



RESILIENCE:
For Media Free of Hate and Disinformation

HATE NARRATIVES AND DISINFORMATION IN ONLINE MEDIA AND ON SOCIAL NETWORKS

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NORTH MACEDONIA

RESILIENCE : For Media Free of Hate and Disinformation

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1. INTRODUCTION

Political, ethnic and religious polarization have long been part of North Macedonia's society, frequently leading to domestic political tensions and disputes with neighbouring countries. Political turmoil has been accompanied by intolerance, calls for violence, and hate speech. Inflammatory language has been produced and frequently spread by ordinary citizens and public personalities.

Media outlets have had a key role in the process. In presenting different social groups and actors and focusing or "framing" negative social phenomena over the years, they have overtly or covertly encouraged stereotypes, ethnocentrism, xenophobia, intolerance or hate speech, instead of openly distancing and deconstructing this discourse.¹

The expansion of online media and social networks has increased the space for the production and spread of hate speech and disinformation. The study *The Political and Economic Basis of Media and Communication Models Spreading Disinformation and Hate Speech*² notes that hate narratives and disinformation in North Macedonia have been more present in online media and social networks during 2019–2020. Professional media outlets incidentally create and transmit disinformation and misinformation. However, media outlets and voices supporting the current political opposition are more present and coordinated.

The research was conducted in September–October 2020 and focuses on online media and social networks. The purpose of the research is to demonstrate patterns and examples of hate and disinformation narratives,

1 Visoka skola za novinarstvo i odnosi so javnosta (2012) "Kvalitativna analiza na mediumslo to izvestuvanje za meguetnickite i megureligiskite prasanja vo Republika Makedonija" Skopje: VSOJ.

2 Nikodinoska, V. (2020) "The Political and Economic Basis of Media and Communication Models Spreading Disinformation and Hate Speech", Tirana: SEENPM, PI and MIM. Available at: <https://mim.org.mk/en/research/1231-the-political-and-economic-basis-of-media-and-communication-models-spreading-disinformation-and-hate-speech>

examining actors and events that serve as the main generators of ideas and messages, common targets, dynamics of production and dissemination of narratives, and possible reactions or preventive actions to combat them. It analyzes secondary sources, reports by domestic and international organizations and consultations with media experts.

The research report will present case studies related to four target groups in relation to which the hate and disinformation narratives were analyzed, and end with conclusions and recommendations.

2. METHODOLOGY

The three target groups of the research—political opponents, journalists and migrants—were identified based on the findings of the country research reports on hate and propaganda media models, conducted in seven countries in the region during summer 2020.³ The target group based on ethnicity/religion was additionally researched in North Macedonia.

Examples of hate and disinformation narratives were developed on the regional level for the first target groups, while for the ethnicity/religion group, they were identified by the country researchers. A specific case of producing and sharing hate narratives was selected for each target group, and one case of a powerful disinformation narrative for the migrants target group. The research is not limited to the narrow legal concepts of hate (speech), disinformation and propaganda in media and communication, but is analyzed in broader sociological terms.

The analyzed cases and events were selected for each target group from June 2019 to June 2020. The analysis covers either two consecutive or two non-consecutive weeks.

The research includes online media and social networks accounts, selected by several criteria. The *Kurir.mk* online media outlet was selected for cases of political opponents, as it is one of the higher-ranked online news media.⁴ The Facebook community *Bojkotiram* (around 15K likes and followers) and Facebook group *Zoran Zaev traitor number 1* (2,500 members) produce and share nationalist and xenophobic content. The Facebook profile of the ex-journalist Milenko Nedelkovski is one of the most popular, with around 63K followers.

³ Part of the project “Resilience - Civil society action to reaffirm media freedom and counter disinformation and hateful propaganda in the Western Balkans and Turkey” implemented in Albania, BiH, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Serbia and Slovenia.

⁴ According to Alexa Top Sites, it is in 41st place in North Macedonia. Available at: <https://www.alexa.com/topsites/countries/MK>. Accessed: 23 November 2020.

CASE STUDIES

Table 1

GROUPS	CASE /EVENT	TIME PERIOD	ONLINE MEDIA	SOCIAL NETWORK
Migrants/ refugees	Disinformation related to migrants/refugees	1–15 March 1–15 April 2020	<i>Kurir.mk</i> <i>Signal.mk</i> <i>Kolozeg.info</i>	FB group <i>Makedonija</i> Personal Facebook account
Political opponents	Disagreements between the political parties on scheduling the general election date during the pandemic crisis	20 May– 2 June 2020	<i>Kurir.mk</i>	FB group <i>Bojkotiram</i> FB group <i>Zoran Zaev predavnik br. 1</i> FB account of former journalist Milenko Nedelkovski
Critical journalists	Defamation and insults of female journalists	18 May–24 May 31 May–6 June 2020, 10–24 January	<i>Dokaz.mk</i>	FB accounts of female journalists
Ethnic/ Religious groups	Religious festivities during the pandemic crisis and violation of lockdown restrictions by ethnic/religious groups	15–31 May 2020 14–20 April 2020	<i>Infomax.mk</i>	FB page of <i>Infomax.mk</i> FB group <i>Sveto ime – Makedonija</i>

The *DokazM.mk* online media outlet was selected due to a specific case of hate speech and offensive language against a female journalist, and for disinformation as its line of work. Threats and insults via social networks by a civil servant against female journalists were analyzed due to the reactions sparked among the public and by institutions.

Fact-checking services debunked disinformation related to migrants in *Kurir.mk*. Content in *Signal.mk*, *Kolozeg.info* and the *Makedonija* Facebook group (47K followers) were pointed out by the experts for migrants and refugee issues.

Infomax.mk is a popular media outlet with examples of hate narratives related to ethnic/religious groups, and its content is often subject to fact-checking services. The Facebook group *Sveto ime – Makedonija*, on the other hand, also contains comments with a nationalistic charge that feed the hate narratives.

Content from online media includes articles, commentaries and photos, whereas posts, comments, videos, photographs and engagements were in the focus of the analysis of social networks.

3. CASE STUDY: MIGRANTS AND REFUGEES

3.1. Online media contributing to information “chaos”

Migrants and refugees were the burning topic in North Macedonia in the period between 2015–2018 as in June 2015, the country “became a key transit link for over 700,000 refugees and migrants.”⁵ The country was in political turmoil, while the refugee crisis in 2015 and 2016 was abused in the political agendas, resulting in referendums against the settling of migrants in some municipalities.⁶ The period was notable for sensational and discriminatory media reporting, misinterpretation of facts, xenophobia and enmity towards migrants or refugees.⁷ In 2017, there was a change in the political discourse towards refugees and migrants after changes in the government on a central and local level, which led to political stability.

Media content on migrants and refugees in North Macedonia during 2019–2020 decreased compared to previous years, as there were fewer refugees on the southern border with Greece due to the pandemic and lockdowns in the country and the region.

Media content on migrants and refugees in North Macedonia during 2019–2020 decreased compared to previous years, as there were fewer refugees on the southern border with Greece due to the pandemic and lockdowns in the country and the region. At the beginning of 2020, there were sporadic cases of disinformation or hostile language in online media.

The article in *Kurir.mk* “Chaos on the Macedonian-Greek border, migrants are trying to enter by force”, [1] supports its claim with an “anonymous source” in the Ministry of the Interior. The article reports the presence of several Special Police Unit troops on the southern border with Greece, not excluding the possibility of an “escalation of the situation”. The article suggests that migrants are aggressive and could attack the police. Due to the alarming headline not correlated to the text, lack of evidence and official sources, and the misleading photo taken on the Greek-Turkish border, the CriThink fact-checking service debunked the text as disinformation.⁸

Signal.mk re-published an identical article from *Kolozeg.info* claiming that the Government had signed an agreement to allow 500,000 migrants to settle in the country. The text, equating the refugees and migrants with terrorists, warns that “Macedonia becomes a landfill for ISIS terrorists of the EU” [2].

5 Tuneva, M. (2017) “Media Coverage of the Refugee Crisis in Macedonia”, SEENPM. Available at: https://seenpm.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/08/Crisis-reporting-Macedonia_Final.pdf?fbclid=IwAR1OkHctRRPcGz-Qygmfs0SfZugMfZZSshxjErjNr2DtJiR3ulEle1yHxl

6 Smailovic, M., (2017) “Islamophobia in Macedonia” in Bayrakli, E. and Hafez, F. (2017) “European Islamophobia Report”, Istanbul: SETA. Available at: <http://www.islamophobiaeurope.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/Macedonia.pdf>. Pg. 403.

7 Tuneva, M. (2017) “Media Coverage of the Refugee Crisis in Macedonia”, SEENPM. Available at: https://seenpm.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/08/Crisis-reporting-Macedonia_Final.pdf?fbclid=IwAR1OkHctRRPcGz-Qygmfs0SfZugMfZZSshxjErjNr2DtJiR3ulEle1yHxl

8 Anastasovska, A. (2020) “Nema nikakov haos na grcko-makedonskata granica”, *Crithink.mk*, 5 March 2020. Available at: <https://crithink.mk/nema-nikakov-haos-na-grchko-makedonskata-granicza/?fbclid=IwAR0FOubQTLyD2cNv7GDLzVIWUj0le0kGjDYML-pzemGHCQ7CGDGzW8IR0WE>

The promotional video that USAID shared on YouTube incited comments that “potential asylum seekers are encouraged to apply for Macedonian citizenship and direct them to use the resources of the ‘Northern’ state”, representing migrants as a threat to the country’s socio-economic stability. The video was produced by USAID to promote human rights protection by highlighting the integration of migrants and refugees in the country. On the *Kolozeg.Info* website, there is information that the text has had 4096 shares, while the comments below contain calls for action against every refugee that would settle and death wishes for the SDSM leader and PM Zoran Zaev, and ministers.

In 2017, out of seven hate speech cases due to religious affiliation reported on www.govornaomraza.mk, five were towards refugees and migrants on web portals,⁹ while in the period June 2019–June 2020, there were only a few cases registered. Media outlets that spread disinformation in a coordinated manner in 2016¹⁰ were warned by the Council of Media Ethics and the Audio and Audio-Visual Media Services Agency to abide by professional standards.

3.2. Presentation of migrants and refugees on social networks

There was less hate speech against migrants and refugees on social networks¹¹ in 2019–2020 compared to 2017. Sporadic posts and comments on Facebook groups and Twitter could not gather widespread support or spread hate narratives.

Islamophobia and hostile vocabulary towards migrants and refugees, perceiving them as a threat to Macedonian society’s cultural values prevail in a number of posts on Facebook groups: “...this is an army that wants to Islamize Europe, to occupy the Balkans...” (in capital letters) [3]. The post is accompanied with a video of unknown origin, place and purpose of creation, depicting a larger group of men starting a fire and running, while one can hear Arabic conversation and somebody yelling “Allah Akbar”. The post has 170 shares, and most of the 74 comments contain messages implying they will take “our” land and erase our religion, and that they are barbarians who “sacrifice their children and ... trained soldiers”, “terrorists”, and “wild tribes”. Many of the comments contain intimidating messages for migrants and refugees that “this plague should be diminished” or that the way to deal with them is “locking up or shooting”.

Islamophobia and hostile vocabulary towards migrants and refugees, perceiving them as a threat to Macedonian society’s cultural values prevail in a number of posts on Facebook groups.

9 Smailovic, M., (2017) “Islamophobia in Macedonia” in Bayrakli, E. and Hafez, F. (2017) “European Islamophobia Report”, Istanbul: SETA. Available at: <http://www.islamophobiaeurope.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/Macedonia.pdf>. Pg. 400.

10 Tuneva, M. (2017) “Media Coverage of the Refugee Crisis in Macedonia”, SEENPM. Available at: https://seenpm.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/08/Crisis-reporting-Macedonia_Final.pdf?fbclid=IwAR1OkHctRRPcGz-Qygmfs0SfZugMfZZSShxxjErjNr2DtJiR3uEle1yHxI. Pg. 18

11 Govor na omraza website, www.govornaomraza.mk

The migrants are one of the topics very susceptible to conspiracy theories. For example, conspiracy scenarios for organized transport of refugees under state protection are often exploited on social networks: "... The location discovered. Refugee camp. The street lights near the railway station and at the entrance to Gevgelija are turned off. They are transferred by bus..." [6]. The post was created by a representative of a patriotic association. There are 422 shares and 74 comments on the original post. The post is even shared on groups that have a completely different purpose, where discussion is opened by users expressing the fear that the refugees will stay and settle in the country, which is allegedly why the lockdowns were introduced. They also blame the Government for its politics towards the refugees and the restrictive measures it undertook to fight the pandemic. Some of the comments contain fascist messages ("Damned be migrants, blessed Hitler)" [6].

NARRATIVES ON MIGRANTS AND REFUGEES

Table 2

MAIN NARRATIVE	SUB-NARRATIVES	EXAMPLES
The arrival of migrants is a threat to society.	Migrants represent a threat to Macedonian society's cultural values.	"This is an army that wants to Islamize Europe, to occupy the Balkans."
	Migrants represent a threat to the Macedonian economic system.	"Potential asylum seekers are encouraged to apply for Macedonian citizenship and use the resources of the state 'Northern'."
	Migrants are potential terrorists.	"Macedonia becomes a landfill for ISIS terrorists of EU."
	Migrants are aggressive; they attack the police.	"Migrants are trying to enter by force"; "Escalation of the situation."
	The Government is helping migrants by being servile to EU policies.	"They are transferred by buses."

4. CASE STUDY: POLITICAL OPPONENTS

4.1. Online media: "Ours" and "theirs" country

The summer of 2020 saw parliamentary elections in North Macedonia which have been postponed twice. Amidst the pandemic crisis and lockdowns during March–June, the ruling left Social Democratic Union of Macedonia (SDSM) favoured snap parliamentary elections during July 2020, arguing that the state needed stable and functional government to handle the crisis and the political and economic situation. The opposition VMRO-DPMNE opted for a date in the autumn due to the dire epidemiological situation in June–

July. The case that will be elaborated refers to the bitter debate between the governing and opposition parties that brought to the surface hate narratives and disinformation by opposition parties and inclining media.

Kurir.mk, known for its inclination towards the VMRO-DPMNE, published numerous articles between 20 May and 2 June suggesting that the ruling party worked against its citizens' interests by pushing for snap elections during the pandemic. [7] This narrative largely relies on mockery and insults of SDSM leader, Zoran Zaev. Humiliating remarks refer to his cultural and psychological characteristics, his rural origins, depicting him as a "peasant child" [8] and calling him "Baron Murtinhausen" [9] as a compound made from the village where he originates from and the famous satirical character. The main allegation levelled at the ruling party leader is the change of the country's name, labelling him "traitor", "unique, crazy leader" and fake patriot ("northern idiotism that he himself invented and realized" [8]).

Senior officials who tested positive for COVID-19 have been subjected to harsher criticism for lack of care and irresponsibility towards citizens [11]. *Kurir.mk* comments that the governing SDSM is "becoming a coronavirus inflecting cluster." Party officials are seen as a danger directly jeopardizing citizens' health, while the SDSM's campaign and their desire for government might "be a reason for the large number of newly infected people, but also victims" [12].

Political polarization is reflected in reporting about the country as "ours" and "theirs" ("...it's not the same fatherland we share with Zoki") [8]. This dichotomy is reflected in the narrative that suggested that the governing party is serving the West. Some texts point to close ties between the Government, the US and billionaire George Soros ("The SDSM Government 'borrowed' the phrase 'new normality' from its mentor Soros"). Soros is seen as the SDSM's protector for decades "pulling the strings in Macedonia", just like he did with the "Colourful revolution" and some NGOs [13].

A group of media commonly share identical content, acting in a coordinated and orchestrated manner, thus extending their audiences to include the rich. These news media are linked to dozens of Facebook pages that amplify their content.

A group of media, among which *Kurir.mk* can be counted, commonly share identical content, acting in a coordinated and orchestrated manner, thus extending their audiences to include the rich. These news media are linked to dozens of Facebook pages that amplify their content.¹² For example, the official Facebook page of the online news site *Ekonomski.mk* did not post any content from its own site, but instead exclusively amplified *Kurir's* content.¹³

Some of *Kurir.mk's* writings were fact-checked by *CriThink*, which concluded that the text contained personal insults, whose only purpose was to humiliate

12 Gigitashvili, G. and Karan, K. (2020) "Inauthentic Facebook pages target North Macedonia", DFRLab, 25 June 2020. Available at: <https://medium.com/dfrlab/inauthentic-facebook-pages-target-north-macedonia-e264639bdbdb>

13 Ibid.

and degrade political opponents¹⁴ or that the media outlet took part in spreading partial and unconfirmed information.¹⁵

4.2. Political opponents on Facebook

Vocal groups with patriotic, traditional and mostly rightist ideological views, where strong nationalistic rhetoric is expressed, gather many supporters and generate heated discussion on Facebook in relation to the narratives against the Government, especially in the period before the elections. Many were established as a result of civil protests against the change of the country's name in 2018 with the Prespa Agreement. Groups with similar ideological orientation often repost and share mutual or content published by media which usually lean to the right.

In the period preceding the parliamentary elections, the main topic in numerous posts on the Facebook community *Bojkotiram* focused on blaming government officials and especially the leader of the SDSM for being traitors of the country and its people. Zaev's lack of knowledge of Serbian in an interview provoked comments containing humiliating remarks, but criticism is extended to citizens who voted for him, calling them "severdjzani" (a derogatory term for citizens of North Macedonia who supported the name change), "colourful faggots" (a derogatory term for participants in the Colourful Revolution), "sorosoids" (supporters and grantees of George Soros), and "traitors" [14]. The post garnered 84 user comments, 267 likes and 58 shares.

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Defence Minister Radmila Shekerinska was labelled as non-Macedonian and accused of giving up the country name by *Bojkotiram* because she "... has Serbian origin" [15] based on her statement that her mother was born in Belgrade and her grandmother and her husband were half-Serbs. Users continue with the insults by calling her "slut", "traitor", and "stupid".

A similar narrative pervades in most posts and comments on the Facebook group *Zoran Zaev traitor number 1* [16]. Many of the posts analyzed in the researched period re-publish statements and interviews by Zaev or refer to his personality, finishing with the hashtag #CrazyCommunists (#LudaKomunjara). Some of the posts contain death wishes for him and his family ("I hope someday we will see this bastard in a horizontal position with legs in front..."). The Macedonian nation, its ancient origins and glorious past are seen as sacred; thus, any negotiation with the neighbouring countries by a Macedonian politician is perceived as a betrayal. Zaev's statement regarding

14 Dukovska, J. (2020) "Socniot politicki rechnik od nasiot sokak", *CriThink*, 29 May 2020. Available at: <https://crithink.mk/sochniot-politichki-rechnik-od-nashiot-sokak/>.

15 Anastasovska, A. (2020) "Koga fejsbuk statusot na glavniot urednik se prodava kako tekst", *CriThink*, 26 May 2020. Available at: <https://crithink.mk/koga-fejsbuk-statusot-na-glavniot-urednik-se-prodava-kako-tekst/>.

negotiating historic topics and persons with Bulgaria was addressed in 44 comments, many of which contained insulting and repugnant language [17].

The Facebook profile of ex-journalist Milenko Nedelkovski has high popularity and generates the engagement of his followers [18]. In the period before the parliamentary elections, Milenkovski announced on his profile:

"The end is near for all the colourful sorosoids. They will be prosecuted as terrorists. #DoneVojvoda.

All protesters will be done, the photos of their 'performances' like 'Special Prosecutor lovers' are documented: [names of journalists, public figures, politicians and civil society activists] ..." #Strateskipartner [19].

By posting a tweet by Donald Trump saying *"The USA will be designating ANTIFA as a Terrorist Organization"*, the author compares the upcoming elections in North Macedonia and the USA. Implying the victory of the right option in both elections, he warns that proponents of the left-leaning SDSM will be "imprisoned as terrorists". The post has 914 likes, 45 comments and 37 shares. The same day, he informs his followers about a senior SDSM official who tested positive for COVID-19, who was forced to "admit what he hid", posting a screenshot from his official Facebook profile. Followers comment this was God's punishment for election frauds, curse him, wish him death and hope that Zaev gets COVID-19 as well [19].

Nedelkovski has access to a vast network of platforms, owning a website and managing his YouTube channel with 12,700 subscribers. Some videos posted on the YouTube channel have around 30,000 views.

NARRATIVES ON POLITICAL OPPONENTS

Table 3

MAIN NARRATIVE	SUB-NARRATIVES	EXAMPLES
The Government is working against its own country.	The Government representatives are traitors.	"Traitors." "Spies." "Shekerinska has Serbian origin. This is why she gave up on the name so easily."
	The Government is a mercenary of foreign countries and organizations.	Soros is the protector of SDSM, of the Colourful Revolution and the NGOs.
	Various forms of death threats.	"Let him die." (the leader of SDSM) "He needs gallows." "Damn enemies ... =may they perish, God punish them."
	Politicians of the ruling party should be punished, humiliated, publicly exposed.	"The end is coming for all colourful sorosoids. They will be pursued and diminished as terrorists."

The Government's representatives are fake patriots and do not care for the citizens.	"He (Zaev) cares for the country as much as for the people who are put on the corona-elections altar."
Politicians of the Government are communists.	"#CrazyCommunists" (#LudaKomunjara)
Politicians of the Government are elitist.	Zaev enjoys in restaurants. "Stable of Baron Murtinhausen."

5. CASE STUDY: CRITICAL JOURNALISTS

5.1. Female journalists presented in online media

In 2019 and 2020, the pressure on journalists and editors decreased compared to the period before 2016 when they were often personally discredited and hate speech was used against them for their critical reporting towards the then ruling rightist government.¹⁶ However, in 2020, there were cases in which several journalists and editors, including female journalists, were the target of threats, insults, defamation and hate speech via online media and social networks.¹⁷

In 2020, there were cases in which several journalists and editors, including female journalists, were the target of threats, insults, defamation and hate speech via online media and social networks.

Between 18 May and 6 June, the online media outlet *DokazM.mk* published four texts targeting female journalist Miroslava Byrns from *Sloboden pecat* daily using insulting, vulgar language and hate speech and exposing details of her personal life. This was the author's reaction to the critical fact-checking work that Byrns did of *DokazM.mk*' article for *CriThink*.¹⁸

The texts contain sexist insults based on Byrns' appearance, exposing details from her personal life in a speculative and insulting manner ("she came back from America two months ago, she married an old Jewish man so she could spend his pension...") [23]. The author alleges that Byrns makes dishonest money for a living. Ridiculing the journalist's competences or representing female journalists as being not qualified enough for the job they are doing is another underlying narrative in the articles ("illiterate", "so-called journalist", "did you ask me for a second opinion", "I piss on your one-sided journalism") [24]. The author implies that Byrns advanced in her career due to having "close

¹⁶ Nebiu, B. at All. (2018) "Indicators on the level of media freedom and journalists' safety in Macedonia". Skopje: AJM. Available at: <https://bit.ly/3mettFr>. Pg.10.

¹⁷ AJM (2020) "Dramaticen porast na napadi kon novinarite – barame itni resenija", 2 November 2020. Skopje: AJM. Available at: <https://bit.ly/33mllWl>

¹⁸ Byrns, M., "Koj za sto, 'Dokaz' za seks I svalerki" (Everybody writes for something, while *DokazM* writes for sex and lovers), *CriThink.mk*, 17 May 2020. Available at: <https://crithink.mk/koj-za-shto-dokaz-za-seks-i-shvalerki/>

relations” with senior officials, commenting on photos she published on her Facebook profile (“journalists should not have anything with politicians...”) [25]. The allegation that the journalist wants to make use of the European Union permeates one of the texts, although it is not explicitly clear how she would do that [23].

After Byrns asked for an apology from the media outlet, the author published the second text asking her: “Who told you to mess with me?” and gives her advice: “Next time, don’t stick your nose where you shouldn’t”. There is no explicit threat, but the texts are written as a response to Byrns’ article and a warning of what could happen if one messes with the author [26].

The first two texts that *DokazM.mk* published, according to Byrns, had up to 8,000 clicks each [23, 26]. This claim cannot be verified since, in the meantime, the portal has redesigned its webpage so the total number of views cannot be seen. The *DokazM.mk* Facebook page published the texts, but they did not aggregate many engagements (4–7 likes and around ten comments for each of the texts). The majority of comments express disapproval with the media’s narrative.

Byrns filed a complaint with the Council of Media Ethics and a private lawsuit for insult and defamation at the Civil Court. The court case has not been launched yet, since the *DokazM.mk* owner has not accepted the court summons. In June 2020, the Council of Media Ethics condemned *DokazM*’s writings as “an extremely unprofessional and frivolous journalistic product, whose sole purpose is to insult, ridicule and personally discredit the journalist”.¹⁹

Media and journalists’ organizations condemned the language and the defamation directed at Byrns.²⁰ The Union called for the media to respect professional standards. On social networks, journalists, politicians and gender activists supported Byrns. Most comments under Byrns’ post condemned the misogyny and sexism of *DokazM.mk* and its practice of “ridiculing and/or insulting women from the public sphere on a gender basis”.²¹

5.2. Female journalists mocked on social networks

Insults and discrediting of female journalists based on their gender, especially on social media networks, increased in the first half of 2020. While AJM registered four attacks and threats towards journalists in 2019, in 2020 this number increased to 14, half of which were against female journalists.²² Most of them occurred on social networks.

19 CEMEM (2020) “Decision of the CEMEM Complaints Commission”. Skopje: CEMEM. Available at: <https://bit.ly/3mDrXU7>

20 Independent Union of Journalists and Media Workers (2020) “SSNM so poddrška za Miroslava Byrns I sovet da tuzi za navredite izreceni kon nea”, 19 May 2020. Available at: <https://www.pravdiko.mk/ssnm-so-poddrshka-za-miroslava-burns-i-sovet-da-tuzhi-za-navredite-izreceni-kon-nea/>

21 Facebook status of Ivana Tufekgdic, 19 May 2020. Available at: <https://bit.ly/30F5tT0>

22 AJM (2020) “Dramaticen porast na napadi kon novinarite – barame itni resenija”, 2 November 2020. Skopje: AJM. Available at: <https://bit.ly/33mllWl>

During January 2020, a civil servant in the Central Registry Office threatened and published insulting and derogatory contents on social networks against Meri Jordanovska and Iskra Korovesovska, the editors of *A1On.mk* and *TV Alfa*, respectively.

On 10 January, Jordanovska published on her Facebook profile insults and threats she had received via Telegram from Emil Jakimovski, an employee in the Central Registry Office, a former journalist and member of the VMRO-DPMNE. The content included sexist insults (“propagandistic slut”), death wishes (“you should have an obituary”)²³ and threats (posting a picture with handcuffs saying that “this is coming for you and Zoki” (SDSM leader). Jordanovska believed this was due to articles published for *Prizma.mk* about two websites owned by Jakimovski’s brother and their possible connections with one of the political parties. Despite working for *Prizma.mk* in the past, Jordanovska was not the author of the texts.

In both cases, female journalists are targeted on the basis of gender and competence and accused of being liars and mercenaries. The offender represents himself as better because he is a man, a former colleague and an excellent student holding an important position who helped female colleagues in need.

Her post was followed by the testimony of *TV Alfa* chief editor Iskra Korovesovska that Jakimovski had insulted her as a journalist as well via *Facebook*, humiliated her on a gender basis, exposed details from her private life, and threatened her (“see what happens when you meet me outside”).²⁴

In both cases, female journalists are targeted on the basis of gender and competence and accused of being liars and mercenaries. The offender represents himself as better because he is a man, a former colleague and an excellent student holding an important position who helped female colleagues in need. In the bullying, he relies on the power of the political party he was a member of.²⁵

NARRATIVES ON FEMALE JOURNALISTS

Table 4

MAIN NARRATIVE	SUB-NARRATIVES	EXAMPLES
Journalists are enemies of the people.	Journalists are liars.	“You stinky faker.”
	Journalists write what they are instructed to for money.	“You are doing that for food.”
	Journalists should be eliminated.	“You should have an obituary.” “Who told you to mess with me?” “Another time do not put your nose where you shouldn’t.”

²³ Frontline (2020) “Vulgarni zakani kon novinaricata Meri Jordanovska”, *Frontline.mk*, 11 January 2020. Available at: <https://frontline.mk/2020/01/11/vulgarni-zakani-kon-novinaricata-meri-ordanovska/>

²⁴ Facebook status of Iskra Korovesovska, 11 January 2020. Available at: <https://www.facebook.com/iskra.korovesovska>.

²⁵ Private communication of Meri Jordanovska, published with her consent.

Journalists are mercenaries.	“You are still Soros’ mercenary” “(The journalist) wants to earn on the back of DokazM and the European Union.”
Female journalists are less intelligent than male journalists.	“Illiterate.” “So-called journalist.” “Goose.”
Female journalists are not capable as men journalists.	“Director of Central Registry is not an important position?” “You are not important.”
Female journalists advance in the profession in an indecent way.	“Earns money practising the oldest profession.” “Propagandistic slut.”

Both journalists filed charges against Jakimovski for insults and threats on social networks. The Minister of the Interior launched an investigation. Public personalities such as the Mayor of Kavadarci²⁶ and the Central Registry Office Director also reported that Jakimovski had insulted and threatened them. The case was promptly solved: Jakimovski lost his job in the Central Registry and was sentenced to prison for endangering the security of his ex-wife (he was previously on probation for domestic violence) and for the threats against the journalists. The VMRO-DPMNE distanced itself from him and condemned the threats.²⁷

The Independent Union of Journalists and Media Workers stressed that Jordanovska was not attacked only as a journalist, but also as a woman, which “shows that more effort needs to be put into emancipation in the country”.²⁸ The Association of Journalists of Macedonia appealed to the political parties to strongly condemn the threats and to demonstrate an appropriate attitude towards journalists in the run-up to the elections.²⁹

6. CASE STUDY: ETHNIC/RELIGIOUS GROUPS

6.1. Religious divisions surfaced during COVID-19 lockdowns

The case study analyzed in relation to political opponents refers to the religious festivities and restrictions introduced due to the COVID-19 pandemic, and the hate narratives generated towards Muslim believers in relation to these events.

26 Lokalno (2020) “Jakimovski mu se zakanuval I na Mitko Jancev”, *Lokalno.mk*, 11 January 2020. Available at: <https://lokalno.mk/foto-jakimovski-mu-se-zakanuval-i-na-mitko-janchev/>

27 Fokus (2020) “VMRO-DPMNE se ogradi od Emil Jakimovski”, *Fokus.mk*, 11 January 2020. Available at: <https://fokus.mk/vmro-dpmne-se-ogradi-od-emil-jakimovski/>

28 SSNM (2020) “SSNM bara itna istraga za zakanite kon novinarkata Meri Jordanovska”, 11 January 2020. Available at: <https://ssnm.org.mk/soopstenija/ssnm-itna-istraga-za-zakanite-kon-novinarkata-meri>

29 AJM (2020) “ZNM gi osuduva zakanite I navredite upateni kon novinarkata Meri Jordanovska”, 11 January 2020. Available at: <https://mia.mk/znm-gi-osuduva-zakanite-i-navredite-upateni-kon-novinarkata-meri-ordanovska/>

From 23 April to 23 May, Islamic believers celebrated the holy month of Ramadan, which includes fasting and an evening gathering for dinner, sometimes organized by religious groups in public spaces and communities where the majority of the population are ethnic Albanians. During April–June there were three lockdowns during important religious festivities: a four-day complete lockdown over Orthodox Easter beginning on 17 April, a three-day lockdown beginning on 1 May and a 42-hour lockdown for Ramadan Bajram on 24 May.

Infomax.mk, an online media organization with a strong political bias towards the right-wing opposition, published 23 articles with misleading content between 15–31 May 2020. Of those, 22 articles were not signed by an author. Two sub-narratives prevail in the articles: 1) Albanians disrespect the authorities and 2) the Government is giving in under pressure because of political interests before the elections.

The writings focused on Muslim believers, emphasizing examples of “irresponsibility” as a pervasive narrative in many of them (“The question is whether the new COVID-19 clusters in Skopje and Tetovo are due to such frivolous behaviour of believers?”) [27]. The implicit narrative is that Muslims do not respect the Government’s COVID-19 protective measures and spread the virus, not comprehending the danger and the damage it does to everyday life and the economy. In the same period, the media did not adopt a critical stance towards the responsibility and behaviour of Christian believers in the health crisis, although such examples were noticed in the analyzed period.

The implicit narrative is that Muslims do not respect the Government’s COVID-19 protective measures and spread the virus, not comprehending the danger and the damage it does to everyday life and the economy.

The Government is implicitly criticized as being tolerant of the Muslim population’s disrespect of the measures because the SDSM wants to earn the affiliation of the ethnic Albanians ahead of the elections and wants to blame the Minister of the Interior who, in the caretaker government, was from the opposition VMRO-DPMNE [28]. The media raises the question of why the authorities did not allow Orthodox believers to go to church and observe Easter and elaborates that the priests were subjected to fierce attacks, insults and stigmatization [29].

As a result of the “Government’s tolerance towards Muslims”, Christians are depicted as victims of a double standard unable to practice their religion. A Facebook post authored by *Infomax.mk* editor also says:

“Weddings forbidden. For Easter, the whole country under quarantine, the churches closed. People who wanted to go to communion were punished. Struga residents were asked to be castrated because they went to a litany. But, when mass Iftar dinners are held in Chair, Cento, Tetovo, Debar, a voice cannot be heard from the party bots in Bihacka.” (headquarters of the SDSM) [30]

6.2. No restrictions on Facebook

Infomax.mk shares its writings and publications on Facebook through several pages, the *Infomax* group and the editor and staff's personal profiles. *Infomax's* official page has 113K followers. The website reposts the content on the pages without much evidence of efforts to engage readers. Comments are not filtered immediately, allowing offensive and hate speech between Macedonian and Albanian, Christian and Muslim users.

Calling each other "tribes", "horde" and "savages" the representatives of ethnic groups both claim "legacy" to the territory of Macedonia and tackle identity issues.

The editor's comment accusing the Government of double standards about religious celebrations during the lockdown triggers nationalistic discussion among users [31]. While the moderator has deleted some Albanian language replies, offensive and nationalistic messages in Macedonian remain.

Several ethnic Albanian citizens were arrested for violating lockdown restrictions in one of the Skopje suburbs on 14 April 2020, which triggered a protest for their release. A post appeared in the group Sveto ime - Makedonija with a video of the protest and the text: "SHAME! ! About 100 Albanians went out and did what they wanted in the country. Share for everyone to see how they humiliate our country ... !!!" Prolonged exchange of insults and hate speech between users of Macedonian and Albanian ethnic background followed. Calling each other "tribes", "horde", and "savages", in their comments, the representatives of ethnic groups both claim "legacy" to the territory of Macedonia ("Let them go to Albania", "this is also Albania, go in Bulgaria") and tackle identity issues ("Norderm MAK-shit Bulgarians, Russians, Serbs... fromian scum with fallce history") [32].

NARRATIVES ON ETHNIC/RELIGIOUS GROUPS

Table 5

MAIN NARRATIVE	SUB-NARRATIVES	EXAMPLES
Albanians are not loyal citizens of the country.	Albanians are irresponsible and do not respect laws.	About 100 Albanians went out and did what they wanted in the country (i.e. protest during lockdown).
	Albanians do not respect the recommendations of the health authorities.	"The question is whether the new COVID-19 clusters in Skopje and Tetovo are due to such frivolous behaviour of believers?"
	Albanians are instructed by the ruling party.	The ruling SDSM wants to gain sympathy among Albanian voters before the elections.
	Macedonians are victims of the Governments' double standards.	"Struga residents were asked to be castrated because they went to a litany. But when mass lftar dinners are held..., a voice cannot be heard from the party bots in Bihacka."
	The Government gave in to Albanian pressure.	"Gave in to the pressure and threats of the IRC."

7. PREVENTIVE AND EX-POST ACTIONS TO COMBAT HATE AND DISINFORMATION NARRATIVES IN THE COUNTRY

The Public Prosecutor's Office and the judiciary are usually criticized for being slow and ineffective when processing hate speech cases. In the case-law from 2016 to 2020, there was only one court case registered in the Basic Criminal Court referring to the spreading of racist and xenophobic material via a computer system. The court declared the accused innocent in December 2020.³⁰

Due to the increased number of verbal and physical attacks on journalists in 2020, the Association of Journalists of Macedonia asked for a greater engagement of the Public Prosecutor's Office in the processing of cases against media workers, as well as of the Ministry of the Interior expected to require the raising of criminal procedures from the Public Prosecutor in more serious cases.³¹

In an effort to self-regulate the online media space, the Council of Media Ethics established the Registry of Professional Online Media in 2020. Even though 130 online media belong to the Registry, a number of online media have ignored the initiative as such or cannot join it due to multiple breaches of professional standards.

Hate speech was the second most common reason for the violation of professional standards by media outlets, accounting for 20% of the cases in 2019. By June 2020, out of a total of 84 Council adjudications, 36 were for online media outlets that had breached Article 1 in relation to disinformation and misinformation.³² The AJM and the Independent Union of Journalists and Media Workers also regularly react against hate speech in the media and insults and attacks on journalists.

The Helsinki Committee on Human Rights monitors hate speech in traditional media and social networks through its website www.govornaomraza.mk. In March 2020, there was a 100% increase in hate speech cases compared to the same period the year before. The monitoring platform www.govornaomraza.mk.

Due to the increased number of verbal and physical attacks on journalists in 2020, the Association of Journalists of Macedonia asked for a greater engagement of the Public Prosecutor's Office in the processing of cases against media workers, as well as of the Ministry of the Interior expected to require the raising of criminal procedures from the Public Prosecutor in more serious cases.

30 Fokus (2020) "Nedelkovski dobi osloboditelna presuda kako obvinet za sirenje na govor na omraza", [Fokus.mk](https://fokus.mk), 10 December 2020. Available at: <https://fokus.mk/111milenko-dobi-osloboditelna-presuda/>

31 AJM (2020) "Dramaticen porast na napadi kon novinarite – barame itni resenija", 2 November 2020. Skopje: AJM. Available at: <https://bit.ly/33mllWl>

32 Nikodinoska, V. (2020) "The Political and Economic Basis of Media and Communication Models Spreading Disinformation and Hate Speech", Tirana: SEENPM, PI and MIM. Available at: <https://mim.org.mk/en/research/1231-the-political-and-economic-basis-of-media-and-communication-models-spreading-disinformation-and-hate-speech>. Pg. 8.

mk registered one report of hate speech related to migrants in 2019–2020 37 cases for religious affiliation, 108 for political affiliation, and 205 for ethnic affiliation.³³

The Metamorphosis Foundation administers the fact-checking services *Crithink.mk* and *Vistinomer.mk*. In July 2020, *Vistinomer.mk* became Facebook's partner for debunking disinformation.³⁴

8. CONCLUSIONS

The combination of the pandemic, the early elections and religious gatherings during the first half of 2020 created fertile ground for the escalation of the informative chaos, spread of disinformation and hate speech, especially online.

By analyzing different cases and events related to the four target groups, the research identified hate and disinformation narratives appearing in online media and on social networks. In the cases analyzed, migrants were presented as the ones subverting society's cultural values, who could settle in the country and thus take advantage of the socio-economic system or spread Islam. This narrative was largely supported and misused by political parties. Hate and disinformation narratives against political opponents have been triggered by strong nationalistic and identity issues constructed by centres of power and then perpetuated and reinforced by supporting media. Narratives against female journalists contain derogatory language, frequently on a gender basis, as well as stereotyped views and perceptions of women's role in society. Misogyny and sexism are present in the reporting of a few media and used for pressure and blackmail. In relation to inter-ethnic and inter-faith issues, religious festivities during the lockdowns brought to the surface divisions and enmities among ordinary people on social networks and online media reflecting their inclination to political elites.

The elimination of hate speech and hate narratives from the public discourse requires the coordinated efforts of different institutional and civil actors in society, including the political elites which have a crucial role in the production and dissemination of such practices.

The Public Prosecutor's Office and the judiciary have been criticized for their "reserved stance" towards the application of legal bans which resulted in a minimal number of cases related to hate speech in the past.³⁵ However, this problem intensifies when one considers the potential and the impact of the online media and social networks on the production and spreading of these phenomena. The Public Prosecutor's Office hesitates to process these

33 *Govor na omraza*, www.govornaomraza.mk

34 *Anastasovska, A. (2020) "Nema nikakov haos na grcko-makedonskata granica", Crithink, 5 March 2020. Available at: <https://crithink.mk/nema-nikakov-haos-na-grchko-makedonskata-granicza/?fbclid=IwAR0FOubQTlyD2cNv7GDLzVIWUj0le0kGjDYML-pzemGHCO7CGDGzW8IR0WE>*

35 *Kambovski, V. and Lazarova Trajkovska, M. (2012) Pravna analiza na konceptot na kaznenoto delo na omraza i govorot na omraza, Skopje: OSCE. Available at: <http://govornaomraza.mk/media/documents/Pravna%20analiza.pdf>. Pg. 48.*

cases, while the court practice is almost non-existing. The media, journalism associations and human rights advocates have constantly been voicing the need for increased engagement of the Ministry of the Interior, the Public Prosecutor's Office and the judiciary in recognizing, pursuing and prosecuting more serious acts related to hate speech.

The civil society sector appears to be the most active in preventing and countering hate speech and disinformation in both traditional and online media. The CMEM developed the Guidelines for the Ethical Reporting of Online Media whose provisions will be used to assess the compliance of online media to the ethical standards. Even though certain media outlets are still not part of the self-regulatory bodies, they are expected to be accountable to the public and allow for pluralism of views.

Nonetheless, social networks remain a "grey area" where none of the mentioned institutional or civil society actors has competence. Despite Facebook's partnership with the fact-checking service Vistinomer.mk in an effort to identify disinformation on the social network, hate speech is still not under its competence. That is why improving media and information literacy skills and the knowledge of audiences from all age groups is of critical importance. It will help in critically analyzing and assessing news articles or creating and disseminating content via various platforms.

Finally, the elimination of hate speech and hate narratives from the public discourse requires the coordinated efforts of different institutional and civil actors in society, including the political elites which have a crucial role in the production and dissemination of such practices.

9. RECOMMENDATIONS

- The Ministry of the Interior, Public Prosecutor's Office and judiciary should demonstrate active engagement in identifying, processing and prosecuting cases related to hate speech.
- Representatives of the police, public prosecutors and judges should undergo regular training for recognizing hate speech, its processing and effective punishment, both in traditional and online media. Journalists and editors can also participate in this training.
- The Ministry of the Interior, Public Prosecutor's Office, judiciary, Ombudsman and other relevant institutions should cooperate with the media regulator, self-regulatory body and media CSOs for awareness-raising and prevention of hate speech.
- Media management should commit to observing professional and ethical guidelines and effectively combating and deconstructing these narratives with their own counter-narratives.

- In partnership with relevant institutions, the civil society sector should organize and implement communication campaigns for education and awareness-raising on the national and local level, focusing on social media, for preventing hate speech.
- Secondary schools and universities should revise/amend curricula and introduce lectures and workshops on the phenomenon of hate speech and disinformation for educating young people as digital natives, to be able to understand the origins, effectively recognize and counter such practices.
- Civil society organizations should develop and organize media literacy training for various age groups for strengthening the public's' skills in the assessment and critical reading of news content.
- Instead of producing and reinforcing hate narratives and disinformation, political parties should actively counter these phenomena through campaigns, use correct political language, and cut off clientelist relations with online media.

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