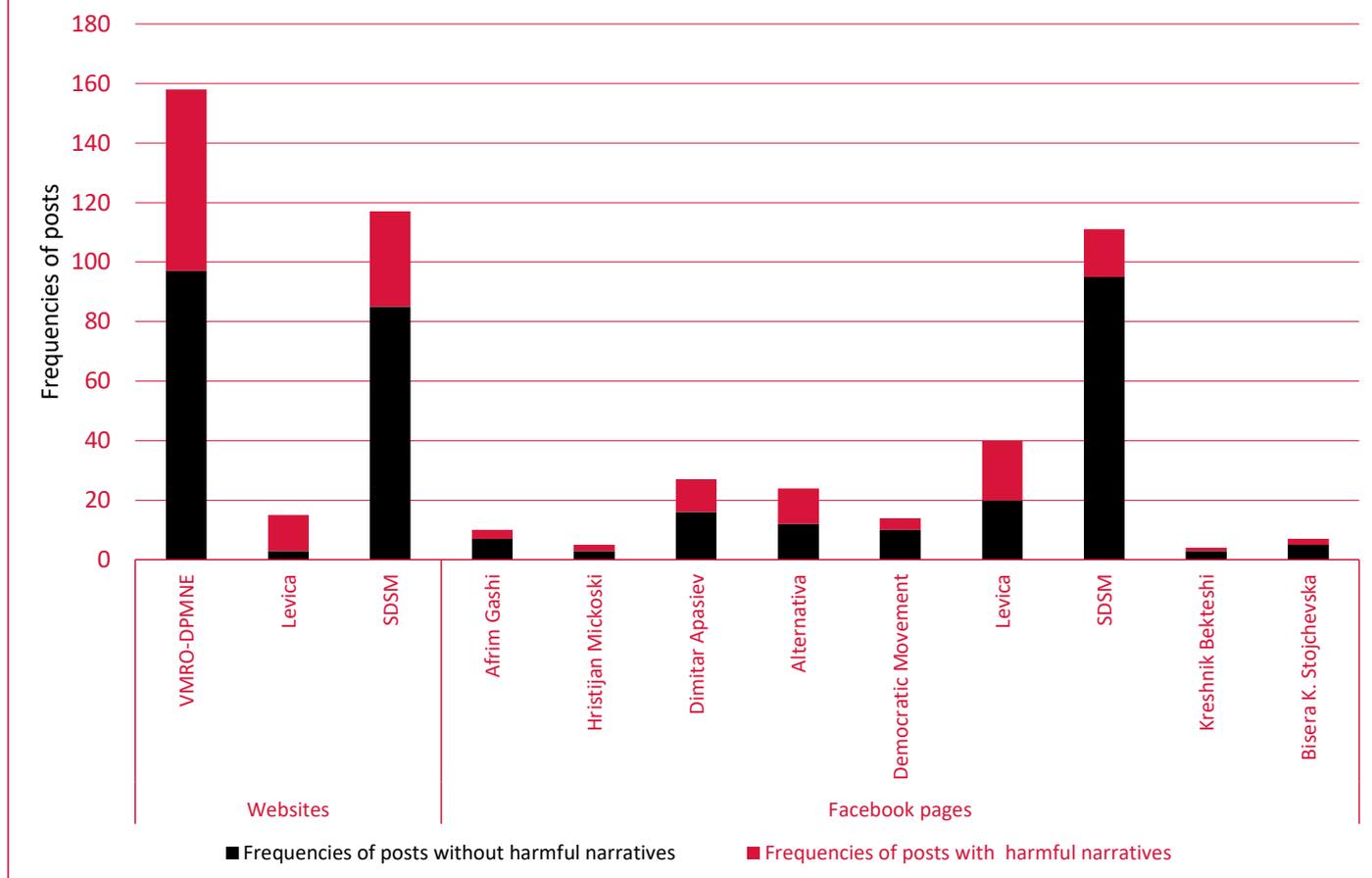
were noted. This month, harmful narratives were noted by two government ministers, namely two by the Minister of Culture from SDSM, Bisera Kostadinovska-Stojchevska and the Minister of Economy from DUI, Kreshnik Bekteshi.



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

In an attempt to calculate which party had the most harmful public communication and considering that the parties differ in their size and the quantity of their public communications, a comparison was made between the number of posts with harmful narratives and the total number of posts on both communication channels of the political entities (Table 7). Thus, it can be concluded that on the websites, the communication of Levica was the most harmful, on whose website harmful narrative is noted in 80 percent of the posts, while in VMRO-DPMNE in 38.6 percent, and in SDSM in 27.3 percent from the total number of posts in the month, harmful communication is noted.

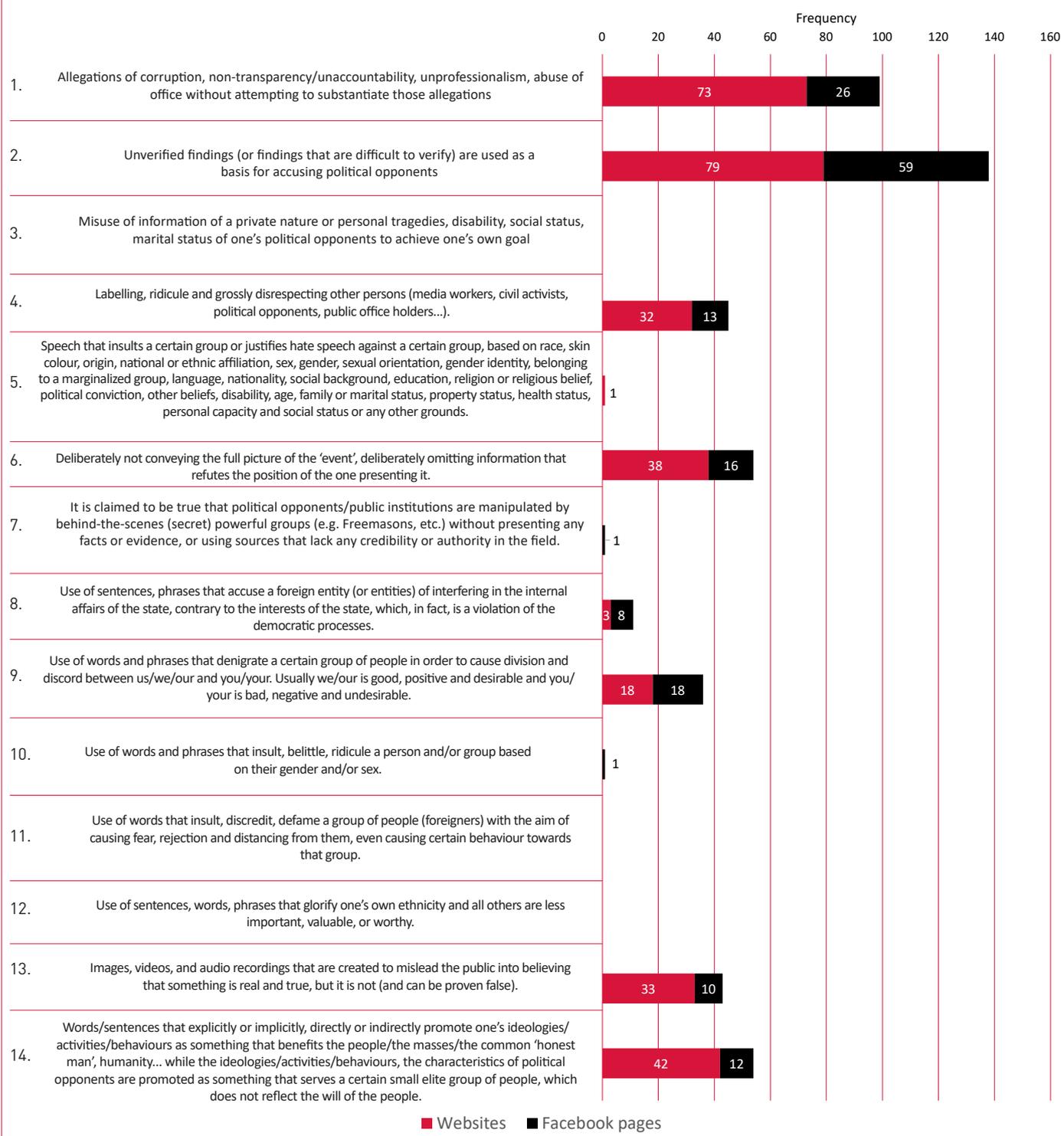
Table 5. Frequencies of posts with and without harmful narrative



Likewise, from the Facebook pages, it can be noted that 50 percent of Levica’s and 41 percent of the leader Apasiev’s posts contain a harmful narrative, while SDSM, which has the largest number of posts (111), is with only 14 percent harmful narrative. Although with a significantly lower total number of posts, the Alternativa Facebook page featured a harmful narrative in 50 percent of posts, while leader Afrim Gashi featured harmful communication in 30 percent of posts.

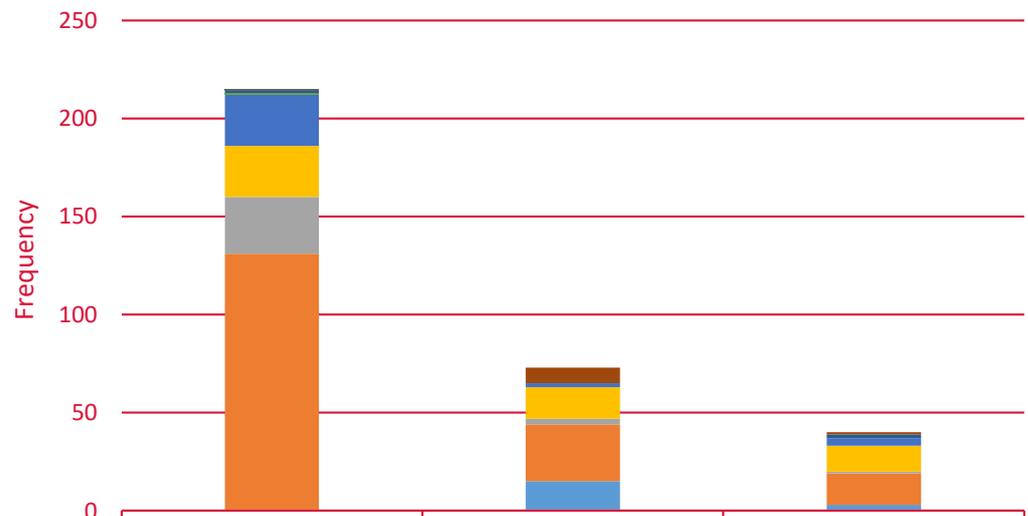
With a very similar trend from last month, and in December, unverified findings were often used on the websites and Facebook pages as a basis for accusing political opponents and unsubstantiated claims of corruption, unprofessionalism and abuse of office. In addition, one can note that in almost half of the posts on the websites the party ideology as something that benefits the people is promoted, while the characteristics of political opponents are promoted as something that does not reflect the will of the people.

Table 6: Presence of Harmful Narratives Indicators (Websites and Facebook)



Unverified findings are mostly noted in the identified posts with harmful narratives on both communication channels of SDSM (59.4 percent of the posts), but in the website posts one can also notice the frequent use of words that denigrate a certain group of people in order to cause divisions and discords between us - the good ones and you - the bad ones, while labelling, mocking and gross disrespect of political opponents are more frequently noted in Facebook posts. In the posts with harmful narratives of VMRO-DPMNE on the website, unsubstantiated claims of corruption, unprofessionalism and abuse of office (93.4 percent of the posts) and unverified findings (in 82 percent of the posts) prevail, but in half of the total number of identified posts with a harmful narrative there is labelling, mocking and gross disrespect of political opponents, information and words that denigrate a certain group of people in order to cause divisions and discord between us - the good ones and you - the bad ones.

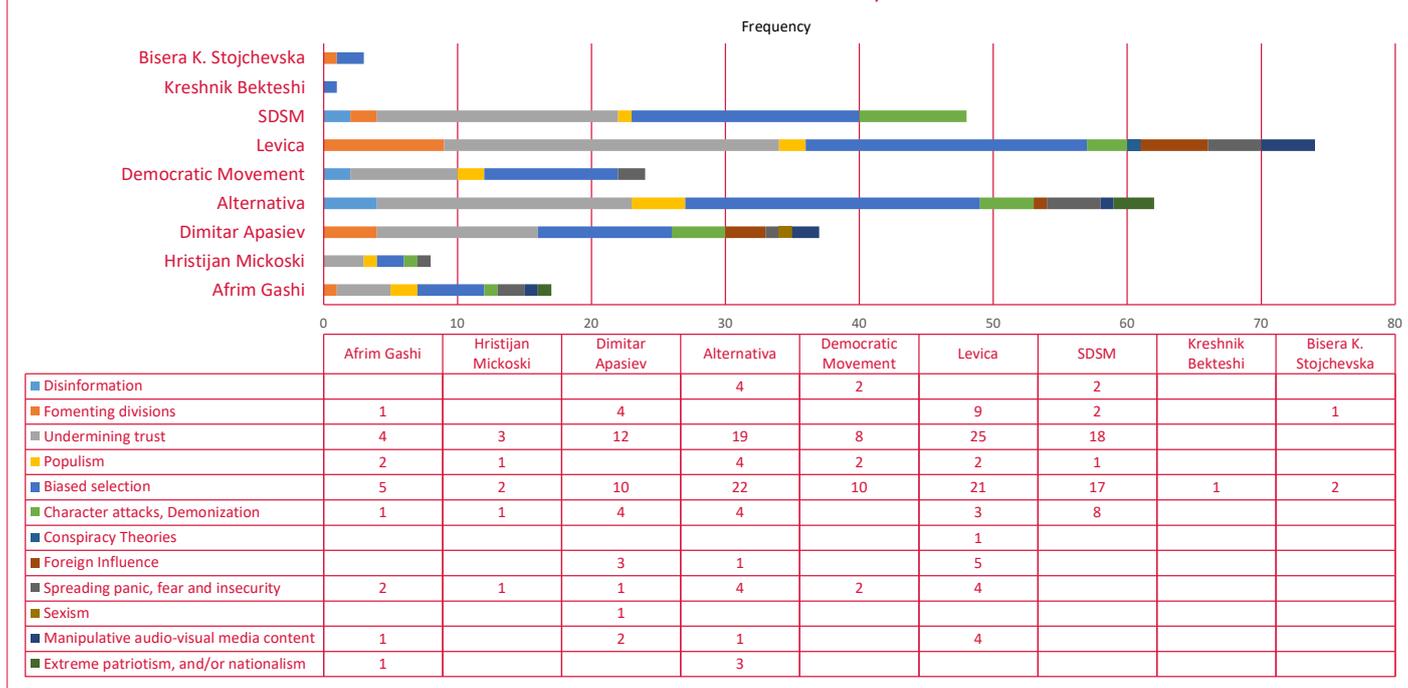
**Table 7: Presence of Harmful Narratives in Political Party Posts on Websites**



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

With the above indicators, on the websites, all three parties most often tried to undermine the trust in the institutions: VMRO-DPMNE in their total of 61 posts, tried to undermine the trust in the institutions 131 times, SDSM - 29 times in a total of 32 posts and Levica 16 times in a total of 12 posts. VMRO-DPMNE, with by far the largest number of harmful narratives, in addition to attempts to undermine trust in institutions, also developed harmful populist narratives (on 29 occasions), biasedly selected information that could mislead the public and developed a narrative for demonizing political opponents. In addition, one harmful narrative of negative foreign influence, one with conspiracy theories and one with hate speech are noted. SDSM also frequently applied a biased selection of information that could lead the public to wrong conclusions and encouraged social divisions, and seldom developed a harmful narrative by spreading panic, fear and insecurity.

Table 8: Presence of Harmful Narratives in the Political Party Posts on Facebook



The monitoring and analysis of Facebook pages shows the same trend of the most frequent harmful narratives about undermining trust in institutions (total 89) and biased selection of information leading to wrong conclusions in the public (total 90).

### 1.3. Monitoring of the communication of the members of the RNM Government through the official Facebook pages

#### November 2023

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

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

#### December 2023

Among the government officials, frequent use of the official profiles for the promotion of party policies and activities is also noted in December.

On the Prime Minister Dimitar Kovachevski's Facebook page also information is posted with regards to the party activities, which represents misuse of an official profile for party promotion, thereby blurring the boundary separating the party from the state.

On the Facebook page of the Deputy Prime Minister in charge of European affairs on 13.12.2023, on the official profile of Bojan Maricikj, a post was shared about Dimitar Kovachevski's speech at the SDSM party debate 'We are Europe'. The Minister of Foreign Affairs, Bujar Osmani, has posts about the promotion of DUI on his official profile. Several videos have been published, originally as the events were held and in the language in which they were held - Albanian, such as the appointment of DUI leader Ali Ahmeti as an honorary citizen of Tropoja and Ali Ahmeti's address on the same occasion, post from a reception organised from the president of DUI, a post from the Election Assembly of the youth of DUI – Chair branch and a post from an interview with Ali Ahmeti. On the Facebook page of the Minister of Interior, Oliver Spasovski, the practice of publishing content promoting party or personal promotion activities continues.

## **2. Monitoring of media coverage of political actors**

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

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

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

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

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

The monitoring was carried out over a total of 15 days during November and December, spread over a four-day intervals ('every fourth day in the month').

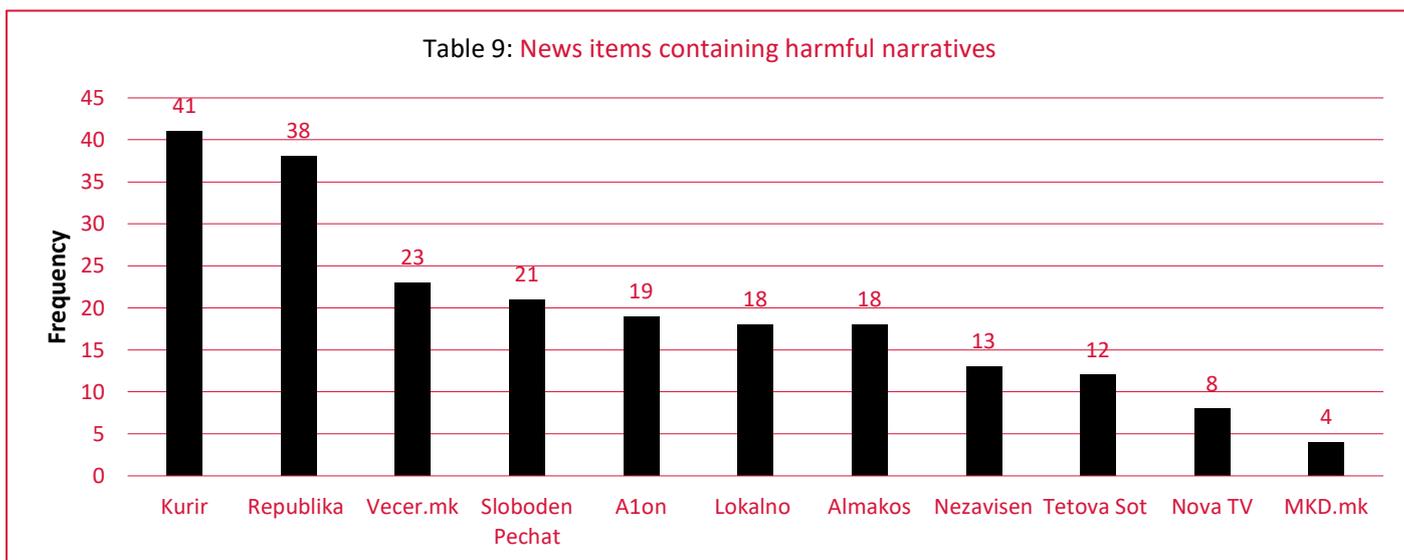
## 2.1. Monitoring report on online media coverage of political actors

### Report for November 2023

Over the period that was subject of analysis (a total of 7 days in November) a total of 215 posts which contained harmful narratives were identified in the monitored online media. In terms of genre, they were dominated by 'reported press release',<sup>1</sup> communicating the official position of a certain body (a political party, the Assembly, the Government, ministries) on a current event (73 news items) and 'reported speech of a politician' at a rally or at a different type of a gathering (49 news items). Put together (122 news items) these make up for 56.8 % of all the analysed news items. The largest number of them rely on a single source (178 or 82.8 %) and one-sided reporting dominates, meaning that the media outlet had only consulted one side (187 or 87.0 %). The largest number of these posts were not signed - as many as 181 news items (84.2 %).

### Presence of harmful narratives in online media

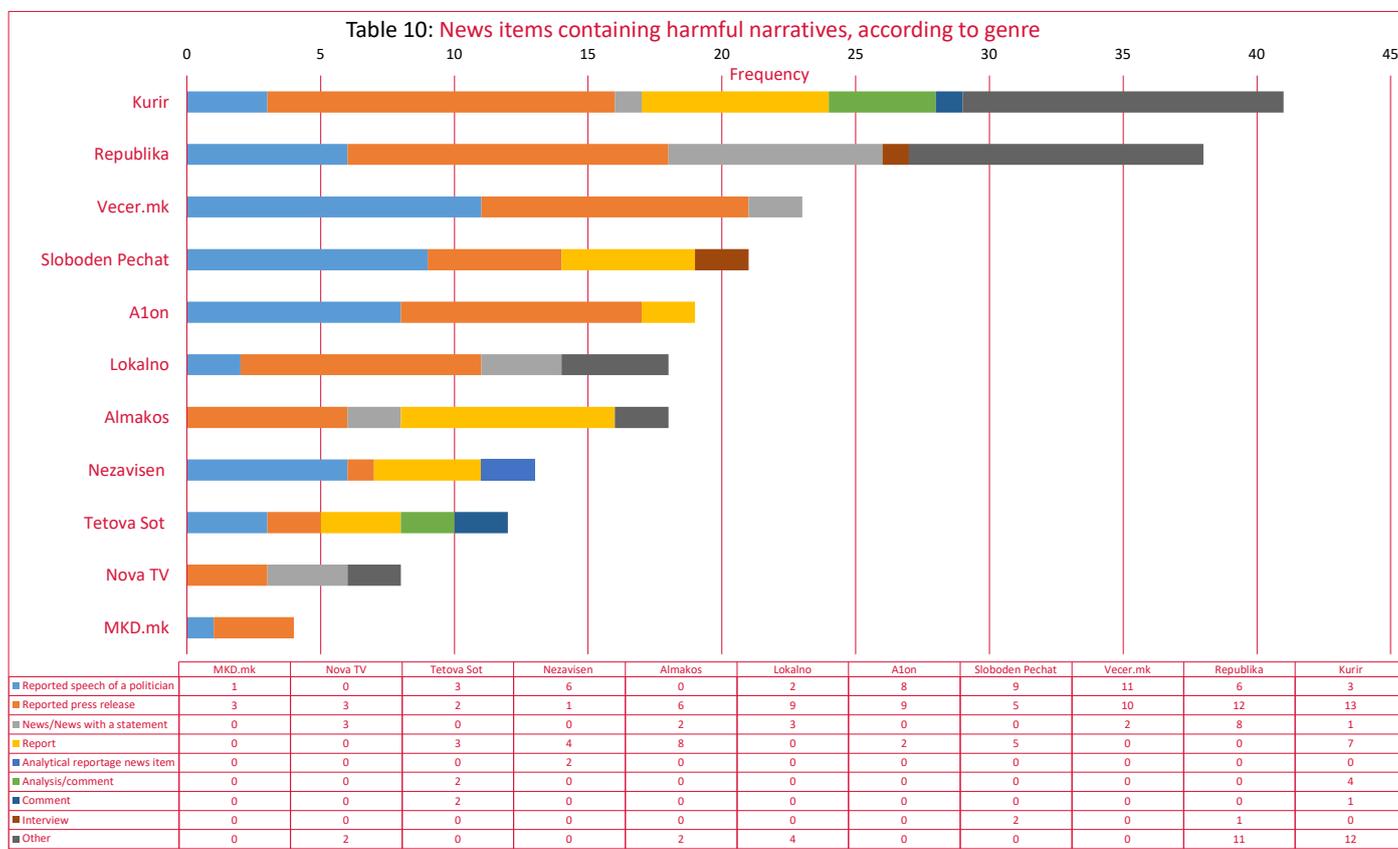
Two portals, Kurir and Republika, have the largest number of posts with harmful narratives (79 or 36.8%), followed by Večer.mk and Sloboden Pечат (44 or 20.5%), or together they make up more than half (123 or 57 %) of all recorded 215 news items with harmful narratives in the entire monitored period. The least are in MKD.mk and Nova TV (12 or 5.6%).



In terms of genre, the structure of the texts spreading harmful narratives in all the online media predominantly consists of reported press releases, especially the ones in Kurir, Republika, Večer.mk, Lokalno and A1on; politicians' speeches, above all in Večer.mk, Sloboden Pечат and A1on, while Almakos and Kurir have the highest number of reports, while Republika has news items. The category 'other' particularly stands out (31 news items or 14.4 %), predominantly present in the

1. The genre 'reported press release' or 'reported speech of a politician' does not usually belong to the traditional genre categories according to various criteria, such as: length of a journalistic text, length of a video material, topic, area, style, manner of production, type of media outlet etc. Bearing in mind that the monitoring includes online media outlets, which have a tendency for hyperproduction of journalistic and quasi-journalistic products, the methodology notes these posts as well.

Kurir and Republika portals, and in most of the cases they are featuring statuses copied from social media, parts of interviews taken from other media outlets, press conferences by the political parties (VMRO-DPMNE and SDSM), as well as viewpoints, answers and retorts by MPs and spokespersons of political parties as excerpts taken from their appearances on TV-debate shows.



## The political actors in the analysed news items

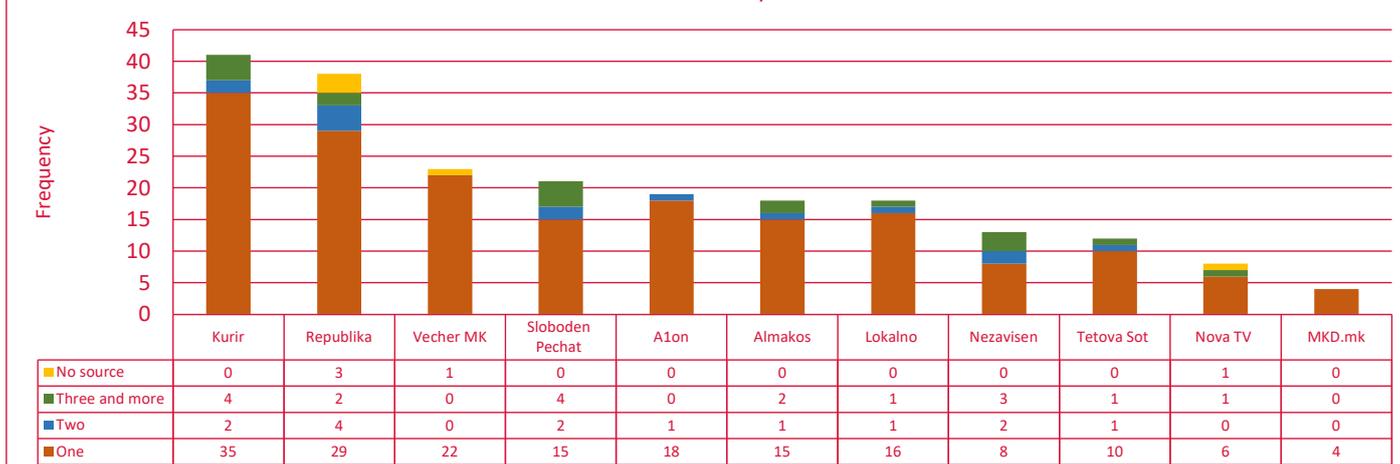
The representation of political actors in news items with harmful narratives is different from one portal to another, depending, above all, on the topic (the issue, the matter) that is being informatively processed, but those with two actors dominate (in 52 news items or 24.2 %), followed by those with three (in 35 news items or 16.3 %) and those with four actors (in 32 news items or 14.9 %). Individually, several portals stand out, such as Republika, which has the highest number of news items with three (9 news items), four (11 news items) and five actors (10 news items), while Vecer.mk has an equal number of news items with two actors (10 news items), to the number of news items with only one actor (11 news items) or Kurir, where in addition to news items with two (28 news items) and three actors (5 news items), there are also news items with a single actor (6 news items). These two portals stand out compared to all the other portals that were monitored, according to the number of news items with only one actor. The actors represented in Vecer.mk are most frequently Hristijan Mickoski, Dimitar Kovachevski, Bujar Osmani, the Government, SDSM, DUI, while in Kurir, in addition to those mentioned in Vecer.mk, VMRO-DPMNE is also featured, along with the MPs, spokespersons and mayors from VMRO-DPMNE.

## (Non)professionalism in journalism

One thing that is typical of all the monitored internet portals is the one-sided reporting. Out of a total of 215 analysed news items, 187 were dominated by one-sided reporting, with rare and incidental inclusion of two, three or more sides. This is most striking when it comes to Kurir and Republika, precisely because of the

fact that they have the highest number of news items with harmful narratives. At the same time, a common feature of all internet portals is also the reliance on a single source of information. Thus, in 178 news items (82.8 %) only one source was indicated, while 14 (6.5 %) pointed to two and 18 (8.4 %) to three or more sources. This approach is the result of the dominance of the two genre forms, i.e. 'reported press-release' and 'reported speech', where the portals shared, in full or partially, the press release or position of a specific political entity (party, party leader, spokesperson, MP) on a specific issue.

Table 11. Number of sources by online media outlet

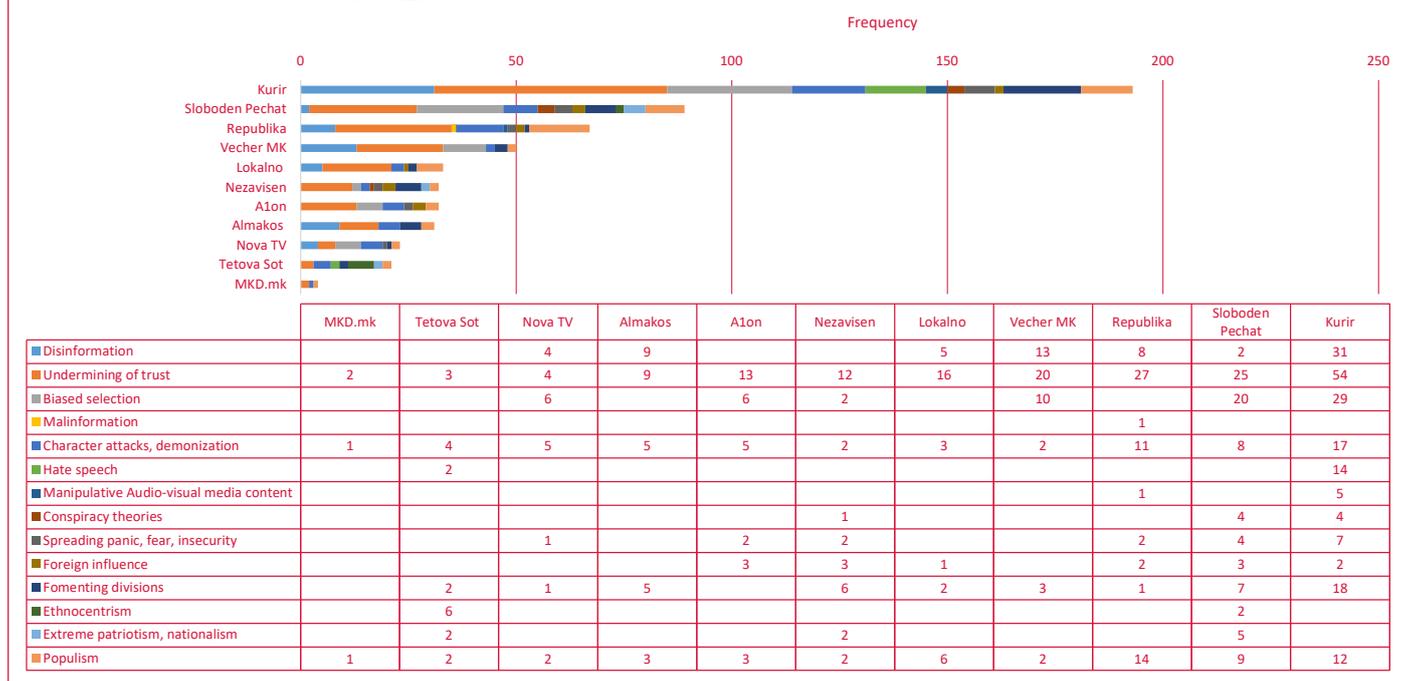


## Dominant harmful political narratives

The analysis identified 215 journalistic products with harmful narratives, and as many as 434 of them were press releases (words, sentences, formulations) that most frequently contain claims of corruption, impartiality/lack of accountability, lack of professionalism, abuse of office without an attempt to substantiate those claims (103 cases), unverified findings (or findings that are difficult to verify) as grounds to accuse the political opponents (91 cases), labelling, mocking and grossly disrespecting other persons (media workers, civil activists, political opponents, public office holders...) use of negative words (61 cases) and directly or indirectly promoting one's own ideologies and activities as something that benefits the people, in contrast to the activities and ideologies of the political opponents (58 cases); as well, news items that serve to undermine the trust, biasedly select, attack and demonize a certain person and spread populism, similarly to what was found in the previous (October) monitoring period. Their 'concentration' is noticeable in the speeches of political entities and their press releases. They are most prevalent in Kurir and Republika, portals that come to the front when it comes to these two genres. When it comes to the rest of the online media outlets, fewer news items with harmful narratives were identified, primarily coming from the number of non/reported speeches of political subjects and their parties' press releases.

In all internet portals, regardless of the number (larger or smaller) of news items with harmful narratives, the undermining of trust in institutions is most often present, and far behind it is biased selection, disinformation, character attacks, populism and fomenting divisions.

Table 12: Presence of harmful narratives in news items in online media outlets



The Kurir portal which is at the top of the list by the number of news items with harmful narratives (41 news items), most often, with 54 posts (sentences, paragraphs, parts of texts) tries to undermine trust in the institutions, but is also at the top of the list when it comes to disinformation (31 posts) and biased selection (29 posts). Republika comes second on the list (38 news items) with 27 posts undermining the trust in the institutions, followed by populism. In Vecher.mk, in addition to undermining trust, there is also disinformation and biased selection.

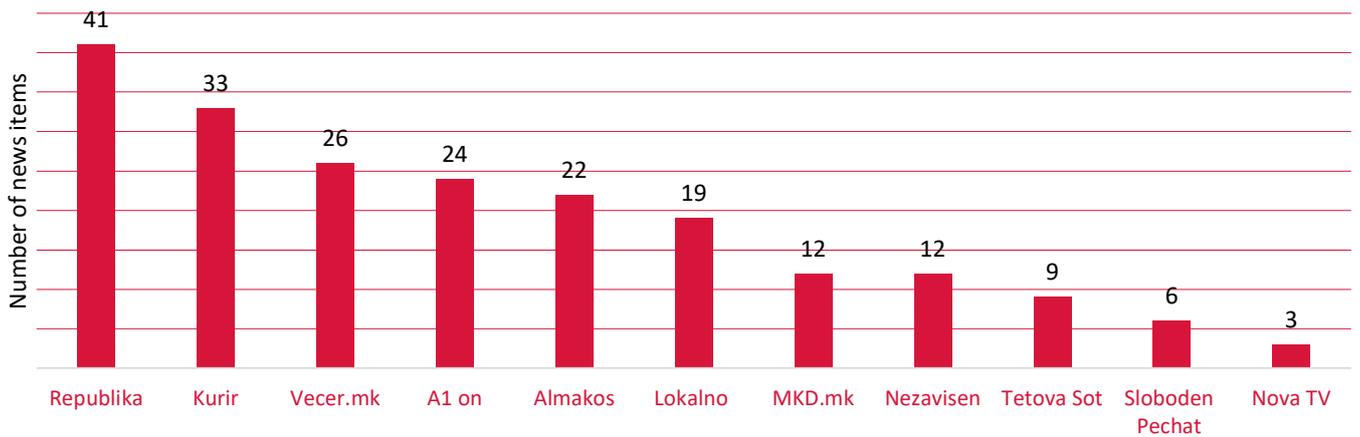
## Report for December 2023

The monitoring of online media (conducted over eight days) in December found 207 news items with harmful narratives. The largest number of them, this time too, were in terms of genre, press releases that had been reported (an official position, above all, of the political party) or 76 news items (36.7 %), reported speech (mostly parts of it) of a politician, i.e. 39 news items (or 18.8 %), but also reported interviews, Facebook posts and press conferences of political actors, accounting for a total of 43 news items (or 20.8 %). When put together, they (158 news items) make up for 76.3% of all the analysed news items with harmful narratives. There are far fewer news and reports, and sporadic analyses, comments and interviews. Furthermore, the largest number of these news items have precise sources (175 news items), but most frequently it is a single source (185 or 89.4 %) and the media only consulted one side (188 news items or 90.8 %). The pseudo-events, party press conferences, statements of political actors are the most frequent reason to publish the news (90 news items), followed by current affairs (45 news items) and social developments (44 news items). The number of news items/posts signed with the author's/journalist's name and surname or initials is very low (only 9 or 4.3 %), as opposed to 187 news items (or 90.3 %) without an author.

## Frequency of Harmful Narratives in Online Media

Portals with the largest number of news items with harmful narratives, as in the previously analysed period, are Republika and Kurir (with 41 and 33 news items respectively), which change from time to time to the first or second place, followed by Vecher.mk, A1on and Almakos and the fewest news items with harmful narratives are in Sloboden Pечат and Nova TV.

Table 13. News items containing harmful narratives



According to genre, as a constant, the most common are party press releases, the reported speeches of politicians, their Facebook posts, interviews given to other media and press conferences. Vecer.mk (in 14 out of a total of 26 news items), A1on (15 out of a total of 24 news items), Kurir (10 out of a total of 33 news items) and MKD.mk (8 out of a total of 12 news items) have the most transmitted announcements.

### **The political actors in the analysed news items**

Political actors are represented differently in the news items with harmful narratives, dominated by those with two (55 news items or 26.6%), three (37 or 17.9%) and four (30 or 14.5%) actors. Looking at portals, Republika, Kurir and Vecer.mk stand out. In Kurir, all analysed news items are with two actors, in Vecer.mk the largest number of news items are with one actor (18 out of a total of 26), which is expected because they have the largest number of news items with a politician's speech and a party press release, while Republika is dominated by news items with three actors (15 news items), but also with four (9 news items) and five actors (8 news items). In portals with a smaller number of analysed news items, for example, in Lokalno and MKD.mk there are usually three actors, in A1on five actors, in Almakos four.

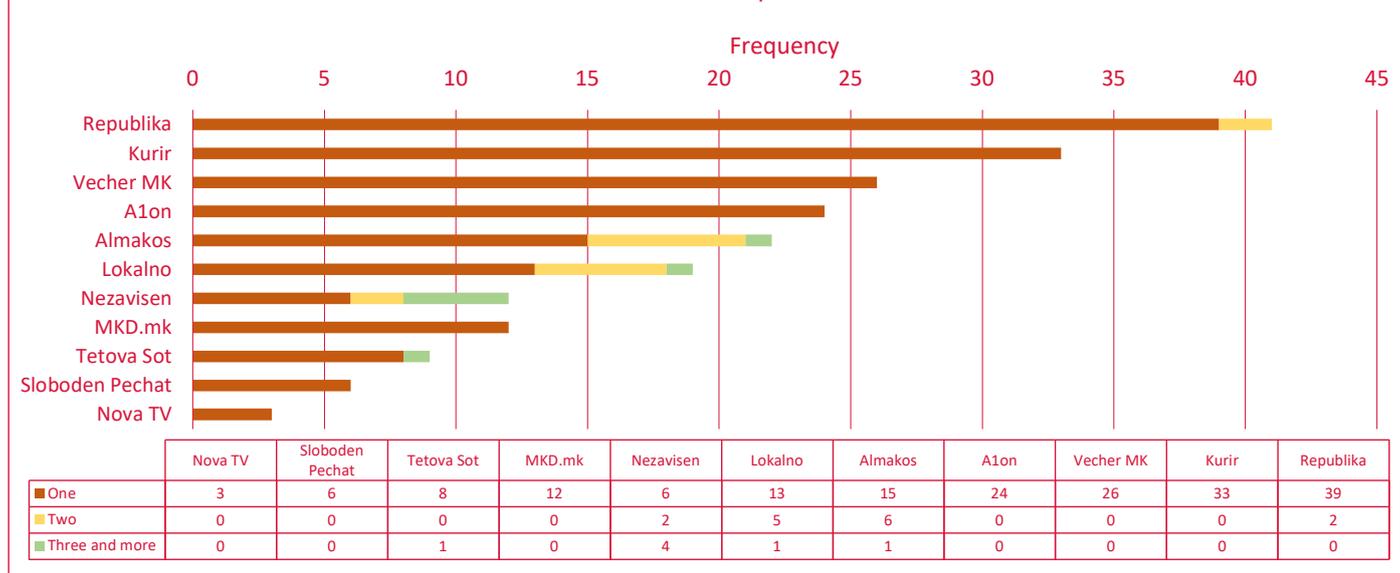
At the same time, the entire narrative/story revolves around several types of actors, who are individual (towards persons) or collective (towards groups or institutions) who change places at the top of the 'pyramid' from time to time, depending, first of all, on what is currently the most current on the political scene. This month, the collective ones, VMRO-DPMNE, SDSM, the Government and DUI, are the most represented, and from the individual ones: the president of VMRO-DPMNE Mickoski, the Prime Minister Kovachevski and the Minister of Interior Spasovski (mostly related to the investigation into the murder of Vanja Gjorchevska and Panche Zhezhovski, the suspects and their party). The party VMRO-DPMNE is the most present in the media, through numerous party announcements and press conferences, statements, interviews of its members, MPs, mayors.

### **Journalistic (un)professionalism**

A common characteristic of all analysed online media is one-sided information. Even in 188 news items (or 90.8%) out of a total of 207 monitored, the portals consulted only one party, and occasionally two or more parties. This applies equally to the Republika, Kurir and Vecer.mk portals with the largest number of news items with harmful narratives, as well as to the portals with a far smaller number of such news items. Even in Vecer.mk (26 news items) and Kurir (33 news items) all analysed news items have only one side, and

the same picture is in Mkd.mk (in 12 out of 12 analysed news items) and Sloboden Pечат (in 6 out of all 6 analysed news items). Also to be expected, and above all because of the dominance of both 'hybrid' genre forms (reported press release and reported speech of a politician), the portals mostly rely on one source of information. Such are 185 news items (or 89.4%), and in Kurir, Vecher.mk, A1on, Mkd.mk, Sloboden Pечат, one and only source is the main actor. Examples with two, three and more sources, such as Almakos, Lokalno and Nezavisen, are rare.

Table 14. Number of sources by online media outlet



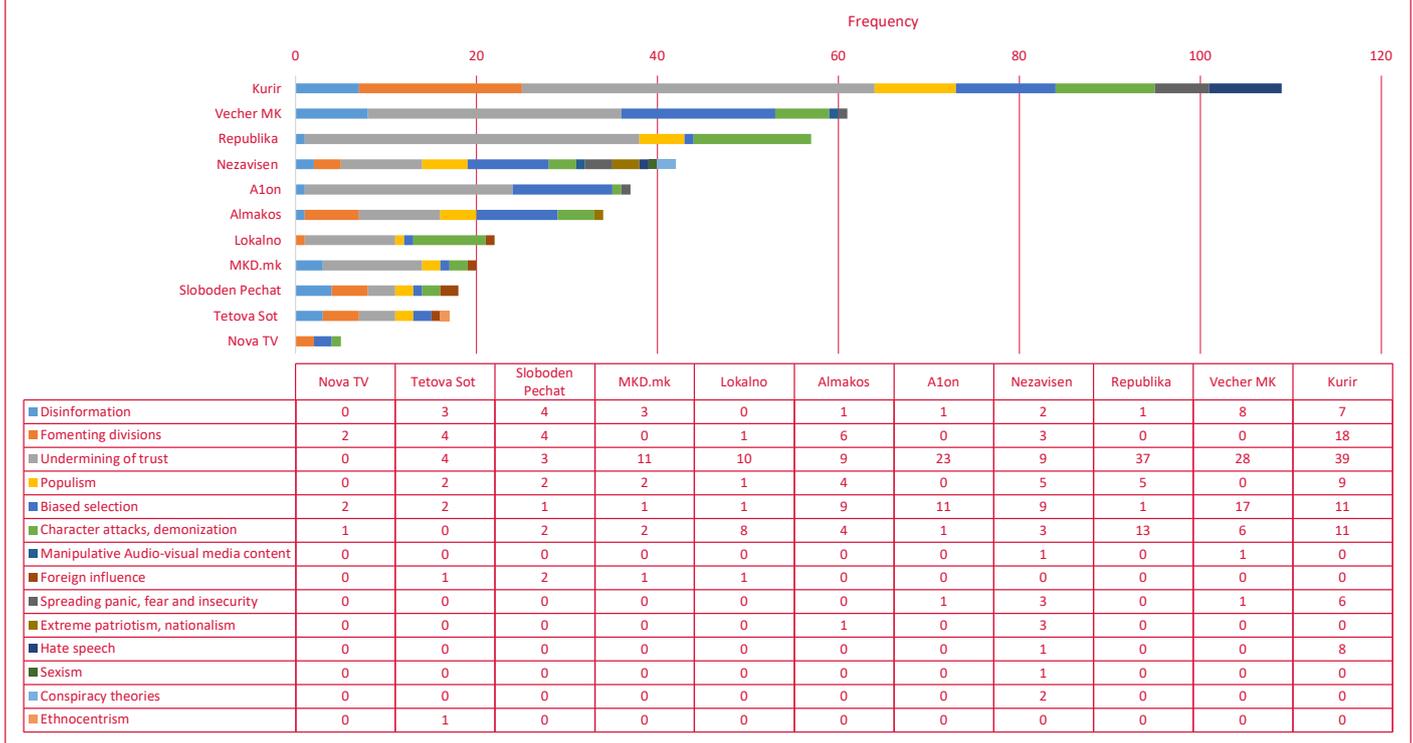
## Predominantly harmful political narratives

The number of 207 news items with harmful narratives determined by the analysis, and specified by 339 posts (words, sentences, paragraphs, formulations) both in the titles and in the texts of these news items, and compared to the previous monitored months, unequivocally speaks that this kind of political narrative is established and persistently exists in the online media, and above all, in Republika, Kurir and Vecher.mk. It, as before, is concentrated on unverified findings (or findings that can hardly be verified) as a basis for accusing political opponents (110 cases); claims of corruption, impartiality/dishonesty, unprofessionalism, abuse of office without attempting to substantiate those claims (72 cases); labelling, mocking and grossly disrespecting other persons, using negative words (51 cases), as well as words and formulations that denigrate a certain group of people in order to cause division and discord between 'us' and 'you' (40 cases). That is, we are talking about news items/posts that undermine trust, make biased selections, attack and denigrate a certain person, spread populism, incite divisions and spread insecurity.

At the same time, the practice continues of duplicating one report from one event (mostly an interview or a debate show) and 'repackaging' it into two or more texts on separate issues on which the politician, the MP, the president of the party expressed an opinion... This is usually the case mostly noticed in Republika, Kurir, Vecher.mk, but sometimes also in portals with a smaller number of news items with harmful narratives. Such an approach, in itself, as a form of information, allows a free space for multiplying harmful narratives, and in that process, in addition to the political actor, the media itself directly participates.

In all online media, regardless of the number of news items with harmful narratives, the undermining of trust in institutions is most often present, so it follows - just as in the previously monitored months - biased selection, as well as attacks on a certain person and their defamation.

Table 15: Presence of harmful narratives in news items in online media outlets



The Republika portal is at the top of the list of news items with harmful narratives (41 news items) and most often, with 37 posts (sentences, paragraphs, parts of texts) it tries to undermine trust in institutions, followed by attacks on a certain political figure (13 published). The Kurir portal is second on the list (with 33 news items with harmful narratives) and has the most posts that undermine trust in institutions (39 posts), but it also has the most posts (compared to all analysed portals) that foment divisions in society. (18 posts), and there is often biased selection (11 posts) and attacks on a certain political figure (11 posts). Vecher.mk is dominated by undermining trust in institutions (28 posts) and biased selection (18 posts).

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

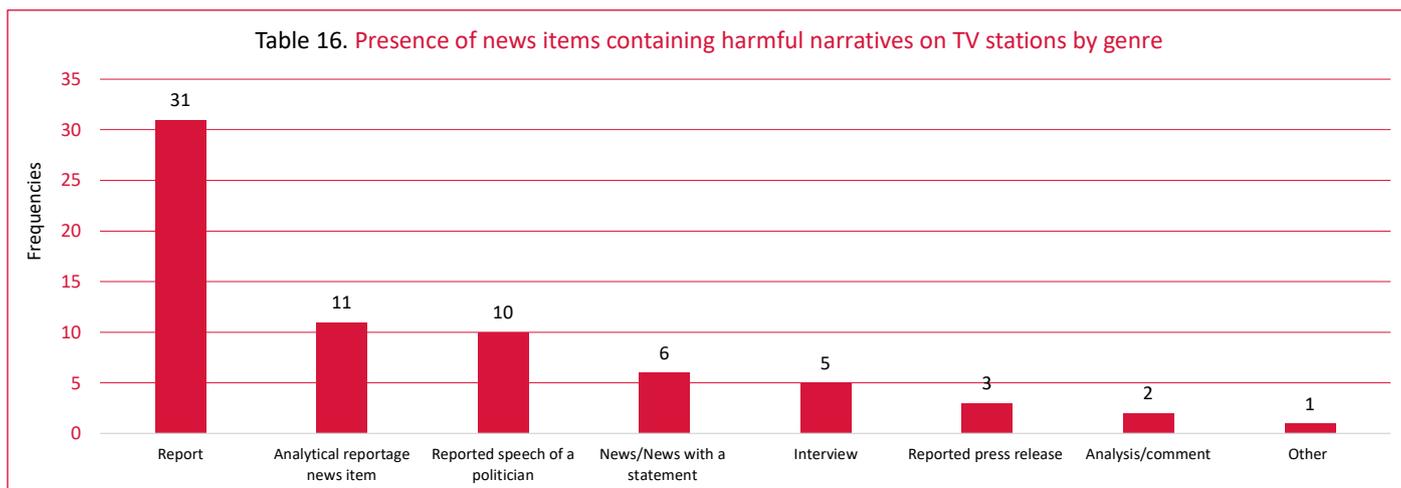
In November, the central news editions of 9 national TV stations were analysed for a total of 7 days.

### Report for November 2023

In November, a total of 69 news items were recorded that contained one or more harmful narratives. This figure does not differ much from the analysis for the month of October when 66 such news items were identified. In contrast to October, when more than half of the news items with harmful narratives (34 or 51.5%) were registered with TV Alfa, the distribution of news items in November is much more balanced. Thus, 16 news items with harmful narratives (23.2%) were recorded at TV Alfa, 12 (17.4%) in total at MTV 1, 11 (15.9%) at MTV 2, 10 in total at TV 21 (14.5 %), at Kanal 5 TV there are 8 (11.6 %), while at TV Sitel, TV Thelma and TV Alsat M there are 4 news items each with harmful narratives (5.8 % for each of the listed).

An even distribution by days is also noted, that is, no single day differs significantly in terms of the number of news items with harmful narratives. The most such news items were registered on 8 November (14 news items or 20.3 %), then 28 November with 12 news items (or 17.4 %), i.e. the Day of the Albanian Flag while on 4 and 20 November 10 news items were registered each (or 20.3 %) etc.

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



What is striking is that there is a very large number of news items in which a politician’s speech or party press release is only reported (a total of 13 such news items or 18.8%). This media anomaly, which is more characteristic of other media (primarily online media), has little in common with professional journalistic standards. Reporting speeches or press releases of political actors, whose content abounds with allegations of corruption, unprofessional work and discrediting political opponents, without analysing their content, verifying such a claim, or presenting the other side, is a feature of biased and unprofessional journalism. Additionally, with such a practice, the media space is left to the political parties for the unhindered presentation of their own agenda and the spread of their ideology.

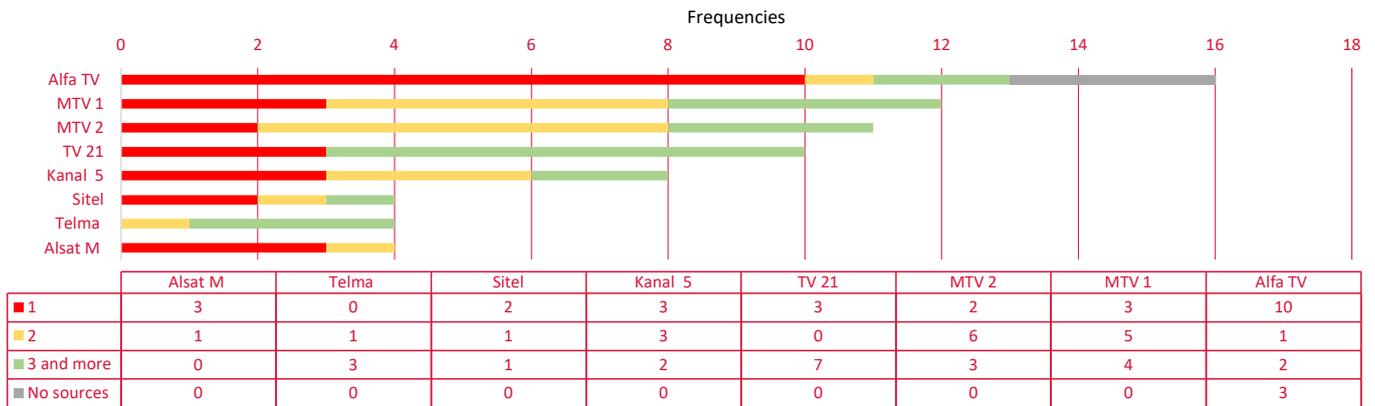
### **Topics, actors, and sources of news items with harmful narrative**

Domestic politics, just like the previous months (September and October), is again a fertile ground for the spread of harmful narratives: almost 2/3 (44 or 63.8 %) are from domestic developments. The second in order is the economy (7 news items or 10.1%), followed by health, justice and foreign policy with 4 news items each, etc. The most common topics are related to EU integrations and the report of the European Commission, the developments of the Radiotherapy and Oncology Clinic and the work of the parliamentary inquiry commission on this case, as well as the elections and the formation of the caretaker government.

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

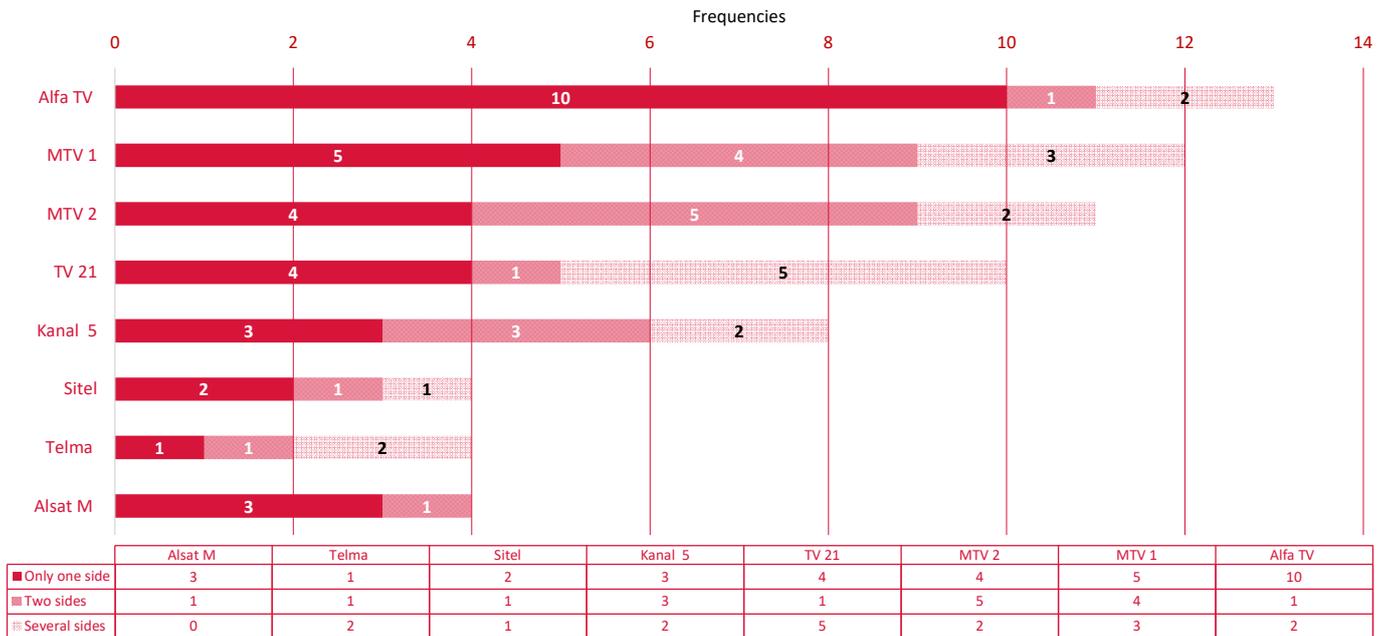
When we talk about balanced and unbiased reporting, it is also very important what sources journalists use when providing information. The analysis for the month of November shows us that in 29 (42 %) out of a total of 69 news items in which a harmful narrative is identified, there is only one or no source (the journalist appears as a source), 18 news items (26.1 %) have 2 sources, while only 22 (31.9%) have 3 or more sources.

**Table 17: Presentation of number of sources in TV news items which contain harmful narrative**



In the same direction is the presentation of the different sides in the news item, that is, how all stakeholders get the opportunity to be represented and show their side of the story. Similar to the use of sources, it is quite obvious here that at least these news items in which we registered harmful narratives are predominantly one-sided (32 news items or 46.4%), while in 17 cases (24.6%) they present two sides and in the same amount (17 news items or 24.6 %) more sides of the story.

**Table 18: Presented sides of the sources in news items which contain harmful narratives**

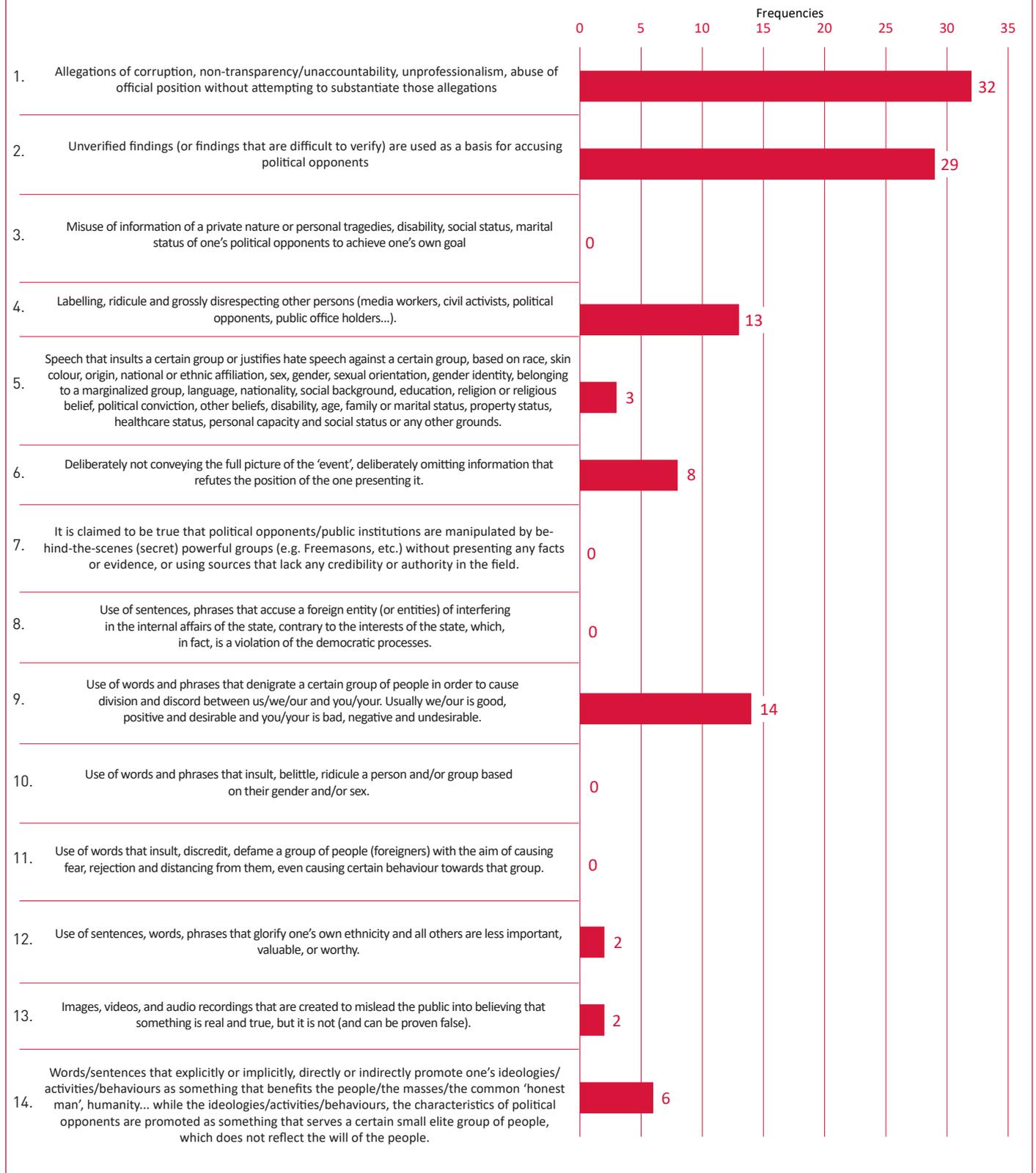


This type of biased reporting, in which all parties are not given the opportunity to present their version of the event, can lead the viewer to incomplete, wrong and one-sided views and conclusions. When we talk about news items in which one of the actors produces harmful narratives, insults or slanders someone from the camp of the political opponent, it is the obligation of the journalist and the media to consult the other side, that is, to offer all points of view.

## The most common harmful narratives

In the month of November, the most frequent are the news items that contain claims of corruption, lack of accountability, unprofessionalism, abuse of official duty without any attempt to support those claims (32 cases), while in second place are the news items related to unverified findings (or findings that can hardly be checked) which are used as a basis for accusing political opponents (29 cases in total).

Table 19. Presence of indicators of harmful narratives in TV news items



Then follow the cases in which words and formulations are used that denigrate a certain group of people in order to cause division and discord between us/us/our and you/you/your (14) and news items related to labelling, ridicule and gross disrespect of other people and the use of negative words (13).

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

The lack of professional distance, the favouring of certain political entities at the expense of political opponents, goes against the ethical standards of the profession and contradicts professional journalism.

## **Report for December 2023**

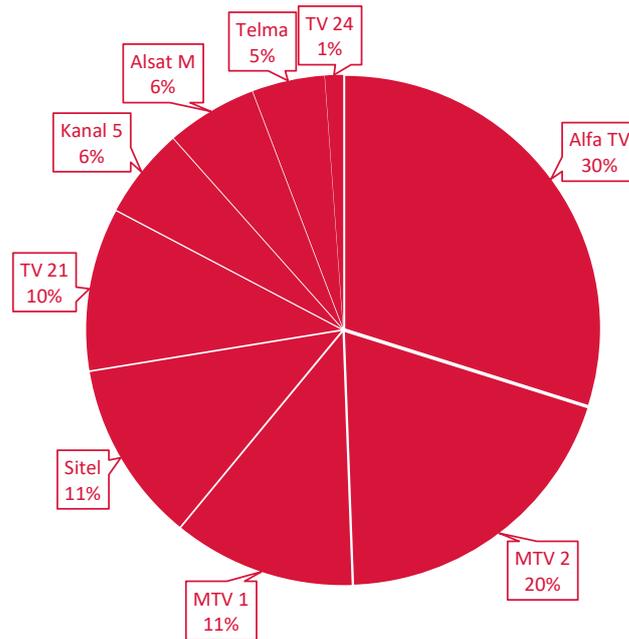
In the last month of 2023, during the analysis of the central news of the 9 TV stations, a total of 87 reports were registered in which harmful narratives were recorded. In December, 8 days were analysed. Compared to October (66 news items) and November (69), there is an increase, which is due to the number of days covered by the analysis (8), but also to the noticeable growth of this narrative among political actors as the elections approach.

### ***Frequency of harmful narratives among TV stations***

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

And this month, most of this type of news items were registered at TV Alfa (26 or 29.9%), followed by MTV 2 (17 or 19.5%), MTV 1 and TV Sitel (10 or 11.5% each), TV 21 (9 news items or 10.3%), TV Kanal 5 and TV Alsat M (5 or 5.7% each), TV Telma (4 or 4.6%) and finally, TV 24 (1 news item or 1.1 %).

Table 20. TV news items which contain harmful narrative



Of the registered news items with harmful narratives, similarly as in October and November, the largest number or 33 news items (37.9%) are from the TV-report genre, while 19 (21.8%) are from the analytical-report genre. We see that the number of news items is relatively high again, in which only the speech of a politician is reported (10 or 11.5 %) or the press release of the political party is reported (4 or 4.6 %). This practice signals that, quite often, certain media forget their basic role and instead of critically analysing the developments, they simply leave the media space to political actors who find a platform to spread their own ideology.

### The political actors in the analysed news items

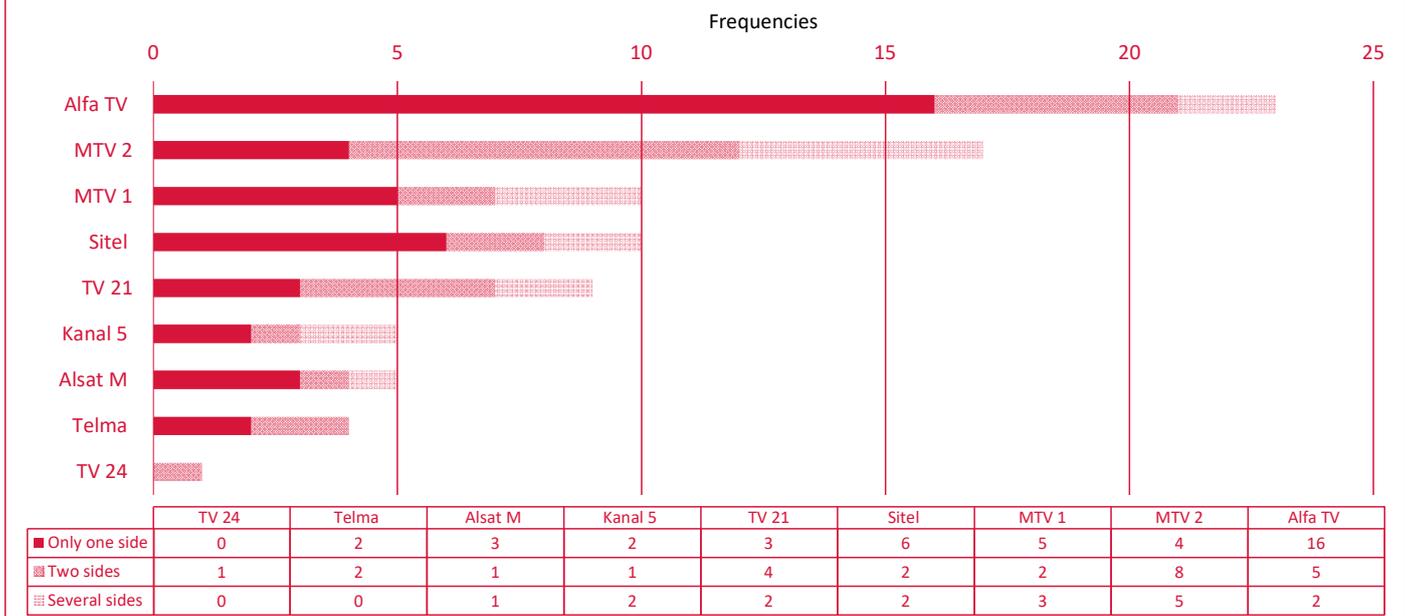
A general conclusion, and not only for December, but also for the previous months of the monitoring, is that the largest political parties in the country (SDSM, VMRO-DPMNE and DUI) dominate the news items of the news editions of the TV stations. Therefore, it is not surprising that even in the news items that contain harmful narratives, we often find actors who belong to one of these parties. VMRO-DPMNE (27 times), Dimitar Kovachevski (20 times), the Government of SDSM and DUI (17 times), SDSM (12 times) are most often mentioned as actors.

### One-sided reporting

The trend that continues to alarm is one-sided reporting, especially visible in the news items that are the subject of our analysis. Out of a total of 87 news items that contained a harmful narrative, exactly half (44 or 50.5 %) either had only one source (41 or 47.1 %) or did not contain any sources at all, i.e. the journalist appears as a source (3 or 3, 4 %).

In the remaining cases, in 21 news items (24.1%) two sources were consulted, while in 22 news items (25.3%) three or more sources were consulted. This is followed by the inclusion of only one side in the report, and here we see almost the same results, that is, in only 17 news items (19.5%) did the journalist include more than one side in the news items (41 only one side and 26 two sides).

**Table 21. Presented sides of the sources in news items which contain harmful narratives**

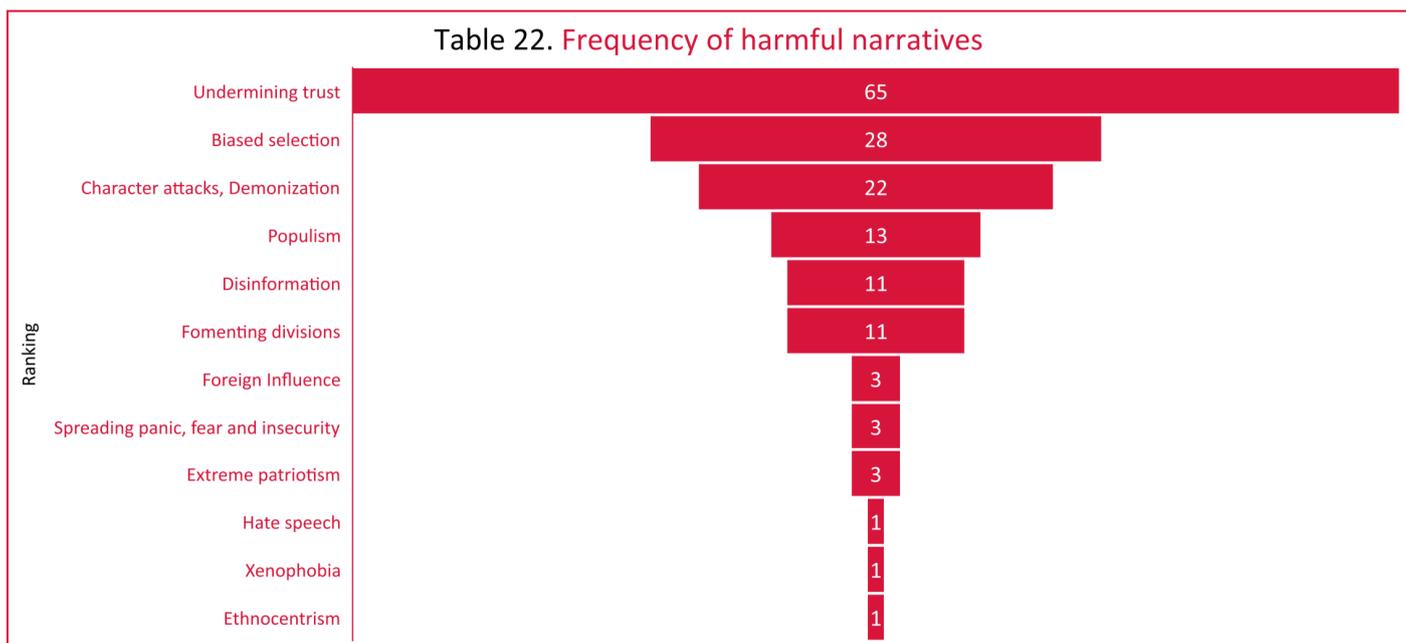


Again with TV Alfa we see the most one-sided approach, i.e. 16 out of a total of 23 news items (69.6%) included only one side, 5 (21.7%) two sides, while in only 2 news items (8.7%) we see more sides. However, the analysis in December shows that the rest of the media are not too far from the one-sided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

### **The most common harmful narratives**

In December, a total of 87 news items were determined, in which a total of 162 indicators were recorded that cause one of the harmful narratives that are the subject of the research process, that is, each news item contains an average of two such 'harm' indicators. Even in this period, there are no big differences when it comes to the types of narratives that dominate the news editions of TV stations. Again, the most notable are indicators related to allegations of corruption, non-accountability, unprofessionalism, abuse of office without any attempt to substantiate those claims (35 cases) and news items related to unverified findings (or findings that are difficult to verify) used as basis for accusing political opponents (33 cases in total). They are followed by news items related to labelling, ridicule and gross disrespect of other persons and the use of negative words (22).

**Table 22. Frequency of harmful narratives**



The news items that contain this type of indicators were most often the reason for creating the following narratives: undermining trust (65), biased selection (28), character attacks or demonization (22), populism (13), fomenting divisions (12) etc.



British Embassy  
Skopje



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

