



RESILIENCE:
For Media Free of Hate and Disinformation

**THE POLITICAL AND ECONOMIC
BASIS OF MEDIA AND
COMMUNICATION MODELS
SPREADING DISINFORMATION
AND HATE SPEECH**

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NORTH MACEDONIA

RESILIENCE: For Media Free of Hate and Disinformation

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NORTH MACEDONIA

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THE POLITICAL AND ECONOMIC BASIS OF MEDIA AND COMMUNICATION MODELS SPREADING DISINFORMATION AND HATE SPEECH

Vesna Nikodinoska

1. INTRODUCTION

Hate speech, propaganda and disinformation marked a long and dark period in the political and media sphere in North Macedonia from 2008 to 2016. Although the political atmosphere relaxed after the change of government in 2016, in 2019 and 2020 these phenomena are still present, if not increased, which is especially characteristic of the internet space.

North Macedonia has a long tradition of political manipulation with the media.¹ The period from 2008–2016 was characterized by complete political domination of the ruling party in the entire media sphere, during which the political clientelism relations between the government and the media developed and strengthened.² These relations are still maintained in 2020, as there are media outlets that openly favour certain political options, spread disinformation and half-truths in favour of political centres of power. Pressure on non-profit media, some of which cover investigative journalism, has decreased compared to the period before 2016 when journalists and editors were often discredited on a personal basis, and hate speech was used against them for their critical position towards the government.³ However, in 2020, there were several cases in which a number of journalists and editors were the target of threats, insults, obscene language and hate speech sent through online media and social networks.

1 Atanasov, A. (2020) "Tuneva: Mediumite ne treba da se tretiraat kako propagandna masinerija za politicko poentiranje", interview for Macedonian News Agency, 13 June 2020. Available at: <https://mia.mk/tuneva-vo-interv-u-za-mia-mediumite-ne-treba-da-se-tretiraat-kako-propagandna-mashineri-a-za-politichko-poentira-e/>

2 Trpevska, S. and Micevski, I. (2014) *Zosto e vazen integritetot na mediumite?* Skopje: MIM. Available at: https://mim.org.mk/attachments/article/824/zosto_e_vazen_integritetot_na_mediumite_MK_v2.pdf. Pg. 85.

3 Nebiu, B. at All. (2018) *Indicators on the level of media freedom and journalists' safety in Macedonia*. Skopje: AJM. Available at: <https://safejournalists.net/wp-content/uploads/2018/12/Indicators-on-the-level-of-media-freedom-and-journalists-safety-in-Macedonia.pdf>. Pg.10.

Traditional media often refrain from open hate speech, although since 2015 there have been several separate cases where discrimination, intolerance and hate speech have been reported on several⁴ commercial terrestrial television stations at the state level. Still, most disinformation and hate speech is created and transmitted online. Analyses and research show that internet portals are the most common violators of professional standards in 2018–2020,⁵ while hate speech is most prevalent on social media.⁶ The online media are not subject to media regulation, and many of those that do not have transparent ownership are not part of self-regulatory bodies. Hate speech also persists due to the practice of impunity and inaction of the competent institutions. The editorial policy of many portals is biased in favour of political parties. Moreover, a large part of the audience that uses the internet more intensively for information purposes does not have enough skills to distinguish the truth from disinformation, manipulation and propaganda.

Traditional media often refrain from open hate speech, although since 2015 there have been several separate cases where discrimination, intolerance and hate speech have been reported on several commercial terrestrial television stations at the state level. Still, most disinformation and hate speech is created and transmitted online.

This analysis deals with the identification of patterns of disinformation, propaganda and hate speech in the media and public communication in North Macedonia. The aim is to determine their structure and characteristics, and political and economic support, as well as their impact. The analysis conducted in the period April–June 2020 took into account the decisions made by the Council of Media Ethics of Macedonia (CMEM) in 2019 and 2020, and reviewed the monitoring reports conducted by the Agency for Audio and Audiovisual Media Services (AAVMS) and the complaints that it received, and the analysis of organizations conducting monitoring of disinformation and hate speech, such as the Helsinki Committee of Macedonia, CriThink – Critical Thinking for Mediawise Citizens, and Civil – Center for Freedom. Media experts and other reports of media organizations dealing with the monitoring of these phenomena in North Macedonia were consulted as well.

The analysis identified several media models, media groups and individuals who spread disinformation, propaganda and hate speech, predominantly in the online sphere, as few traditional media outlets only accidentally published such content in 2019 and 2020. The following models were identified: 1) larger online newsrooms that maintain political clientelism relations with the centres of power and often disseminate disinformation and propaganda in their favour in a coordinated manner; 2) small tabloid-type online media (“one-man newsroom”) that apologetically spread inappropriate information, disinformation, and often hate speech in support of certain centres of power; 3) public figures who through various online channels spread hate speech and offensive and inappropriate speech on political and nationalist grounds;

4 AAVMS (2015-2020) Reports of conducted supervision/measures, public reprimand. Skopje: AAVMS. Available at: <https://avmu.mk/telma-dooel-skopje/>

5 CMEM (2020) Infographics - Statistical review of the decisions of the Complaints Commission for 2019. Skopje: CMEM. Available at: <https://semm.mk/komisija-za-zalbi-4/statistichki-pregledi/690-2019>

6 Interview with a representative of the Helsinki Committee, conducted on 18 June 2020 (via email).

4) social media groups with a political and/or nationalist background; 5) individual social media posts and comments with inappropriate content of a political, national, sexual and other nature.

The analysis contains a description of the media system and the extent to which it enables the development and existence of media models that spread disinformation, propaganda and hate speech. The organizational structure, ownership and financing of the media will be explained, as well as the self-regulatory mechanisms, regulatory framework and initiatives of the civil society organizations that monitor and analyze their work. In this regard, examples of media, media groups, individuals and other media structures that usually spread disinformation, propaganda and hate speech will be presented, as well as recommendations for further dealing with these harmful practices in the media and communication sphere in North Macedonia.

2. HOW THE POLITICAL AND MEDIA SYSTEMS ENABLE AN ENVIRONMENT FOR THE SPREADING OF DISINFORMATION AND HATE SPEECH

2.1. Political clientelism – the weakness of all governments

During the rule of the right-wing VMRO-DPMNE party in the period 2008–2016, the media served as “the means of mobilization, not a means of information”⁷, as well as spreading the orchestrated propaganda from one political centre, which resulted in narrowing the space for critical media. The primary mechanism for achieving influence was the state advertising in the so-called “eligible media” which strengthened the political clientelism between the government and the media. Pro-government media outlets were established, or smaller regional television broadcasters whose editorial policies favoured the ruling party were bought in a dubious manner.⁸ After the change of government in 2016, the country began to advance in the ratings of media organizations that measure media freedoms. State advertising was abolished, and parts of the media that received support through party and State Budget sources were closed, while some media and prominent anchors who openly spread hate speech and propaganda completely disappeared from the media scene. The favouritism of the left-wing government can be seen in the coverage of certain media from 2016–2020 as well, although in a more moderate style and smaller numbers.

While the VMRO-DPMNE party was in power, the media sphere was dominated

7 Trpevska, S. and Micevski, I. (2014) *Zosto e vazen integritetot na mediumite?* Skopje: MIM. Available at: https://mim.org.mk/attachments/article/824/zosto_e_vazen_integritetot_na_mediumite_MK_v2.pdf. Pg. 68.

8 Apostolov, V., Jordanovska, M. and Cvetkovska, S. (2014) “Nova mediumska zetva vo vladiniot reklamen kombajn”, published on www.novatv.mk on 5 December 2014. Available at: <https://novatv.mk/nova-mediumska-zetva-vo-vladiniot-reklamen-kombajn/>

by pro-government media, and internet portals were seen as “the last refuge of critical journalism”. However, several pro-government online media outlets were created at the time, publishing content with an extreme bias towards the then ruling party⁹. In that period, the ownership of some registered offshore destinations was also problematic, and over the years, the media reported on various schemes of affiliation with the ruling party and the diversion of funds from state advertising.¹⁰

While the VMRO-DPMNE party was in power, the media sphere was dominated by pro-government media, and internet portals were seen as “the last refuge of critical journalism”. However, several pro-government online media outlets were created at the time, publishing content with an extreme bias towards the then ruling party.

Research shows that in 2020 the two largest political parties, VMRO-DPMNE and the SDSM, have information portals that are close to them and that they often use them to spread politically coloured texts or manipulations.¹¹ Through advertisers affiliated with political parties, funds are allocated for advertising on such portals, which “calls into question the professionalism of journalism in those portals and creates unfair competition for those who work professionally and raise funds from advertising based on readership.”¹²

2.2. Online media are the most frequent violators of professional standards

Internet media are a particularly suitable channel for spreading disinformation and inciting hate speech. The growing trends of these phenomena generally make it more difficult for citizens to access news of public interest, given the fact that the internet, as a source of information, has drawn level with television in terms of frequency of use (76%).¹³

The Council for Media Ethics of Macedonia (CMEM) concluded that in 2019 and 2020, the largest number of violations of professional and ethical standards referred to Article 1 of the Code of Journalists, which requires the publication of accurate and verified information. Journalistic content should not rely on one-sided information because it “creates an opportunity for citizens to be served half-truths or lies as verified and real news.”¹⁴ In the context of disinformation, misinformation and propaganda spreading, violations may include infringements related to Article 3 of the Code, which requires journalists to provide correction, denial and response in case of inaccuracy of information, as well as Article 13, which refers to the mixing

9 Trpevska, S. and Micevski, I. (2014) *Zosto e vazen integritetot na mediumite?* Skopje: MIM. Available at: https://mim.org.mk/attachments/article/824/zosto_e_vazen_integritetot_na_mediumite_MK_v2.pdf. Pg. 85.

10 Trpkovski, G. (2020) “Ungarskoto maslo vo makedonskite mediumi”, published on www.prizma.mk on 14 February 2020. Available at: <https://prizma.mk/ungarskoto-maslo-vo-makedonskite-mediumi/>

11 AAVMS (2020) “Utvrduvanje na vlijaniето na novite mediumi vrz formiranjeto na javnoto misljenje i vrz rabotenjeto na tradicionalnite mediumi”. Skopje: AAVMS. Available at: <https://bit.ly/2W7T1c3>. Pg. 37.

12 *Ibid.* Pg. 37.

13 *Ibid.* Pg. 7-8.

14 Tahiri, S. and Adamchevski, M. (2017) *Izvestuvanje vo interes na javnosta.* Skopje: SEMM. Available at: <http://www.semm.mk/attachments/izvestuvanje-vo-interes-na-javnosta.pdf>. Pg. 10.

of facts and opinions, news and comments. According to the CMEM, hate speech (Article 10) was the second most common reason for the violation of professional standards by the media with 20% in 2019, just like Article 13 (20%).¹⁵ By June 2020, out of a total of 84 adjudications of the CMEM's Complaints Commission, 36 were for portals that violated Article 1.

CMEM ADJUDICATIONS ACCORDING TO THE REPRESENTATION OF THE VIOLATED ARTICLES OF THE CODE IN 2019

Table 1

| ARTICLE | DESCRIPTION OF THE ARTICLE FROM THE CODE | NUMBER OF |
|------------|---|---------------|
| Article 1 | Inaccurate and unverified information, lack of "second party" and absence of at least two unrelated sources. | 41 (68.3%) |
| Article 10 | Hate speech and incitement to violence or discrimination on any grounds. | 12 (20.0%) |
| Article 13 | The journalist does not distinguish between facts and opinions, news and comments. | 12 (20.0%) |
| Article 15 | The journalist must cultivate a culture of speech and ethics. Inappropriate communication with the public is incompatible with the journalistic profession. | 9 (15.0%) |
| Article 7 | The journalist will respect the privacy of the person, except when it goes against the public interest. | 7 (11.7%) |
| Article 3 | The journalist will endeavour to publish a correction, denial or response when inaccuracy of the information is established. | 4 (6.7%) |

Source: CMEM, 2019, <https://semm.mk/komisija-za-zalbi-4/statistichki-pregledi/690-2019>

In the context of hate speech, the findings of the monitoring of the Helsinki Committee for Human Rights show an increased rise from the end of 2018, as well as throughout the first half of 2019, mostly on the basis of ethnicity and political affiliation, as well as sexual orientation and gender identity.¹⁶ During March 2020, on the other hand, 110 cases were registered, which is 100% more than the same period last year.¹⁷ Most of the cases were related to the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic, and the introduction of a state of

¹⁵ CMEM (2020) Statistical review of the decisions of the Complaints Commission for 2019. Available at: <https://semm.mk/komisija-za-zalbi-4/statistichki-pregledi/690-2019>

¹⁶ Hate Speech Monitoring Website: www.govornaomraza.mk

¹⁷ Helsinki Committee (2020) "Govor na omraza vo vreme na pandemija". Skopje: HC. Available at: <https://mhc.org.mk/media/helsinshki-komitet-govor-na-omraza-vo-vreme-na-pandemija-zgolemen-broj-na-prijavi-po-osnov-na-etnichka-i-politichka-pripadnost/>

emergency, as well as the restrictive measures taken by the Government in the period from March 2020. Their monitoring also confirms that the portals are a channel for spreading fake news and inciting hate speech since much of their content is posted on Facebook and Twitter.¹⁸ In the case-law from 2016 to 2020, there is only one court case registered in the Basic Criminal Court for spreading racist and xenophobic material via a computer system, which is still in the process of being processed.¹⁹

REPRESENTATION OF MEDIA THAT WERE THE SUBJECT OF COMPLAINTS TO THE CMEM IN 2019

Table 2

| | | |
|-------------------------|-------|---------------|
| Internet portals | 83.1% | 69 complaints |
| Television broadcasters | 15.7% | 13 complaints |
| Newspapers | 1.2% | 1 complaint |

Source: CMEM, <https://semm.mk/komisija-za-zalbi-4/statistichki-pregledi/690-2019>

These phenomena are not such a characteristic trend for traditional media because they are subject to legal regulation and monitoring by the Agency for Audio and Audiovisual Media Services, including, among others, hate speech (Article 48) and respect for programmatic principles (Article 61) which are part of the Law on Audio and Audiovisual Media Services.²⁰ Research shows that the regulator is particularly engaged in the occurrence and prevention of hate speech and discrimination through the media.²¹ From 2015 to 2020, through their control oversight, the Agency concluded that several of the largest commercial terrestrial television stations at the state level sporadically violated these two legal provisions. Specifically, violations were more frequent around the 2016 parliamentary elections,²² on the television stations close to the ruling VMRO-DPMNE, which fiercely defended its policies.

18 Interview with a representative of the Helsinki Committee, 18 June 2020 (via email).

19 Response from the Basic Court 1 at the Request for MIM for free access to information, 18 June 2020 (via email).

20 Law on Audio and Audiovisual Media Services (2013). Available at: https://avmu.mk/wp-content/uploads/2017/05/Zakon_za_audio_i_audiovizuelni_mediumski_uslugi_mkd_1.pdf

21 Nebiu, B. at All. (2018) Indicators on the level of media freedom and journalists' safety in Macedonia. Skopje: AJM. Available at: <https://safejournalists.net/wp-content/uploads/2018/12/Indicators-on-the-level-of-media-freedom-and-journalists-safety-in-Macedonia.pdf>. Pg. 9.

22 AAVMS (2015-2020) Reports of implemented measures/supervision/public reprimand. Skopje: AAVMS. Available at: <https://avmu.mk/izdavaci-na-mediumi-televizii/>

2.3. Models of online media that spread disinformation, propaganda and hate speech

Although there are no accurate records, there are about 100 online portals in North Macedonia that produce informative content. Many of them face financial difficulties and work in very modest conditions, due to which they employ a small number of journalists and editors, which also affects the quality of the media content. Often, the media that spread disinformation have problems with ownership transparency.²³

In North Macedonia, online media are mostly in the hands of domestic natural and legal entities. Seven online media outlets and one television station are owned by foreign capital, namely Hungarian. These are media whose editorial policy is inclined towards the right-wing party VMRO-DPMNE.²⁴ After the SDSM came to power in 2016, media that, in turn, support its policies also emerged. In 2019, the husband of the prime minister's adviser bought several online media outlets, expressing his intention to further expand the media business.²⁵ These types of media belong to the first model of online media that maintain political clientelism relations with the centres of power and often spread information and propaganda in their favour in a coordinated manner.

Most online media outlets have small newsrooms with one to five journalists, but there are also such daily information portals that number about a dozen journalists. Many of the online editorial newsrooms of the first model employ journalists and editors who have journalistic experience or appropriate education. However, they also publish disinformation and speculation, or their content has been reviewed by the Complaints Commission at the CMEM or the fact-checking services for other reasons. Gender balance in terms of employment exists in most major newsrooms, and some are led by female editors.

The most common remarks about the work of online media are the unsigned texts, mixing the news with the commentary, tendentious or misleading titles, manipulating content and photos, using content from domestic and foreign media without citing the source, and using content from social networks.

The most common remarks about the work of online media are the unsigned texts, mixing the news with the commentary, tendentious or misleading titles, manipulating content and photos, using content from domestic and foreign media without citing the source, and using content from social networks. Often, a group of online media outlets that support the same political and ideological views with the political centres of power share the same text or photo, which might later

23 Nikodinoska, V. and Milenkovski, S. (2019) "North Macedonia's Epidemic of Political Disinformation", published on TOL website, 21.08.2019. Available at: <https://www.tol.org/client/article/28538-north-macedonias-epidemic-of-political-disinformation.html>

24 Jovanovska, M., Bodoky, T. and Belford, A. (2018) "Right-Wing Hungarian Media Moves Into the Balkans". Available at: <https://www.occrp.org/en/spooksandspin/right-wing-hungarian-media-moves-into-the-balkans>

25 Jovanovska, M. (2020) "Soprugata sovetnik na Zaev, soprugot vo pohod vo pohod vo mediumskiot biznis", published on Irl.mk, 31 March 2020. Available at: <https://irl.mk/soprugata-sovetnik-na-zaev-soprugot-vo-pohod-vo-mediumskiot-biznis/>

be confirmed as disinformation or misinformation.²⁶ Depending on the party they support, the narratives promote or criticize political, ideological, ethnic, or religious views.

The second model is the small online media, usually run by one person, who is both the owner and the journalist in the media organization. Some small media outlets, usually with strong political and ideological views, neither publish ownership information,²⁷ nor an impressum. These media do not hide their political orientation and unapologetically place themselves on the side of the parties they support. Most of them, however, work like “one-man newsrooms” with a limited impact on the public. Some of them publish content that does not respect journalistic, ethical and professional standards, they abound in sensationalist and shocking news and headlines, and often publish unverified information, speculation, insults, and hate speech. The content is conveyed in colloquial language, uncharacteristic of the journalistic form, often with the intention of discrediting public figures.

However, even those online media outlets that continuously violate the Code of Ethics are fighting for a piece of the advertising cake, which disrupts the fair competition in the media market.²⁸ For those who are registered as legal entities, the financial situation can be checked through the competent institutions. However, not a single online media outlet has an obligation to publish its financial data or sources of funding, as is the case with broadcast media. Portals generally provide revenue from advertising, and online advertising has been on the rise since 2016. The analysis of the financial operations of 35 legal entities that issue more than 40 leading online media and aggregators shows that the total operating income in 2018 amounted to about 4 million euros compared to 2.7 million euros in 2016.²⁹ For the parliamentary elections in July 2020, in addition to the traditional ones, as many as 230 online media outlets applied to the State Election Commission for the paid political advertising provided for the participants in the pre-election campaign. For that purpose, the budget allocated 3.6 million euros for all media. Media organizations warn that this poses a risk of political influence over the media and media freedom.³⁰

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26 CMEM Complaints Commission has made several decisions against a group of media outlets that shared the same text.

27 IREX (2019) MSI 2019. Washington: IREX. Available at: <https://www.irex.org/sites/default/files/pdf/media-sustainability-index-europe-urasia-2019-full.pdf>. Pg. 83.

28 Ibid. Pg. 79.

29 AAVMS (2020) Utvrduvanje na vlijanieto na novite mediumi vrz formiranjeto na javnoto misljenje l vrz rabotenjeto na tradicionalnite mediumi. Skopje: AAVMS. Available at: <https://bit.ly/3emvH0G>. Pg. 27.

30 Selmani, N. (2020) “Novi 3 milioni evra za plakanje partiska propaganda vo mediumite”, Media Reform Observatory, Metamorphosis. Available at: https://mediaobservatorium.mk/novi-tri-milioni-evra-za-plakanje-partiska-propaganda-vo-mediumite/?fbclid=IwAR2afBYlxk5c_-P6V5AebEVtqPeDKv1-9lrrl_fAdVxP

REVENUES FROM THE OPERATION OF DOMESTIC ONLINE MEDIA IN 2016, 2017 AND 2018

Table 3

| | 2016 | 2017 | 2018 |
|---|---------------------------------|----------------------------|----------------------------|
| REVENUES FROM THE OPERATION OF 35 legal entities (online media) | MKD 167,852,367 €2.7 million | MKD 189,645,002 €3 mil. | MKD 250,906,555 €4 mil. |

Source: AAAVMS, *Determining the impact of new media on shaping public opinion and the operation of traditional media (2020)*

In addition to politicians, there are journalists, businessmen and influencers who are the main sources of disinformation and hate speech,³¹ whose posts are shared virally on social networks. The third model categorizes celebrities who use multiple platforms to convey their views and messages that, in addition to offensive and inappropriate speech on political and nationalist grounds, often contain hate speech. Thus, several former journalists with many followers on Facebook and Twitter, have their own websites, write columns for other media or have their own shows on the broadcast media. The website of a former journalist declares itself as independent from all centres of power, stating its intention to be financed through donations, i.e. there is information on the website about how one can donate.

The fourth model contains various “formations” on social networks that spread hate speech and disinformation. According to the analysis of civil society organizations, some Facebook pages have from several thousand to 30 thousand members,³² and are politically and ethnically motivated, especially in the run-up to elections. The diversity of topics that generate membership on social network sites and groups comes from the division of society on political, ethnic and religious grounds. Disinformation and propaganda also produce conspiracy theories related to the Coronavirus crisis, as well as various anti-vaccination movements, theories about the influence and impact of 5G, and several people who are influential on the world stage, such as Bill Gates, Soros and others. All these narratives are intertwined with daily politics.

Almost all media, both traditional and online, share their content through social networks, where the comments under the posts are often not filtered by an administrator. This is another free space for disseminating all kinds of information in the communication space, which is often “packed” with nationalistic rhetoric, insults, threats and hatred on any and all bases, which is why it is categorized as a separate model. However, more detailed research on hate speech and disinformation spread through social media user comments has not been conducted.

31 Nikodinoska, V. and Milenkovski, S. (2019) “North Macedonia’s Epidemic of Political Disinformation”, published on TOL website, 21 August 2019. Available at: <https://www.tol.org/client/article/28538-north-macedonias-epidemic-of-political-disinformation.html>

32 Civil (2020) “Pre-election report on the monitoring of Civil”, 11 July 2020. Available at: <https://civilmedia.mk/predizboren-izveshtaj-za-monitoringot-na-tsivil/>

2.4. Balancing between self-regulatory “remedies” and regulation

In the past few years, there have been several initiatives for bringing order to the field of online journalism. In 2020, a registry was established the mandatory criteria of which professional online media must meet in order to become members.³³ By May 2020, about 130 online media outlets had become part of the registry. A certain number of online media outlets do not show initiative or, due to multiple violations of professional standards, cannot join the registry. In 2019, the CMEM initiated the Network for Combating Hate Speech in the Media in order to encourage inter-agency cooperation and to create a coordinated system of action of institutions (professional media and journalistic associations, competent state and regulatory bodies, civil society organizations and other entities in the field of media and human rights).

These initiatives are a kind of a response to the dissonance that exists in the media sphere about the need to regulate online media due to non-compliance with ethical and professional standards. Media organizations oppose the requirements for the legal regulation of online media, as it contradicts the recommendations of the Council of Europe, and underline that the laws related to the liability of traditional media (Criminal Code, Copyright Law, Anti-Discrimination Law, n.b.) also apply to online media.³⁴ In recent years, some courts have dismissed defamation and insult lawsuits through online media because they were not defined as media in the media regulations.³⁵ According to the Association of Journalists of Macedonia (AJM), this is due to the “political background” aimed at discrediting the online media, in order to provide evidence to the Government for the case for more robust regulation.³⁶

In recent years, some courts have dismissed defamation and insult lawsuits through online media because they were not defined as media in the media regulations. According to the Association of Journalists of Macedonia (AJM), this is due to the “political background” aimed at discrediting the online media, in order to provide evidence to the Government for the case for more robust regulation.

The Agency for Audio and Audiovisual Media Services has jurisdiction over television and radio stations, and only administers the registry of print media. The regulator exercises control over broadcasters in compliance with the legal provisions regarding programming principles (Article 61) and special prohibitions for programmes that incite or spread discrimination, intolerance or hatred based on race, gender, religion or nationality (Article 48).³⁷ It has no jurisdiction over online media.

³³ Registry of professional online media. Rules for admission of internet portals for membership. Available at: <https://promedia.mk/rules?lng=mk>

³⁴ AJM (2017) “Announcement: Analysis of online media presented”. Skopje: AJM. Available at: <https://znm.org.mk/prezentirana-analiza-za-onlajn-mediu/>

³⁵ Nebiu, B. at All (2018) Indicators on the Level of Media Freedom and Journalists Safety in Macedonia. Skopje: AJM. Available at: <https://safejournalists.net/wp-content/uploads/2018/12/Indicators-on-the-level-of-media-freedom-and-journalists-safety-in-Macedonia.pdf>. Pg. 22.

³⁶ Ibid. Pg. 30.

³⁷ Law on Audio and Audiovisual Media Services (2013), Art. 61 and Art. 48. Available at: https://avmu.mk/wp-content/uploads/2017/05/Zakon_za_audio_i_audiovizuelni_mediumski_uslugi_mkd_1.pdf

Of the civil society organizations working in the field of human rights, the Helsinki Committee monitors hate speech on traditional media and social networks in order to improve the capacity of police officers, judges and public prosecutors to process hate speech cases and provide effective mechanisms for the protection of citizens' rights.³⁸ The Metamorphosis Foundation administers the fact-checking and deconstruction of disinformation in the media on its websites Crithink.mk and Vistinomer.mk. The project "Fighting Fake News Narratives" (f2n2.mk) is implemented by the CSO "Most" against disinformation on the internet. The CSO Civil conducts election monitoring and publishes information on hate speech and disinformation on social networks.

Regarding social media, in May 2020, Facebook intervened when it was discovered that "disinformation farms" from North Macedonia and the Philippines were working for the Natural News site, known for sharing conspiracy theories and disinformation about Covid-19, by removing the site.

3. EXAMPLES OF ONLINE MEDIA THAT OFTEN SPREAD DISINFORMATION, PROPAGANDA AND HATE SPEECH

In order to present the models of dissemination of disinformation, propaganda and hate speech, the analysis will present examples of media and other communication forms, their organizational set-up, transparency of data in terms of ownership and editorial board/newsroom, and the content they produce, as well as data indicating their connection to the centres of power. Financial data will be displayed for those online media that are available from other surveys, as the media themselves have no obligation to publish them.

The analysis will rely on the findings of the CMEM and fact-checking services, given that only they monitor their work in terms of compliance with professional standards. According to the decisions of the CMEM³⁹ a dozen online media often appear as violators of multiple professional standards. They are also subject to CriThink and Vistinomer analyses or are indicated in the monitoring of the Helsinki Committee. The starting point were the media against which the CMEM brought several adjudications for violations of Articles 1, 3, 10 and 13 in the period from 2019 to June 2020.

38 See more at: www.govornaomraza.mk; <https://mhc.org.mk/news/povik-za-angazhman-na-mediumski-monitori-za-registriranje-na-govor-na-omraza-na-socijalnite-mediumi-za-periodot-noemvri-2019-septemvri-2020-godina>

39 CMEM - Decisions and Opinions. Available at: <https://semm.mk/komisija-za-zalbi-4/arhiva-odluki-i-mislenja>

CMEM ADJUDICATIONS FOR VIOLATION OF ARTICLES 1, 3, 10 AND 13 OF THE CODE OF ETHICS IN 2019–2020

Table 4

| MEDIA | ARTICLE 1 | ARTICLE 3 | ARTICLE 10 | ARTICLE 13 |
|--------------|-----------|-----------|------------|------------|
| Dokaz M | 11 | 1 | 2 | 4 |
| Republika.mk | 7 | 1 | 1 | 1 |
| Vecer.mk | 4 | 1 | 1 | 2 |
| Lider.mk | 3 | | 1 | 1 |
| Infomax.mk | 2 | | | 3 |
| Kurir.mk | 2 | 2 | | 2 |
| Maktel.mk | 1 | | | 1 |
| 1TV | 3 | 1 | | 2 |

Source: CMEM, <https://semm.mk/komisija-za-zalbi-4/ahiva-odluki-i-mislenja>

3.1. Group of portals: Dissemination of disinformation from the same ideological matrix

Several media outlets against which the CMEM has brought several adjudications for violations of the Code of Ethics are related to the Hungarian investments in the media sphere in North Macedonia.

The company that publishes the portal Republika.mk, and previously published a weekly under the same name, was founded in 2012 and was initially registered in Belize. In 2016, ownership was transferred to a domestic physical entity, from whom the company Adinamic, owned by the Hungarian citizen Agnes Adamik, bought 51%.⁴⁰ This company also bought a majority share in the company EM Media, which owns the online media Kurir.mk, Lider.mk, Deneshen.mk, Ekonomski.mk and Vistina.mk. The company EM Media was previously managed by a person who is related to an official of the right-wing party VMRO-DPMNE. The company Adinamic also bought a part of the shares in LD Press Media, which owns the portal NetPress.com.mk.⁴¹

Unlike its beginnings, the Republika portal now has transparent ownership and publishes an impressum, according to which the editorial board/newsroom has 11 editors and journalists. Lider.mk has ten employees in the editorial board/newsroom, and information on the owner company and the director is published on the site. The company-owner of Republika.mk and Lider.mk in 2020 was the company Prva Republika DOO, which is managed by the same director.

⁴⁰ Jovanovska, M., Bodoky, T. and Belford, A. (2018) "Right-Wing Hungarian Media Moves Into the Balkans", published on www.occrp.org, 9.05.2018. Available at: <https://www.occrp.org/en/spooksandspin/right-wing-hungarian-media-moves-into-the-balkans>; <https://irl.mk/mediumite-na-ungarskata-desnitsa-se-pr/>

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

TRANSPARENCY OF OWNERSHIP AND FINANCIAL DATA OF A GROUP OF ONLINE MEDIA

Table 5

| MEDIUM | IMPRES-SUM/ NUMBER OF JOUR- NALISTS | OWNERSHIP/ PUBLISHER/ REGISTRANT | DIRECTOR | MEMBER- SHIP IN THE REG- ISTER OF ONLINE MEDIA | ADVERTISEMENTS | OPERATING INCOME | ALEXA RANK- ING |
|--------------------------|---|--|-------------------------------------|---|--|--|-----------------------|
| Repub- lika.mk | Yes/ 11 journal- ists and editors (7 women/ 4 men) | Prva Republika DOO Skopje | Done Donevski | No | -VMRO-DPMNE (election campaign) - #Because I love Macedonia -Triglav (insurance) -Weight loss products | 2018 €234,000 2017 €219,000 2016 €387,500 (The data refer to the company Prva Republika) | Over 50 |
| Lider.mk | Yes/ 8 ed- itors and journalists (2 women/ 6 men) | Prva Republika DOO Skopje | Done Donevski | No | -VMRO- DPMNE (election campaign) - #Because I love Macedonia | (Same data as above for Prva Republika) | Over 50 |
| Kurir.mk | Yes/ 7 ed- itors and journalists (3 women/ 4 men) | EM Media DOO Skopje | / | No | -VMRO-DPMNE (election campaign) -European University -Sinalco.mk (prize game-juices) -Weight loss product | 2018 - €390,000 2017 €136,000 2016 €272,000 | 31 |
| Net- press. com.mk | Yes / 5 ed- itors and journalists (2 women / 3 men) | LD Press Media | Lidija Stancev- ska Kumeva | No | -VMRO-DPMNE (election cam- paign) -NLB Bank -Pekabesko -Weight loss prod- uct -Thrivity.mk (em- ployment site) -Gohost.mk (site domain host) | 2018 €117,600 | 30 |

Source: Media Websites, MARnet; Financial data from: AAAVMS' Analysis and from Analitika.mk: <https://analitika.mk/biznisot-so-internet-portali-tezi-okolu-tri-milioni-evra/>.

During the rule of the VMRO-DPMNE party, advertisements from government campaigns, institutions and large domestic companies were published on some portals,⁴² a practice that was interrupted by a change of government. The media wrote that in 2015 the companies EM Media and Prva Republika had payments of 25,000 euros each, i.e. 32,000 euros from the Government, as stated in the database of budget payments.⁴³ In the local elections in 2017, according to the report of the VMRO-DPMNE party, some publishing companies of online media received funds for banners from the party—mostly EM Media, which publishes the portal Kurir, and Republika.mk.⁴⁴ During the 2019 presidential elections, the company EM Media received the biggest portion of the money allocated for online advertisements – 31,000 euros, while Prva Republika, which is the publisher of the Republika website portal, took 17,650 euros, more specifically for advertising the VMRO-DPMNE presidential candidate.⁴⁵ These finances for media advertising, according to the agreement among the political parties, are allocated from the State Budget. In the pre-election period in June 2020, the websites of Republika.mk and Lider.mk ran ads under the slogan #Buy Macedonian products, a campaign supported by the VMRO-DPMNE party. EM Media owning the portal Kurir.mk is in second, and Prva Republika owning Republika.mk is in fourth place among the first five entities that realized the most sales revenues in 2018. In 2018, EM Media increased the 2016 revenues by 50%, while Prva Republika generated much higher revenues in 2016 compared to the following two consecutive years.⁴⁶

During the rule of the VMRO-DPMNE party, advertisements from government campaigns, institutions and large domestic companies were published on some portals, a practice that was interrupted by a change of government.

Common to these portals is their inclination towards the former ruling VMRO-DPMNE party, but even after the change of the government in 2016 and until 2020, they kept their editorial policy close to the opposition party and maintained a critical attitude towards the SDSM government.⁴⁷ In some cases, the media itself confirms its critical position: *“Republika’ is the biggest threat to the government: Šekerinska is also threatening us with a lawsuit.”* (24 August 2019). For some, the choice of columnists is such that they mostly support the policies of the VMRO-DPMNE party, or, quantitatively and qualitatively, their content shows a tendency towards one political party and a critical attitude towards the government. It is a common practice of many of these portals to transmit the same content, with almost the same or a similar

42 Trpkovski, G. (2020) “Ungarskoto maslo vo makedonskite mediumi”, published on Prizma.mk, 14 February 2020. Available at: <https://prizma.mk/ungarskoto-maslo-vo-makedonskite-mediumi/>.

43 Ibid; Open database: www.open.source.gov.mk.

44 Jordanovska, M. (2017) “VMRO-DPMNE so najbogata reklama I propaganda na lokalnite izbori”, published on Prizma.mk, 07 October 2017. Available at: <https://prizma.mk/vmro-dpmne-najbogata-reklama-propaganda-na-lokalnite-izbori>.

45 Jovanovska, M. and Cvetkovska, S. (2020) “Drzavni pari za izborni informaciski vojni”, published on IRL.mk, 23 July 2020. Available at: <https://irl.mk/drzavni-pari-za-izborni-informatsiski-voni/>.

46 AAVMS (2020) Utvrduvanje na vlijaniето na novite mediumi vrz formiranje na javnoto misljenje I vrz rabotenjeto na tradicionalnite mediumi. Skopje: AAVMS. Available at: <https://bit.ly/3emvH0G>. Pg. 27.

47 Republika.mk: “Šekerinska laze, ‘Republika’ ne se izvinila I nema da se izvini”, published on Republika.mk, 22 June 2020. Available at: <https://republika.mk/vesti/makedonija/shekerinska-laze-republika-ne-se-izvinila-i-nema-da-se-izvini/>

title, accompanied by the same photo. Even disinformation is replicated and disseminated in this way. Thus, the CMEM Complaints Commission decided that professional standards were breached by the text *“Zaev and Dimitrov took us back to the 19th century, you can state that you are Greek or Serbian at the border, but not Macedonian”* (22 December 2019) published by the media outlet Republika.mk, and under another title by Infomax.mk and Vecer.mk. The text was a transferred Facebook status of a social media user. However, the media neither tried to contact him to confirm the information with the relevant institution nor expressed any reservations with the status in order to avoid possible disinformation and manipulation of the public. The text in all three media was not signed. The Commission concluded that the media had violated the ethical standards 1, 3 and 13, related to reporting half-truths and unverified information, and mixing facts and opinions.

It is a common practice of many of these portals to transmit the same content, with almost the same or a similar title, accompanied by the same photo. Even disinformation is replicated and disseminated in this way.

The fact-checking service CriThink⁴⁸ analyzed several texts on Republika.mk, Kurir.mk, Netpress.mk and Lider.mk. The analysis showed false, tendentious or sensationalist titles, disinformation, unverified information and speculations, sensationalist news, selective use of correct information and their manipulation, xenophobic content, unverified information taken from social networks (Republika.mk: 12 February 2019, 29 January 2019, 27 February 2019, 02 June 2020; Lider.mk: 27 March 2019, 17 September 2019; Kurir.mk: 21 March 2019, 24 April 2019, 04 October 2019, 10 March 2020, 26 March 2020; Netpress.com.mk: 12 August 2019). For example, CriThink reviewed the news on Lider.mk, according to which the Assembly dismissed the first minister of Jewish descent in North Macedonia, alluding that she was the target of anti-Semitic attacks by the ruling SDSM party (18 February 2020). This narrative was shared by most media with the same political inclination in order to accuse the government of anti-Semitism. The Minister of Labour and Social Politics from the ranks of the VMRO-DPMNE opposition was dismissed for not using the constitutional name of the country. CriThink assessed the text of Lider.mk as unprofessional and manipulative, creating a distorted image behind the reasons for the dismissal of the minister.

3.2. DokazM: Sensationalism and scandals

The DokazM.mk portal is one of the “most controversial” online media when it comes to non-compliance with the standard journalistic expression and publishing accurate and verified information.

The website contains neither an impressum nor any information about the owner of the media, although when checking MARnet⁴⁹ the name of the registrant is indicated. The CMEM received the most complaints against this medium in the period from 2019 to June 2020. This medium uses inappropriate

48 CriThink Website, Fact-Checking Section: <https://crithink.mk/category/proverka-na-fakti/>

49 MarNet-Macedonian Academic Research Network: <https://marnet.mk/>

language and has a sensationalist approach to presenting information, often publishing “shocking” and “scandalous” headlines and news. According to the CMEM decisions, in most of the decisions, this medium violated Articles 1, 7 (concerning the right to privacy), 13 and 15 (related to the culture of speech and ethics and inappropriate communication with the public).

| MEDIUM | IMPRES-SUM/ NUMBER OF JOUR- NALISTS | OWNER- SHIP/ PUBLISH- ER/ REGIS- TRANT | DIRECTOR | MEMBER- SHIP IN THE REG- ISTER OF ONLINE MEDIA | ADVERTISEMENTS | OPERATING INCOME | ALEXA RANKING |
|--------------|--|--|----------|---|---|---------------------|------------------|
| Dokaz. mk | / | Marjan Stamenkovski (name of registrant according to MARnet, not listed on the website) | / | No | #Because I love Macedonia -Alkaloid -MaxBet -Vitaminska -Izvorska voda -Kozhuvchanka (water) | / | Over 50 |

Source: Media website, MARnet.

In the past two years, the CMEM has issued two decisions for hate speech against the media, the last one on 8 June 2020, in favour of a daily newspaper journalist.⁵⁰ The CMEM concludes that this is an “extremely unprofessional and frivolous journalistic product, whose sole purpose is to insult, ridicule and personally discredit the journalist”. The texts are full of insults, inappropriate and vulgar language, hate speech and discrimination based on gender and physical appearance.⁵¹ Such qualifications by the media for public figures and ordinary citizens were noticed in other content as well.

Given the criticism it has directed at all political centres of power at certain times in the past, the consistent political bias of the media cannot be pinpointed. However, in the run-up to the 2020 elections, the central position of the news related to the opposition party was obvious, mostly in a positive connotation, and the critical, at times even ridiculous, tone towards the government. Despite the complaints, the portal maintains the image of a sensationalist “press” that publishes speculation and often frivolous content. On their Facebook page, the comments are not viewed or filtered by the administrator, and through them, hate speech, obscene speech and insults are further spread.

50 CMEM (2020) Decision of the CMEM Complaints Commission. Skopje: CMEM. Available at: <https://bit.ly/2WeUYUa>

51 Ibid.

The financial data of the medium are not known. Despite the infamous reputation it has, the medium still publishes ads or has banners from major Macedonian brands, such as the food company “Vitaminska”, the pharmaceutical company “Alkaloid”, the mineral water “Kozuvchanka”, as well as the #Buy Macedonian products campaign supported by the VMRO-DPMNE party.

3.3. Vecer.mk: violation of standards despite fifteen years of operation

Vecer.mk is a news portal established in 2004 whose editor in chief is Ivona Talevska. She is the president of the Macedonian Association of Journalists (MAJ), a parallel association to the Association of Journalists of Macedonia of which the majority of journalists are members. Until 2016, she was known as the editor and anchor of the news programme on the largest private national television channel, TV Sitel, when she disappeared from the air after the change of government and the opening of a court case by the Special Public Prosecutor’s Office. Although the website does not give the name of the owner, the company Maksmedia, of which one of the co-owners is Dragan Pavlović Latas, is the owner of the portal. Dragan Pavlović Latas is known as one of the editors of TV Sitel, a staunch supporter of VMRO-DPMNE policies while they were in government by 2016 and a fierce critic of the left-wing government led by the SDSM. After the change of government in 2016, he withdrew from his position as editor of the TV channel, while still writing as a regular columnist for the Vecer.mk portal.

Vecer.mk has a consistent editorial policy that has supported the VMRO-DPMNE party ever since its first spell in power, which ended in 2016. Financial data for the portal are not available. However, according to investigative journalism research,⁵² during the 2019 presidential elections, Maksmedia received 17,700 euros for advertising the VMRO-DPMNE candidate, which is the second-highest amount spent on an online medium, while in 2020, the company invoiced around 12,000 euros for VMRO-DPMNE advertisements for Vecer.mk.

| MEDIUM | IMPRES-SUM/ NUMBER OF JOUR- NALISTS | OWNER-SHIP/ PUBLISH- ER/ REGIS- TRANT | DIRECTOR | MEMBER-SHIP IN THE REGISTER OF ONLINE MEDIA | ADVERTISEMENTS | OPERATING INCOME | ALEXA RANK- ING |
|----------|--|---|----------|--|---------------------------------------|---------------------|-----------------------|
| Vecer.mk | 4 editors (3 women/ 1 man) | Maksme- dia LTD (name of MARnet’s registrant) | / | No | -VMRO-DPMNE (election campaign) | / | 8 |

Source: Media website, MARnet.

52 Jovanovska, M. and Cvetkovska, S. (2020) “Drzavni pari za izborni informaciski vojni”, published on IRL.mk, 23 July 2020. Available at: <https://irl.mk/drzhavni-pari-za-izborni-informatsiski-voni/>

During 2019 and 2020, the CMEM made nine adjudications against the portal Vecer.mk due to violation of several articles of the Code of Journalists – 1, 3, 12 (failure to highlight the source or author of the text), 13, 14 (lack of professional distance from the political subjects) and Article 10 which relates to hate speech.

CriThink reviewed texts published on Vecer.mk in which it assessed that fake news was transmitted (27 February 2019), tendentious and unverified information was taken from social networks (12 February 2019), there were manipulative titles that were not supported by the content of the text were detected (28 June 2020), and announcements of scandals that were officially dismissed (8 June 2020). There are cases when the media has used and shared news from other media that have a similar political and ideological orientation, or published disinformation.

3.4. Infomax.mk: Commentary approach to journalism

The portal Infomax.mk has a larger newsroom and publishes an impressum and information about the publisher. The financial data are unknown. The media has a right-wing orientation, i.e. it supports the VMRO-DPMNE party and is critical of the government, which is evident from the positioning of the texts that support the opposition, the tone of the reporting, and the choice of columnists. In March 2020, the editor in chief Aleksandar Mitovski was sentenced to six months' probation for disclosing an official secret. The MAJ, of which the editor is a member, described the verdict as a threat to journalism and the public by the government, the prosecution and the judiciary, which they say are in the service of the ruling SDSM.⁵³ The sentence was also condemned by the AJM, with the explanation that the public interest should be taken into consideration.⁵⁴

| MEDIUM | IMPRESSUM/ NUMBER OF JOURNALISTS | OWNER- SHIP/ PUBLISH- ER/ REGIS- TRANT | DIRECTOR | MEMBER- SHIP IN THE REGISTER OF ONLINE MEDIA | ADVER- TISE- MENTS | OPERATING INCOME | ALEXA RANKING |
|----------------|---|--|----------|--|---|-----------------------------------|------------------|
| Infomax. mk | Yes/ 8 editors and journalists (2 women/ 6 men | CIA Re- search and Analysis Center | / | No | VMRO- DPMNE (election campaign | 2017 €2,500 2018 €16,000 | 50 |

Source: Media Websites, MARnet. Financial data taken from the analysis of Analitika.mk, <https://analitika.mk/biznisot-so-internet-portali-tezi-okolu-tri-milioni-evra/>.

53 The MAJ's reaction to the Court's decision against journalist and editor Aleksandar Mitovski, 4 March 2020. Available at: <https://kurir.mk/makedonija/vesti/man-sudot-potvrdi-deka-vo-makedonija-vladee-hipriden-rezim-zakanata-kon-site-novinari-e-jasna-i-direktna/>

54 Meta.mk (2020) "Novinarskite zdruzenija ja osudija uslovnata kazna zatvor za urednikot na 'Infomaks'", published on Meta.mk, 5 March 2020. Available at: https://meta.mk/novinarskite-zdruzheni%25d1%2598a-%25d1%2598a-osudi%25d1%2598a-uslovnata-kazna-zatvor-za-urednikot-na-infomaks/?utm_source=rss&utm_medium=rss&utm_campaign=novinarskite-zdruzheni%25d1%2598a-%25d1%2598a-osudi%25d1%2598a-uslovnata-kazna-zatvor-za-urednikot-na-infomaks

In 2019, the company owner of the Infomax portal received 14,500 euros for advertisements during the presidential elections.⁵⁵

The CMEM has made decisions against Infomax.mk due to publishing incomplete information and not consulting a second party, as well as due to mixing facts with commentary. Some texts were removed by the medium itself, there were situations when its texts were published by other online media, or the portal shared news and other content with media that have the same ideological and political views.

The content of Infomax.mk is one of those most frequently reviewed by the fact-checking service CriThink. According to CriThink, in the published content, there was speculation and unverified information, and personal attacks against politicians from the government. There were also often texts in which facts were mixed with commentary or references to Facebook statuses, manipulative texts (16 April 2019; 13 March 2020), tendentious speculation (13 February 2019), one-sided and politically motivated texts for denigrating political adversaries (29 April 2019), republishing sensationalist and old texts (14 October 2019), and titles and texts that spread panic and unverified information in emergency situations (19 March 2020).

3.5. Maktel.mk: speculations and apologies

Among the group of online portals that often do not adhere to the standard journalistic expression and use announcements such as “shocking” or “exclusive” and inappropriate language is the portal Maktel.mk.

| MEDIUM | IMPRES-SUM/ NUMBER OF JOUR- NALISTS | OWNER- SHIP/ PUBLISHER/ REGIS- TRANT | DIRECTOR | MEMBER- SHIP IN THE REGISTER OF ONLINE MEDIA | ADVERTISEMENTS | OPER- ATING INCOME | ALEXA RANK- ING |
|---------------|--|--|----------|--|---|---|-----------------------|
| Maktel. mk | Yes/ 1 editor | Popularni Knigi DOO | / | No | -Alkaloid -Mebel-Vi -Sinalko (prize game) -Replek -Eurofarm -Jamieson -Nikob (security) -Brilliant (oil) -Construction company -Diners -Izvorska voda - Peugeot -Tourist agency -FON -Cable operator -Total TV -Semos | 2018 €16,618 2017 €9,000 2016 €8,300 | Over 50 |

Source: Media Websites, MARnet; Financial data taken from the analysis of AAAVMS, <https://bit.ly/3eIRPbz>.

⁵⁵ Jovanovska, M. and Cvetkovska, S. (2020) “Drzavni pari za izborni informaciski vojni”, published on IRL.mk, 23 July 2020. Available at: <https://irl.mk/drzavni-pari-za-izborni-informatsiski-voni/>.

This media supports the ruling SDSM and has a critical attitude towards the right-wing VMRO-DPMNE political party, which is visible in the tone of reporting, the headlines and the texts. The journalistic style is non-standard and colloquial, using obscene language to criticize the opposition, and unapologetically favouring the government. This is one of the few media in which only the name of the editor in chief is written in the impressum, but on the other hand, the number of ads from prominent companies on the website is quite significant.

In 2019 and 2020, in three cases before the Council, proceedings against the media were closed due to the reconciliation of the parties. In this period, this media moderated the tone of the reporting: however, in the past, there were violations based on partial and unverified information, hate speech, inappropriate communication with the public, and abuse of the media for confrontation with people and colleagues.

3.6. 1TV: From high ambitions to scandalous closure

In this group of online media, 1TV was one of the rare television channels that, in the year and a half of its operation, until September 2019, was dogged by many controversies about hidden ownership, as well as about some of the content it produced. The television station was initially considered close to some politicians of the ruling party, but after the news broke out of the blackmail scandal of a well-known businessman, its owner and the special public prosecutor were sentenced to prison. During the 2019 presidential elections, the SDSM spent 37,000 euros on promoting their candidate on this television station.⁵⁶

1TV was one of the rare television channels that, in the year and a half of its operation, until September 2019, was dogged by many controversies about hidden ownership, as well as about some of the content it produced.

In 2019, the Council of Ethics found three violations for publishing partial and unverified information, and two violations for mixing facts and opinions in certain shows, as well as violations of Article 7 (personal privacy) and Article 16 (reputation and dignity of the profession).

On two occasions in 2019, the Agency for Audio and Audiovisual Services found violations of programme principles in terms of protection of dignity and privacy, and presumption of innocence, as well as the objective and impartial presentation of events with equal treatment of different points of view.⁵⁷

56 Jovanovska, M. and Cvetkovska, S. (2020) "Drzavni pari za izborni informaciski vojni", published on IRL.mk, 23 July 2020. Available at: <https://iri.mk/drzavni-pari-za-izborni-informatsiski-voni/>.

57 AAVMS (2015-2020) Reports of conducted supervision/measures, public reprimand. Skopje: AAVMS. Available at: <https://avmu.mk/1-%D1%82%D0%B2/>

3.7. Public figures with inflammatory remarks

In recent years, public figures have posted hate speech on their social media profiles or websites, especially on the basis of political affiliation.⁵⁸

Former journalists Milenko Nedelkovski and Branko Tričkovski, supporters of opposing political options, post ironic and obscene, but also hate speech content based on political affiliation. On Nedelkovski's Facebook profile, hate speech and obscene language are noticeable not only in his statuses but also in the comments below the posts, which are often not viewed or filtered by the administrator.⁵⁹ Nedelkovski has been known to the public for his controversial views since the rule of the VMRO-DPMNE party until 2016. The only case under Article 394-d of the Criminal Code ever to have been opened in the Basic Court 1, for spreading racist and xenophobic material via a computer system, is against him, but the verdict is not yet final, and the case is pending.⁶⁰ Experts pinpoint the problem with the absence of any court verdict on hate speech in the fact that the Criminal Code does not have a specific provision that criminalizes hate speech, but applies articles that prohibit discrimination, racial hatred and nationalistic intolerance, which is a problem for case-law to effectively sanction hate speech promoters.⁶¹ Experts believe that Nedelkovski's outbursts, but also those of other media personalities until 2016, were deliberately tolerated as "a project of the government in the media sphere, as part of the overall situation of a 'captured state'".⁶²

Experts pinpoint the problem with the absence of any court verdict on hate speech in the fact that the Criminal Code does not have a specific provision that criminalizes hate speech, but applies articles that prohibit discrimination, racial hatred and nationalistic intolerance, which is a problem for case-law to effectively sanction hate speech promoters.

Against Branko Tričkovski, on the other hand, in February 2020, the Ministry of Interior opened a case due to deciding criminal liability in "spreading racist and xenophobic material via a computer system" and "inciting hatred on a discriminatory basis". On his Facebook profile, he posted a text about the Caretaker Minister of Labour and Social Policy Rašela Mizrahi commenting on her Jewish origins. His column published on the online platform was reviewed by the CMEM's Commission, during which inappropriate communication with the public was established as well as his bickering with personalities, including journalists.⁶³

58 Facebook post: <https://www.facebook.com/MilenkoNedelkovskiDnevnik/posts/3631176286899368>; Hate Speech Website, Registered Hate Speech Case: <http://govornaomraza.mk/reports/view/2025>

59 Hate Speech Website: <http://govornaomraza.mk/reports/view/1738>

60 Response from the Basic Court 1 to the Request of MIM for free access to information, 18 June 2020, Skopje (via email).

61 Živanovski, N. (2017) "Effectiveness of the legislation on protection from hate speech". Skopje: MIM. Available at: https://mim.org.mk/attachments/article/1032/Analiza_Efikasnosta_na_zakonskata_regulativa_za_zastita_od_govor_na_omraza.pdf.

62 Ibid. Pg. 12.

63 CMEM (2019) "Decision of the CMEM Complaints Commission". Skopje: CMEM. Available at: http://sem.mk/attachments/28-11-2019/Branko_Geroski_za_Frontline.mk.pdf.

3.8. Social networks: an explosion of hate speech

At the beginning of 2020, a more pronounced rise in reported cases due to hate speech was observed, which was especially present and prominent on social media networks.⁶⁴ According to the Helsinki Committee of Macedonia, the traditional (national) media are more aware of hate speech, but the portals are a channel for spreading disinformation and inciting hate speech since much of their content is posted on Facebook and Twitter.⁶⁵

From January to June 2020, the majority of reported cases of hate speech were due to ethnic and political affiliation, and sexual orientation and gender identity. There was a growing trend compared to hate speech during the 2019 presidential election campaign, which was dominated by ethnic and political hate speech.⁶⁶ In the database of the Helsinki Committee, there are numerous examples with insults and derogatory names towards minority ethnic communities and political adversaries, especially the leaders of the largest political parties, or on the basis of sexual affiliation and gender identity. In the period from February to May 2020, there was an increase in hate speech on ethnic grounds before the Christian holiday of Easter and the beginning of the Ramadan fasting, when religious leaders had opposing views and recommendations from those of the Government as to respecting measures for preventing the spread of Covid-19, as well as hate speech against the Roma community.⁶⁷ The rapid growth of newly infected people with Covid-19 has also created hate speech based on health status, combined with ethnic affiliation.

REGISTERED CASES OF HATE SPEECH IN THE MEDIA AND ON SOCIAL NETWORKS IN 2019 AND 2020

Table 6

| HATE SPEECH | January–June 2020 | 2019 |
|--|-------------------|------|
| Due to ethnic affiliation | 172 | 85 |
| Political affiliation | 93 | 43 |
| Sexual orientation and gender identity | 83 | 111 |
| Religion and religious belief | 22 | 7 |
| Sex and gender | 14 | 28 |

Source: Hate speech, <http://govornaomraza.mk/main>

64 Interview with a representative of the Helsinki Committee, 18 June 2020 (via email).

65 Ibid.

66 Helsinki Committee (2020) "Monthly Report on Human Rights - February 2020". Skopje: HC. Available at: <https://mhc.org.mk/reports/mesechen-izveshtaj-za-chovekovite-prava-vo-republika-severna-makedonija-fevruari-2020/>

67 Helsinki Committee (2020) "Monthly Report on Human Rights - April 2020". Skopje: HC. Available at: <https://mhc.org.mk/reports/mesechen-izveshtaj-za-chovekovite-prava-vo-republika-severna-makedonija-april-2020/>; <https://mhc.org.mk/reports/mesechen-izveshtaj-za-chovekovite-prava-vo-republika-severna-makedonija-fevruari-2020/>.

On the social media networks Facebook and Twitter, those who spread hate speech often do not use their real names, and they are somewhat hidden or use fake profiles. The monitoring report of the Helsinki Committee states that “there is a tendency from certain individuals/portals to continuously spread and incite hate speech. The Committee does not have a mechanism to determine whether a profile is fake or not, because that competence is in the hands of the Sector for Computer Crime and Digital Forensics at the Ministry of Interior.”⁶⁸

Some of the media that have Facebook pages, such as DokazM and Markukule, do not filter the comments under the content they share, thus allowing social network users to spread disinformation and hate speech.⁶⁹

In the first half of 2020, attacks on and discrediting of journalists was noticed on social media networks, especially against women journalists on the basis of their gender. A civil servant in the Central Registry threatened the editors of A1On.mk, Meri Jordanovska and Alfa TV, Iskra Korovešovska with insulting and derogatory words and published content attacking them on his Facebook profile. The case provoked reactions from the media community, and the Minister of the Interior launched an investigation into the threats, after which the intimidator received a prison sentence for endangering the security of his ex-wife and for the threats against the journalist Jordanovska.

On the other hand, hate speech is often directed towards persons who are neither prominent figures in society nor holders of public office. A Facebook user wrote a status on her profile against holding wedding parties during the corona crisis period. There were 270 comments under her status, in which there was hate speech, as well as calls for violence against the girl.⁷⁰ “... We have witnessed extreme misogyny, homophobia and calls for lynching. It often happens with women who are considered to be public figures or are ‘loud’ on social media,” commented Kalia Dimitrova of Radio MOF.⁷¹

According to the Helsinki Committee of Macedonia, the traditional (national) media are more aware of hate speech, but the portals are a channel for spreading disinformation and inciting hate speech since much of their content is posted on Facebook and Twitter.

68 Interview with a representative of the Macedonian Helsinki Committee, 18 June 2020.

69 Hate Speech Website: <http://govornaomraza.mk/>.

70 Facebook status of K.K.: <https://www.facebook.com/kvkriss/posts/10221560773904657>

71 Petreska, E. (2020) “Kako obicen Fejsbuk status go pokaza ekstremniot govor na omrazana internet”, published on Radio MOF, 20 May 2020. Available at: <https://www.radiomof.mk/kako-obichen-fejsbuk-status-go-pokazha-ekstremniot-govor-na-omraza-na-internet/>

4. CONCLUSION

The reasons behind creating and spreading hate speech, disinformation and propaganda through the media in North Macedonia most often lie in the connection of the media with the political and business centres of power. The themes that “feed” these phenomena are generated by the long history of political and ethnic division of the society and are usually intensified in times of crisis or pre-election periods. Hate speech of a political and ethnic nature, as well as on grounds of sexuality and gender, is on the rise on social media networks.

The outbreak of the global crisis caused by the coronavirus in North Macedonia in early 2020 coincided with the period before the parliamentary elections. These two topics created a “charge” for the escalation of disinformation and hate speech on political and ethnic grounds, but also on the basis of health. In the period of celebrating the Easter and Ramadan holidays, religiously motivated rhetoric intertwined with daily politics was also present.

In 2020, hate speech has increased compared to the previous year. Although this phenomenon has constantly been present in the communication sphere since 2001, and despite the existence of cases when it transformed into hate crimes, in North Macedonia there is practically no confirmed court verdict on this basis. The reason, according to experts, is the lack of a specific provision in the Criminal Code that criminalizes hate speech, which leads to the application of articles that prohibit discrimination, racial hatred or nationalist intolerance instead.⁷²

The global crisis caused by the coronavirus in North Macedonia in early 2020 coincided with the period before the parliamentary elections. These two topics created a “charge” for the escalation of disinformation and hate speech on political and ethnic grounds.

Especially in the internet sphere, moments of tension are reflected by creating several narratives with opposing political and ethnic views in which much disinformation and propaganda in support of the centres of power is intertwined. Although in the communication sphere different media, even the neutral and professional, sometimes create and transmit disinformation and hate speech, the analysis shows that one group of media more often than all others applies these unethical and undemocratic practices. The editorial policy of most of them shows a bias for the opposition in the period 2016–2020, which is evident from the way the parties are being criticized and/or favoured. Their relations with the VMRO-DPMNE party date back to the time when the party was in power until 2016, and the research as far as 2014 demonstrates that a group of online media outlets created content in order to construct a negative campaign against the then opposition.⁷³ Some of them were once registered in offshore destinations, but in the meantime, they have got new owners and that data is

72 Živanovski, N. (2017) “The effectiveness of the legislation on protection against hate speech”. Skopje: MIM. Available at: https://mim.org.mk/attachments/article/1032/Analiza_Efikasnosta_na_zakonskata_regulativa_za_zastita_od_govor_na_omraza.pdf. Pg. 1.

73 *Ibid.*

available today. The ownership of seven online media outlets has Hungarian capital, of which the company EM Media who owns the portal Kurir and the company Prva Republika are among the five most successful in terms of operating income in 2018. However, the sources of funding for online media remain untransparent, which leaves room for developing political clientelism relations with the parties.

Most of these online media outlets have larger newsrooms, their own established audiences, and they support each other in conveying their messages. Women editors lead several of the portals, and the gender balance is maintained among those with more journalists.

The motivation for spreading hate speech and disinformation in the small “one-man newsroom” portals also has a political bias. In addition to discrediting political opponents, as well as individual characters who are the target of their publications, the seriousness of the media itself, which is managed and operated by only one person and which does not show basic transparency to its audience, is brought into question. One gets the impression that their role, like that of individuals-public figures active in the internet sphere, is primarily to harm adversaries, rather than to inform the public, and the ultimate goal is to “flatter” the centres of power.

In order to protect citizens from the influence of the unprofessional and unethical media, the media community and citizens should support and use the self-regulatory mechanisms to show their effectiveness more convincingly.

Unlike online media, traditional media, which are regulated by law and monitored by the Agency for Audio and Audiovisual Media Services, rarely violate professional standards regarding disinformation and hate speech. Some experts believe that one of the reasons for the information chaos in the online sphere is the lack of media regulation. Opponents of the idea, however, argue that there are enough laws that apply to traditional media and that they should apply unselectively to online media as well.

In order to protect citizens from the influence of the unprofessional and unethical media, the media community and citizens should support and use the self-regulatory mechanisms to show their effectiveness more convincingly. This analysis focused only on the most frequent violators of standards. However, the CMEM also makes decisions against media that are considered professional and neutral, which confirms that self-regulation is a neutral mechanism for “regulation” of the profession, rather than the restrictive laws and draconian measures by the institutions.

5. POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

- **The media community and the civil society sector** should support the self-regulatory mechanisms in the media sphere in order to prevent unprofessional and unethical work and to protect the public from misleading and unprofessional information published by certain media. Thus, the media will be able to improve their professional practices, without rigorous sanctions on their work.
- **Online media** should display ownership, editorial and funding data in order to demonstrate to their audience transparency, professionalism and integrity.
- **The public prosecutor's office** needs to show more engagement and be more proactive in prosecuting hate speech, and the judiciary needs to process cases, as the number of registered hate speech cases, which can result in hate crimes, increases.
- **Professional media and journalistic associations, and representatives of the judiciary, civil society and relevant institutions** should offer guidance on the proper improvement of legislation regarding the more precise definition of hate speech as a crime, but also on the punishment of perpetrators, taking into account the legal solutions and their application in European countries.
- **The Sector for Computer Crime and Digital Forensics of the Ministry of Interior** should show a more proactive approach and engagement in processing reports from citizens and civil society organizations that report hate speech and hate crimes that have occurred on the internet.
- **The civil society sector** should implement long-term initiatives that would deal with the monitoring of disinformation and hate speech, as well as their exposure, in order to raise awareness of these phenomena in the general public.
- **Long-term initiatives for the media literacy of citizens**, which will improve their knowledge and skills to distinguish truth and facts from disinformation, manipulation and propaganda through the media, should be encouraged and supported.
- **The civil society sector, educational institutions or other relevant institutions** should conduct regular research on online media and social networks, given the fact that they compete with television as a source of daily information to citizens.
- **Media organizations, the self-regulatory body, the business community and advertising agencies** should continue the debate on the social responsibility of large companies that should take into account the professionalism of the media when deciding where to advertise, and support the work of quality media in particular.

- **Since the Economic Chamber of Macedonia has cooperated with the CMEM and the AJM in the establishment of the Registry of Professional Online Media**, it should advocate that the business community advise companies to take into consideration the data from the Registry when deciding where to place their advertisements.
- **The media and media community** should actively take part in and support the process of preparation of the ethical framework for online media initiated by the CMEM.

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This publication is a part of the RESILIENCE project research component. The first series of research reports examines THE POLITICAL ECONOMY OF HATE AND PROPAGANDA MEDIA MODEL in Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Serbia and Turkey.

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