BASEL INSTITUTE ON
GOVERNANCE

Corruption and anti-corruption narratives in Bulgarian media
Media monitoring and analysis report 2024

Sensika Technologies | April 2024

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About this report

This report analyses the top corruption and anti-corruption narratives in Bulgarian online and social media from 2023 to early 2024. It was produced by Sensika, a global media monitoring and analytics firm, in support of the Basel Institute's ongoing programme of work in Bulgaria.

The report is a follow-up to a similar analysis in 2023 covering the period 2021–2022, available on the Basel Institute's website.

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The report is intended for general informational purposes and does not constitute and/or substitute legal or other professional advice. We have made reasonable efforts to ensure its accuracy and completeness but cannot guarantee these. For questions, please email info@baselgovernance.org.

Executive summary

The current analysis of the corruption and anti-corruption narratives in Bulgarian online and social media offers a multifaceted approach, comprising both a broad outline and in-depth observations, to present a nuanced view of the subject matter and the notable trends.

During the first stage of the quantitative research, Sensika's media monitoring platform processed over 44 million articles published in Bulgarian online media outlets and over 20 million Facebook posts and comments from Bulgarian profiles for the period spanning from 1 January 2023 to 29 February 2024. The monitored variables encompassed volume distribution, potential reach and media segmentation, among others. A number of key trends were observed.

Throughout the monitored period, both the corruption and anti-corruption narratives received sustained attention and coverage. This stands in contrast to the trend observed during 2021-2022, when the corruption-related narratives consistently attracted high media attention, with prolonged peaks of interest, while the anti-corruption ones experienced only temporary spikes in relevance, typically lasting for two to three weeks before fading away.

The volume peaks of the corruption-related content were mirrored by potential reach peaks, showing that narratives which generate a lot of media content also tend to engage wider audiences, emphasising the role of media in shaping the public discourse.

Bulgarian media outlets exhibited a tendency to avoid direct use of the word corruption and its derivatives. Instead, they usually employed vocabulary associated with corrupt practices, frequently using slang or informal phrases to evoke emotional reactions and sensationalise the news. Mushroom websites took this tendency to extreme proportions, resorting to offensive wording reminiscent of yellow journalism.

Overall, legitimate media, mushroom websites and media aggregators each played distinct roles in the dissemination of the content. Legitimate media provided a steady stream of articles, mushroom websites amplified particular events with sensational coverage and aggregators broadened the content's digital reach.

In the context of the selected narratives, mushroom websites primarily attracted traffic from social media platforms such as Facebook, with the rest coming from direct searches.

Overall, coordinated disinformation campaigns were observed in both online media outlets and Facebook, with mushroom websites playing a significant role. These websites published sensationalist content aimed at implicating notable individuals in matters seemingly unrelated to the main narrative. Suspicious Facebook users, potentially trolls, posted similar or identical comments under different posts, even on unrelated topics, within a limited time frame. These activities suggest attempts to spread fake news and malicious opinions beyond the known interested circles.

It is observed that mushroom websites reuse content sourced from legitimate media outlets such as Blitz, Petel, PIK, and Trud.

Among the different demographic groups, legitimate media resonated strongly among individuals aged 25-44, whereas mushroom websites primarily attracted an audience between 25-34. Conversely, media aggregators appealed to an older demographic, with the majority of the readers aged of 45 and above.

Facebook emerged as the predominant social media platform for news dissemination due to its popularity in Bulgaria. Meanwhile, mushroom websites and media aggregators' traffic mainly depended on Facebook for their traffic, recognising its crucial role in reaching the Bulgarian audience.

Some narratives that were widely covered in online media did not receive proportional attention on Facebook, a fact that underscores the importance of considering the different platforms' roles in information dissemination and public engagement.

The level of public engagement on Facebook indicates a community responsive to corruption developments and anti-corruption efforts. Comments often outnumbered original posts, suggesting a highly reactive audience keen to discuss these issues.

The term corruption was more frequently used by Facebook users compared to online media outlets. Social media users frequently made connections between Boyko Borisov and his party GERB and allegations related to corrupt practices.

The Facebook audience exhibited higher engagement levels when it came to corruption stories with international implications, such as the Magnitsky sanctions, the Schengen bid and Lukoil. This heightened activity suggests a particular interest or concern regarding corruption issues that extend beyond the national borders.

PP-DB and GERB-SDS were prominently featured in the discussions surrounding corruption, largely due to their status as active parliamentary parties.

PP-DB emerged as the top political formation discussed in conversations focused on integrity, often being labelled by both media outlets and political figures as embodying "people of integrity."

The integrity-related content was significantly lower and with a limited potential reach. It was also often mentioned in negative contexts, which might reflect public scepticism towards the ethical standards of the monitored political entities.

1 Introduction

The high-level analysis provides a comparative overview of segmentations in online media and Facebook. It monitors four keyword sets (corruption, corruption-associated, anti-corruption and integrity). The structure is twofold, with one sub-section focusing on online media and the other on Facebook, in recognition to the distinctive contributions each platform makes to the public discourse. By examining volume and potential reach, the analysis aims to discern patterns and trends within these keyword sets.

In the context of the recent National Assembly of the Republic of Bulgaria, the analysis explores how various political parties were perceived in relation to these themes, as portrayed by media sources and reflected in Facebook engagement. The segmentation by source type in online media is critical, offering a lens through which to gauge the media narrative's resonance.

This is further refined by the three source categories: legitimate online media, aggregators and mushroom websites, where the latter can exhibit a content volume thrice that of the former, signifying the diversity in credibility and reach within the Bulgarian media space.

As for Facebook, the segmentation is by post type (posts or comments), which allows us to better trace the reactions of the social users and the engagement patterns within the keyword sets. The reactive interactions with some of the political parties in comparison to the more balanced distribution between posts and comments in relation to others indicate the varying degrees of public discourse engagement.

This comprehensive examination offers valuable perspectives on the media's role in shaping public opinion on governance and integrity, underpinning the importance of the informed and critical consumption of information.

2 Media coverage of corruption: state and characteristics

Understanding the media coverage of news about corrupt practices in the Bulgarian public and private sectors requires consideration of the country's complicated media landscape. In this regard, numerous studies and media professionals highlight the following three factors as contributing to the unsatisfactory coverage of corruption in Bulgarian media: the ownership situation, the established business model, and the external pressure by political and non-political groups.

2.1 Media ownership

According to a 2021 study, only 15% of interviewees consider the Bulgarian media sector "free from undue influence from business or politics". This is unsurprising given the country's results in the 2022 Media Pluralism and Media Freedom report published by the European Union Institute. Four of the Market Plurality indicators point toward a particularly high risk (News media concentration; Online platforms concentration and competition enforcement; Media viability; Commercial and owner influence over editorial content), while three indicators in the Political Independence domain point to high risk (Editorial autonomy; State regulation of resources and support to media sector; Independence of PSM governance and funding).

As a result, Bulgarian media outlets provide politicians with practically unlimited coverage to the extent that the former has been described as "a government communication platform" (Reuters Institute Digital News Report 2022). In this context, as our research shows, it is a common practice for online networks to publish "interviews" with politicians or other statements sent by PR teams in a coordinated manner.

Furthermore, some outlets have been "rewarded" with EU and public funding (Euroactiv) with the effect of encouraging recipients to go easy on the government in their reporting. Bulgaria, like several other countries from Central and Eastern Europe (e.g. the Czech Republic and Slovakia), has witnessed the sale of a few commercial media outlets to businesspersons who used the purchase to "boost their political influence" (Fighting Words: Journalism Under Assault in Central and Eastern Europe).

2.2 Media business model

Bulgarian publishers, too, have not been spared the damage caused by the disruption of the traditional media business model and the ensuing issues have been present for the past three decades. The penetration of the Internet and social media have made print unsustainable, with income from subscriptions and advertising left as the only viable option.

However, in 2021 only 12% of news consumers in Bulgaria paid for online news, down by three percentage points compared to 2020 (Reuters Institute Digital News Report 2022), while the majority of ad budgets were streamed towards TV channels (AEJ Bulgaria). Unable to find financing through "backchannels," the few independent media outlets have invested in different income sources (such as events, online studios, podcasting equipment, etc.).

Nevertheless, this "fight for clicks" is usually marked by low journalism standards and media ethics (Nieman Reports) which has led to the constant publishing of unchecked materials whose phrasing is loaded with bias, mediocre language, and offensive vocabulary. Often, such media items are used to discredit the reporting of corrupt practices or even the reporters themselves.

2.3 Judicial harassment, political pressure, and intimidation

Taking this into consideration, Reporters without Borders (RSF) describes media freedom in Bulgaria as "fragile and unstable," while the country itself is still one of the "most corrupt" in the European Union (RSF). According to the organisation, "the few independent voices in Bulgaria work under constant pressure" with intimidation from politicians as well as administrative and judicial pressures against publishers and journalists being a common practice.

Furthermore, independent media and investigative journalists are regularly victims of abusive procedures, or Strategic Lawsuit against Public Participation (SLAPPs). Apart from judicial harassment of independent media, in 2021, RSF pinpointed two separate occasions of physical violence against journalists, while another investigative reporter received death threats after releasing a documentary about high-level judicial corruption (RSF).

Another factor that comes into play is the "growing anti-media rhetoric from governments" in Central and Eastern Europe. In Bulgaria, outlets connected to the Open Society Foundation (OSF) and The America for Bulgaria Foundation (ABF) are targets of such rhetoric used by politicians and outlets loyal to the government (Fighting Words: Journalism Under Assault in Central and Eastern Europe).

2.4 Defining corruption and anti-corruption

International organisations such as the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund, and Transparency International define corruption as *the abuse of public office for private gain, while anti-corruption is often described as any efforts to eradicate or prevent the abuse of public office for private gain*. The stories presented in this report could not be classified entirely based on these definitions, as they do not take into consideration the general media monitoring aspect, the Bulgarian media's specific context, and the subjectivity of the public's perception.

Therefore, the definitions were expanded as follows:

(a) *Corruption narratives represent actions aimed at the exposure of the abuse of public office for private gain by Bulgarian or foreign entities and in detriment to Bulgarian citizens, officials, and/or authorities* (in online media, corruption stories begin with the coverage of the action itself — signals, sanctions, etc.).

(b) *Anti-corruption stories represent direct actions aimed at eradicating or preventing the abuse of public office for private gain by Bulgarian or foreign entities in detriment to Bulgarian citizens, officials and/or authorities*. In the context of this media monitoring report, anti-corruption stories begin with the coverage of such actions — arrests, proposals for new policies, submission of anti-corruption bills, etc.

3 Key terms and definitions

3.1 Glossary

Category	Term	Definition
Types of Narratives	Story	Stories are contained within the general narrative of a Topic. They appear, develop, and die out over a limited period (e.g. days, weeks). A story could reappear in the future, usually triggered by a sudden development.
	Topic	A broad or general theme or topic of interest pre-defined by the customer. Topics remain permanent for a long period. (e.g. corruption, anti-corruption).
Technical Terminology	Top Mentioned Political Parties Chart	The chart provides a percentage distribution of the mentions of a political party based on the content that references all political parties. The number of compared parties may vary from story to story.
Metrics	Potential Reach	Estimation of the potential reach of a piece of content, based on the total number of views generated by the source for the last 30 days and divided by the number of content items published by the source for the same period.
	Source Audience	Source audience refers to a segment of the analytics that identifies where the traffic to a particular website originates from. This includes demographic details, geographic locations, type of devices used, age, and source of the traffic (social media links, search engine usage, etc.) taken from a third-party provider.
Facebook	Original Posts	Content that is created and shared directly by the administrators or authorised contributors of a public page. The post can include text, images, videos, hyperlinks, etc.
	Comments	Comment refers to a response or reaction made by users to the content created/shared by a public Facebook page. Comments can be moderated by the page administrators. This includes deleting comments, blocking users or turning off the comments for specific posts.
Source Types	Legitimate Online Media	Online news outlets that publish original articles, and are neither media aggregators nor mushroom websites. These include well-known media outlets, as well as sites with unclear or hidden ownership and lack of transparent editorial policy.
	Media Aggregators	News aggregators automatically consolidate web content that has been published by online newspapers, blogs, and podcasts in one location for easy viewing.
	Mushroom Websites	Websites that share similar design and structure and publish news in a seemingly coordinated manner. They usually disseminate disinformation, propaganda, and fake news.

Political Parties	BSP	Bulgarian Socialist Party: A centre-left, social democratic political party founded in 1990. It is a member of the Socialist International, the Party of European Socialists, and the Progressive Alliance. Its chairperson at the time of this writing is Kornelia Ninova.
	GERB-SDS	GERB-SDS is a political alliance between two parties: GERB (Citizens for European Development of Bulgaria) founded by Boyko Borisov, who served as prime minister of the country, and SDS (Union of Democratic Forces), one of the oldest political parties in the country, which gained traction in the 1990s as the first democratic alternative to the Communist party.
	DPS	DPS (Movement for Rights and Freedoms) is a political party in Bulgaria primarily representing the interests of the Turkish minority, although it officially defines itself as a centrist, liberal party that stands for the rights of all ethnic and religious minorities in the country. The current co-chairperson of DPS at the time of this writing is the Magnitsky-sanctioned politician Delyan Peevski.
	Vazrazhdane	Vazrazhdane is a nationalist political party in Bulgaria, known for its conservative and often hardline stances on various issues. Founded by Kostadin Kostadinov, the party promotes strong nationalist sentiments and is known for its pro-Russian views and scepticism towards the European Union and NATO.
	ITN	ITN (There Is Such a People) is a populist political party in Bulgaria founded by the popular TV host and singer Slavi Trifonov. ITN advocates for direct democracy measures, such as referendums and public consultations.
	PP-DB	PP-DB is a political coalition in Bulgaria formed between the We Continue the Change (PP) and the Democratic Bulgaria (DB). PP was established by two former ministers, Kiril Petkov and Asen Vasilev, and focuses on anti-corruption, transparency, and the implementation of modern economic policies. DB consists of parties like Yes, Bulgaria! (Da, Bulgaria!) and Democrats for a Strong Bulgaria (DSB) advocating for judicial reform, environmental protection, and liberal democratic values.

3.2 The rise of disinformation (mushroom websites)

Disinformation has turned into one of the most widely-spread diseases in the modern-day informational environment, together with propaganda and fake news. These three phenomena have highly negative social effects — they manipulate public opinions, amplify divisions and polarise societies.

Usually, these hybrid attacks rely on *flooding* the public discourse with large volumes of manipulative content, disregarding any journalistic standards for quality and credibility of the information. The spread of disinformation is mainly based on *seeding* superficial news stories and narratives in mushroom websites and amplifying them through sharing on social media via trolls and bots.

3.2.1 The mushroom website operational model

Mushroom website are *impostor* online media outlets, designed to provide anonymity and plausible deniability for their creators, in order to make it difficult to trace the origin of information and attribute responsibility. They are created in bulk by malicious actors with the sole purpose of *seeding* disinformation, propaganda, and fake news.

They usually appear in the context of active disinformation campaigns within which they "pop up, multiply and grow" in a coordinated manner. Once the "dark money rain" is gone, they either disappear or become inactive, until the next disinformation campaign (Sensika).

3.2.2 The role of social media

Social media platforms are instrumental for amplification of the content reach. Trolls and bots, using fake user profiles, share disinformation, propaganda and fake news across different social network channels, striving to artificially boost the engagement metrics of the content. This way they *trick* the algorithms of the platforms and make the content look *organically viral*.

Many social media users suffer a cognitive vulnerability that has been observed lately. The increased consumption of news through social media and mobile devices has led to more unconscious behaviour, characterised by more impulsive reactions to media content that reinforces their pre-existing biases and beliefs. Often users distribute disinformation and fake news without reading beyond the headlines and without checking the credibility of the source.

Armies of trolls and bots, with the help of the aforementioned unconscious behaviour of real social media users, succeed in viral spreading of disinformation and fake news.

Tier 1 – International Media & Newswires
- **Publishing propaganda in the form of "refined and polished" disinformation,** enriched with statements by Kremlin affiliated politicians, citing Tier 2 sources or "talking heads on duty" from Kremlin sponsored "Think-Tanks", "Business Organizations" and politicians.
- Publishing manipulative high-budget reports, original works and analysis.

Tier 2 – Regional Media Outlets
- **Publishing disinformation in the form of "rinsed" versions of fake news** mixed with some real facts, usually taken out of context, enriched with comments and "analysis" by "independent experts".
- Editorial publications (often without an author), citing **unclear sources** ("information appeared on the web") or specific Tier 3 and other Tier 2 sources that are part of the same influence network.

Tier 3 – Mushroom Websites & Blogs
- **Publishing disinformation, fake news, conspiracy theories, rumors and wild speculations;**
- **Content without stated authors,** without cited sources (or fake sources), with unclear dating, manipulated or "deep fake" pictures and videos;
- Titles are provocative, formulated as **"click-baits"** to trigger emotions and knee-jerk reactions.
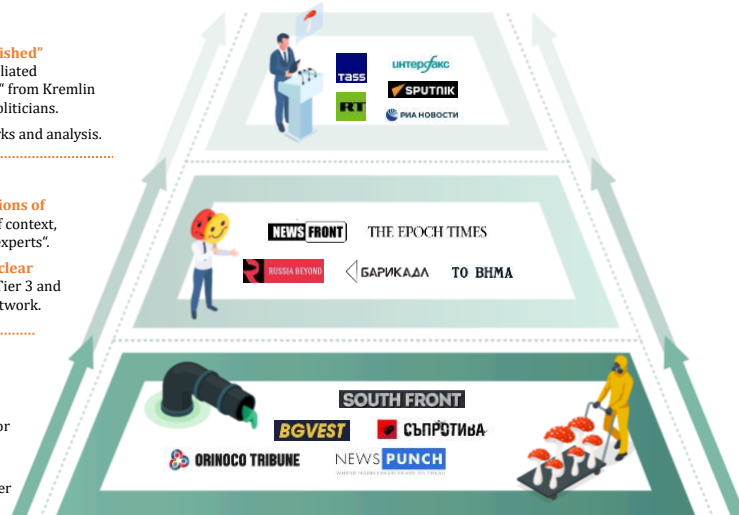
Table 1: The infographic represents the typical lifecycle of rinsing fake news and wild speculations into disinformation, propaganda or smear campaigns, often dominating the public discourse, and distracting the attention both of the mainstream media and the general public.

Viral Spread

It's all over the news and social media, coming from all kinds of sources and "trusted friends".

Organic Amplification

Unsuspecting Social Media Users spread disinformation, propaganda and fake news by sharing posts on their personal newsfeeds, often without reading beyond the headlines.

Targeted Distribution for Artificial Amplification

Troll & Bot Factories (cheap manual labor + automated bots) are spam-sharing and engaging with thousands of groups, pages, forums, **tricking the social media platforms' recommendation algorithms** that the content is viral and it's worth suggesting to users.

Seeding / Implantation

Initial Seeding is done in Tier 3 "mushroom websites" with high degree of automation – the same piece of content is published simultaneously on tens of affiliated websites.

Table 2:   The infographic represents the typical itinerary of a disinformation spread — from seeding in Tier 3 mushroom websites to achieving organic viral spread, notably without involvement of traceable paid advertisement on social media platforms.

4 Methodology

4.1 Online media

The applied methodology in Sensika's media monitoring and analysis project utilises a systematic, rigorous, and efficient approach to deliver superior insights and results. The methodology employs AI technologies and is bolstered by human interventions for accurate trend spotting, sentiment analysis, and comprehensive reporting. The data collection process during the first stage of the quantitative research was executed entirely within Sensika's media monitoring platform, which processed over 44 million articles published in Bulgarian online media outlets over the period 1 January 2023 – 29 February 2024.

The analysis focused on numerical values and their growth or decline over time. The monitored variables included volume distribution, potential reach, media segmentation, and topics spread, among others. The primary method involved detecting all Bulgarian variations of corruption and anti-corruption, as well as keyword sets commonly linked with corruption, like arrest, scheme, bribe, etc., appearing in either the title or the initial three sentences of each article. This was necessary because many media outlets avoid direct references to corruption but utilise associated terms.

Consequently, a deep-dive analysis allowed for the detection of all narratives. For the purpose of the analysis, the top thirteen narratives, segmented by topic (corruption and anti-corruption) were chosen as the most outstanding ones in terms of prominence. After a narrative was defined, a custom keyword set was created for finding articles within the Sensika catalogue that published on the issue. The following narrative analysis is based on the overall number of

media items related to it and are constructed based on keywords that are relevant to the topic, even if they do not include corruption or corruption-associated terms. In doing so, the full scope of the given narrative could be outlined. However, it was intriguing to examine whether the terms corruption, anti-corruption, integrity and their related keywords appeared in the stories.

4.2 Social media

Due to the current EU data protection law and, specifically, its General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR), Sensika has access only to publicly available content from Facebook. Therefore, the extracted narratives cover explicitly the content from public pages. During the initial research, the system extracted over 2,5 million Facebook posts and 20 million comments from Bulgarian profiles or in Bulgarian language for the monitored period. Thus, the online narrative's keyword sets were applied on the Facebook content as well.

However, they were slightly amended to address the specifics of social media (use of slang, informal language, common spelling mistakes, etc.). Here again, it was interesting to analyse the occurrence of the terms corruption, anti-corruption, integrity and their associated keywords in the stories on Facebook.

5 Overview analysis of the Bulgarian online media coverage

5.1 Overview of the four keyword sets

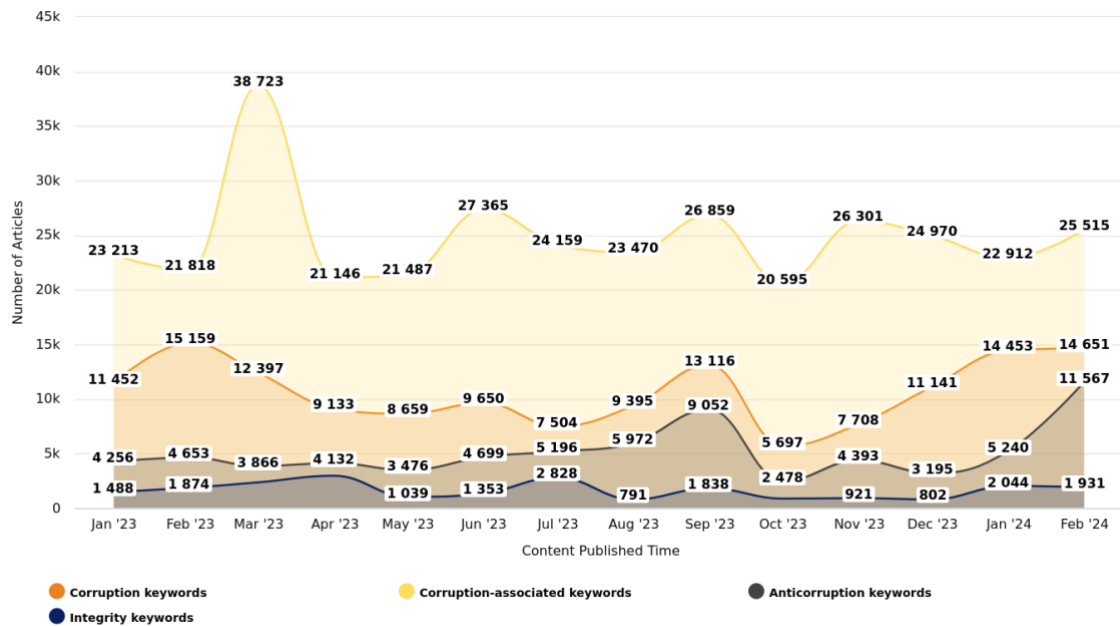### 5.1.1 Overview of the four keyword sets by volume

Table 3:   The chart illustrates the overall volume distribution per month and per keyword set.

The spike in corruption and corruption-associated keywords in February through March 2023 can be attributed to notable news that referenced smaller crimes and ongoing investigations (Sofia24).

Following this, the number of articles using anti-corruption keywords remained consistent, with an increase in February 2024. The latter was related to the ongoing discussions around measures, reforms or actions against corruption, notably in relation to details surrounding the murder of Martin "The Notary" Bozhanov who was known as an influential extra-judicial power broker or "fixer" with close connections to high-level government, police and judiciary officials (NOVA).

Articles containing integrity keywords exhibited minimal volume fluctuations, yet they maintained a consistent presence in the media landscape. In April 2023, many articles highlighted a statement by Finance Minister Sabev, urging MP Daniel Lorer, Former Finance Minister Asen Vasilev and their group to prove they are truly people of integrity by resigning (BG7).

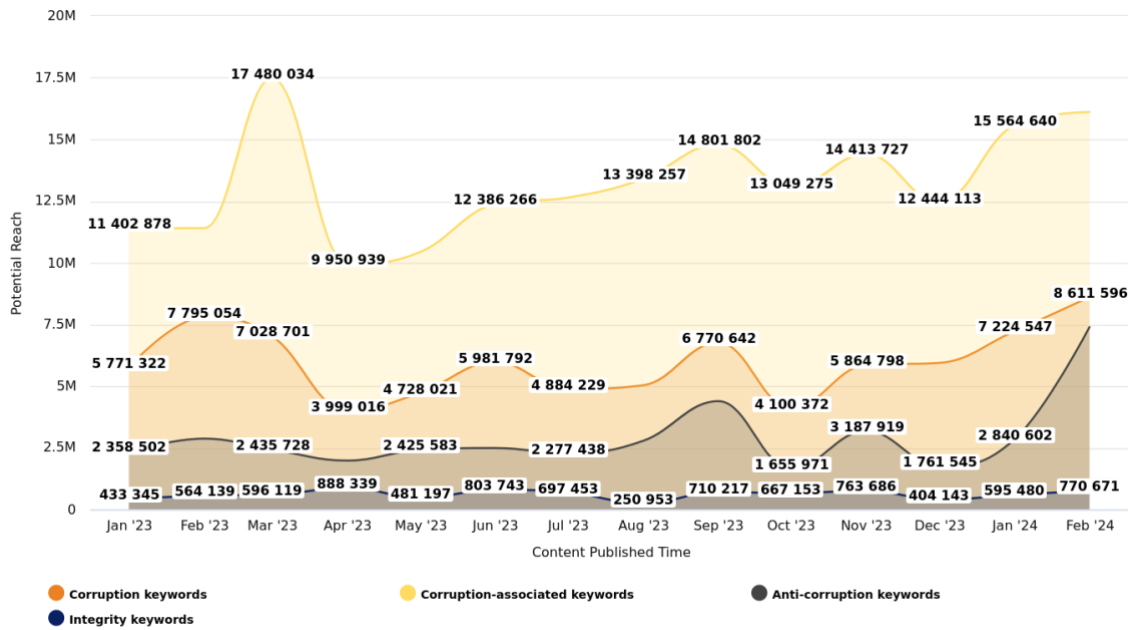## 5.1.2 Overview of the four keyword sets by reach

Table 4:   The chart illustrates overall potential reach distribution per month and per keyword set.

The chart indicates that the narratives received significant engagement, aligning with the peaks in volume. This shows that they not only captured the media's attention but also resonated with the wider audience.

Throughout the coverage period, the anti-corruption keywords maintained a consistent presence in terms of both volume and reach, indicating ongoing public interest and media focus on measures against corruption. For their part, the integrity keywords exhibited a more limited reach, suggesting narratives that prioritise exposing wrongdoing over highlighting virtue.

5.2 Overview of the four keyword sets segmented by source types

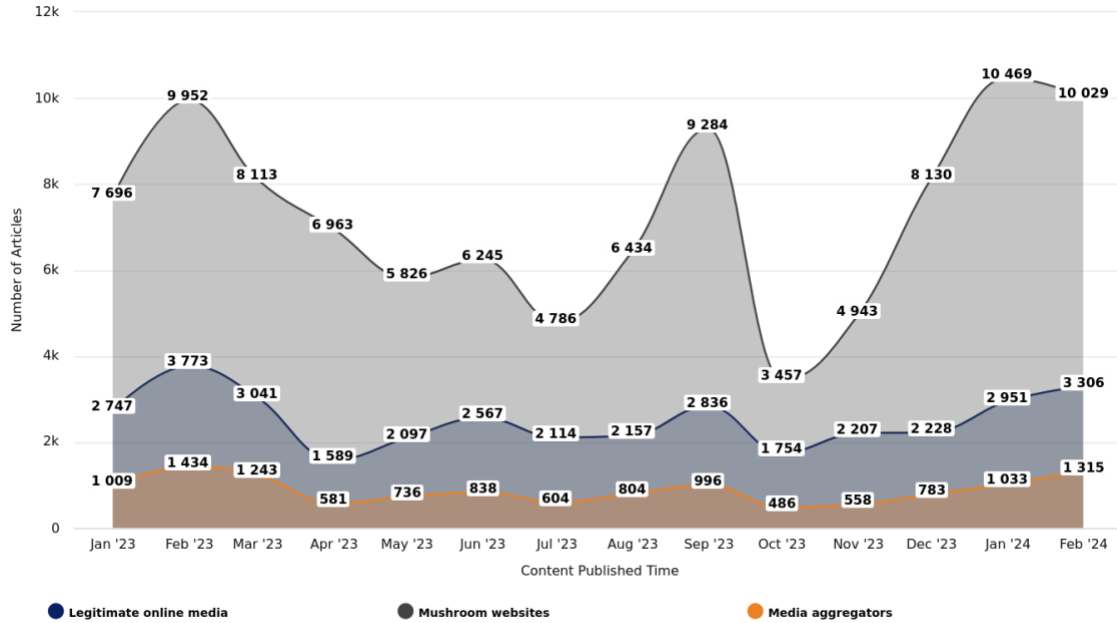### 5.2.1 Corruption keywords volume distribution

Table 5: The chart represents the volume distribution per month for the topic of corruption and the coverage peaks produced by the three types of media outlets: legitimate online media, mushroom websites and media aggregators.

Legitimate online media maintained a steady stream of articles throughout the year, showcasing a consistent commitment to reporting on corruption, with the activity peaking slightly in February 2023. In contrast, mushroom websites exhibited significant volatility in their content production tied to specific events such as the the Department of the Treasury's Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) sanctioning of five current or former Bulgarian government officials in February 2023, the adoption of the Anti-Corruption Law in September 2023, and the murder of a controversial power broker Martin "the Notary" Bozhanov in early 2024 .

For their part, media aggregators published the lowest amount of content compared to the other two types of sources but displayed a regular engagement throughout the year, with minor fluctuations.

5.2.2 Corruption-associated keywords volume distribution
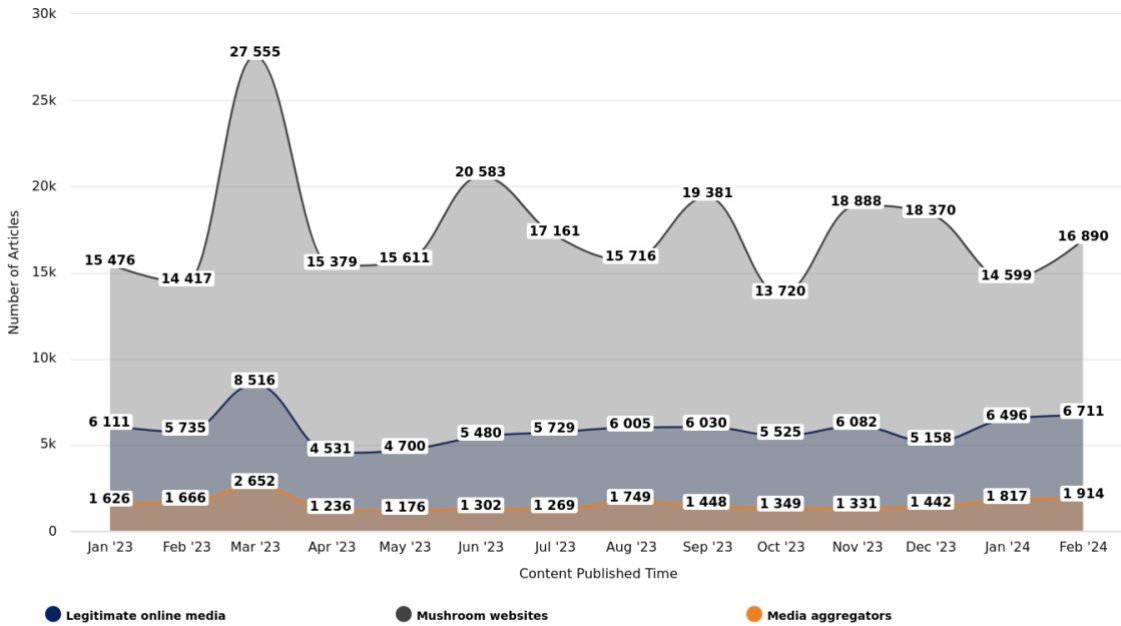

Table 6:   The chart represents the volume distribution per month for the corruption-associated keywords and the coverage peaks produced by the three types of media outlets: legitimate online media, mushroom websites and media aggregators.

Legitimate online media sources consistently covered corruption-associated news, illustrating a persistent effort to highlight arrests, briberies, etc. The content reached its peak in March 2023, a pattern repeated across mushroom websites and media aggregators as well.

Overall, while legitimate online media, republished by media aggregators, offered a constant stream of measured coverage, mushroom websites amplified specific narratives, especially during peak events, which could have potentially influenced public perception and discussion around the corruption-associated issues.

5.2.3 Anti-corruption keywords volume distribution
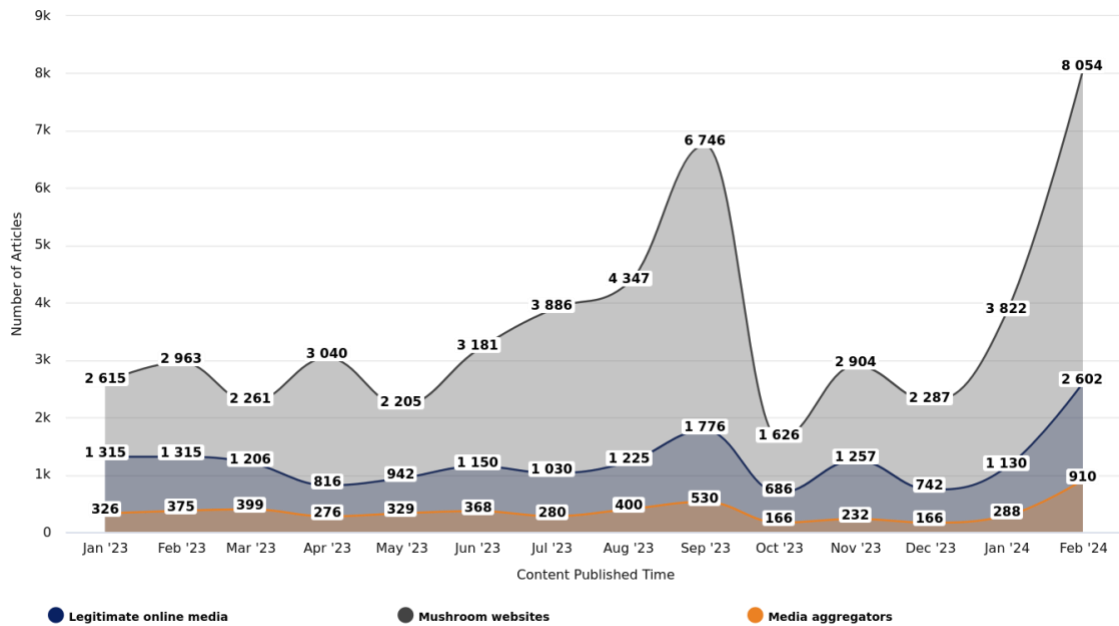

Table 7:   The chart represents the volume distribution per month for the topic of anti-corruption and the coverage peaks produced by the three types of media outlets: legitimate online media, mushroom websites and media aggregators.

By examining the data on anti-corruption, we can discern several compelling patterns across the different types of media sources. Legitimate online media maintained a steady presence, displaying a consistent dedication to exploring the anti-corruption narratives. The peaks in September 2023 and February 2024 indicated heightened interest in new legislative measures, government actions or high-profile anti-corruption cases, such as the actions undertaken following the murder of Martin "The Notary" Bozhanov in early February 2024.

Mushroom websites, known for their rapid and often sensational reporting, showed substantial activity as well, mirroring the peaks of the legitimate websites.

Media aggregators, while generally less active than mushroom websites, displayed a modest but constant participation in the conversation. Their presence bolstered the visibility of the anti-corruption topic, potentially extending the reach of the content beyond the audiences of more traditional or legitimate media sources.
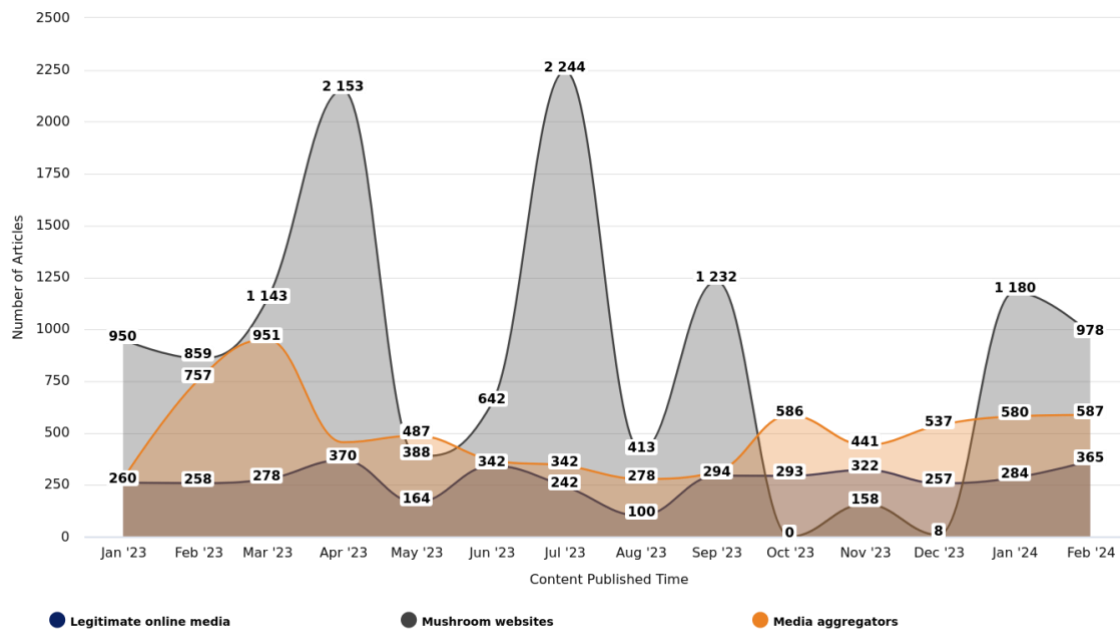
5.2.4 Integrity keywords volume distribution

Table 8: The chart represents the volume distribution per month for integrity and the coverage peaks produced by the three types of media outlets: legitimate online media, mushroom websites and media aggregators.

Despite producing the least amount of content, legitimate online media demonstrated consistency in the coverage of the integrity topic, which indicates sustained commitment to maintaining discourse on ethical standards and practices (NOVA).

The chart also shows that mushroom websites formed four peaks overall: in April 2023, July 2023, September 2023 and January through February 2024. During these spikes, integrity was indirectly mentioned in relation to the PP-DB coalition's moral standards and ethical behaviour. The spikes also demonstrated the mushroom websites' tendency to focus on sensational moments, reflecting a drive for immediate engagement. (KAMELIQ).

On the other hand, the peaks of the content from media aggregators varied from those in the other two types of sources, marking an unusual trend. Many headlines underscored the monitored concept in relation to the idea for a Bulgarian government composed of individuals prioritising national interests and committed to serving the people with integrity and ethics (Novini247).

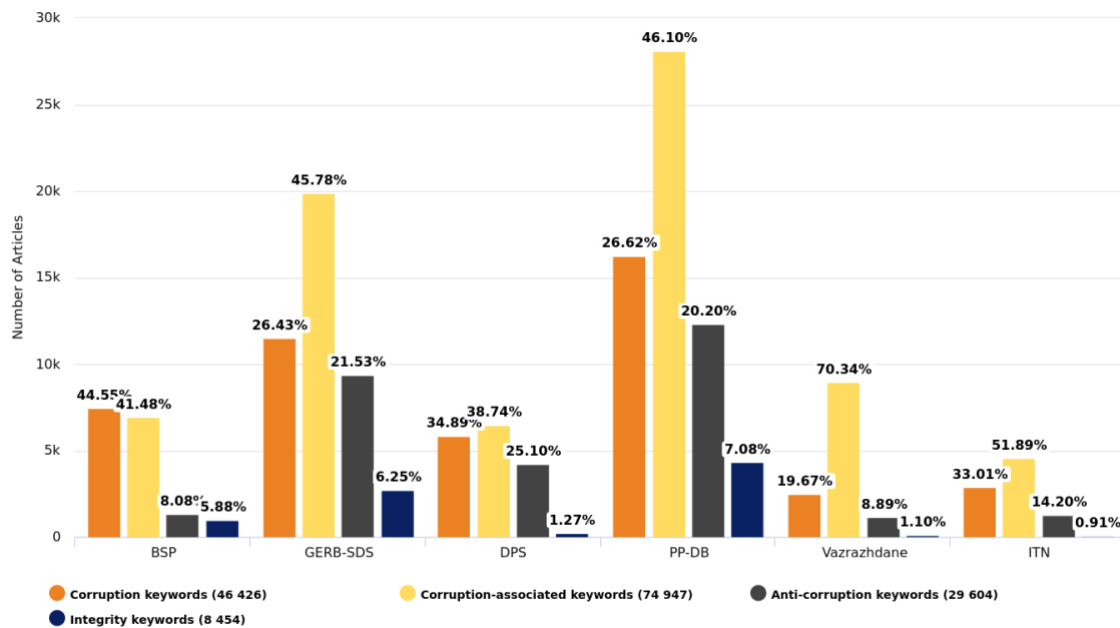## 5.3 Overview of political parties mentions in the four keyword sets

Table 9:   The chart represents the volume distribution for each of the six parties and the share of their mentions in the context of the four keyword sets: corruption, corruption-associated keywords, anti-corruption and integrity.

The chart above shows that PP-DB and GERB-SDS were prominently featured in the discussions surrounding all keyword sets, largely due to their status as active parliamentary parties. Meanwhile, all political formations were predominantly mentioned in the context of the corruption and corruption-associated narratives (BNT). This reflects the parties' recognition of corruption as a significant issue, with various party figures debating its impact and the potential strategies to address it. The mention of all parties together with various anti-corruption keywords mainly follows the ongoing discussions on corruption and their implications for combating the issue (DARIK).

In discussions concerning integrity, Former Transport Minister Nikolay Sabev called for Asen Vasilev and Daniel Lorer of the PP-DB political formation to resign from PP, citing integrity concerns (Eurocom). Meanwhile, during National Assembly debates, GERB's Georg Georgiev and Boyko Rashkov from PP clashed over the Gemcorp memorandum. Georgiev's remarks, branding the Former Interior Minister as the "umbrella of the Petkov government," highlighted integrity issues (NOVA).

BSP often presented itself as a party of integrity. For instance, this was highlighted during a voter meeting in the regional city of Stara Zagora with Velina Atanasova, the chairman of BSP-Stara Zagora's municipal organisation and a candidate for deputy (Presstv).

For its part, Vazrazhdane was indirectly referenced with the phrase "honest and principled," on several occasions when its leader Kostadin Kostadinov addressed voters, emphasising that his party offers an alternative for those of them who feel deceived by GERB-SDS and PP-DB, highlighting the importance of integrity (BTA).

It is also worth mentioning that integrity was used by DPS when making an ironic remark to PP as "the honest ones from Harvard" (PIK), whereas ITN was only briefly mentioned in media discussions involving integrity.

5.3.1 Overview of the political parties mentions per source type in the context of corruption keywords
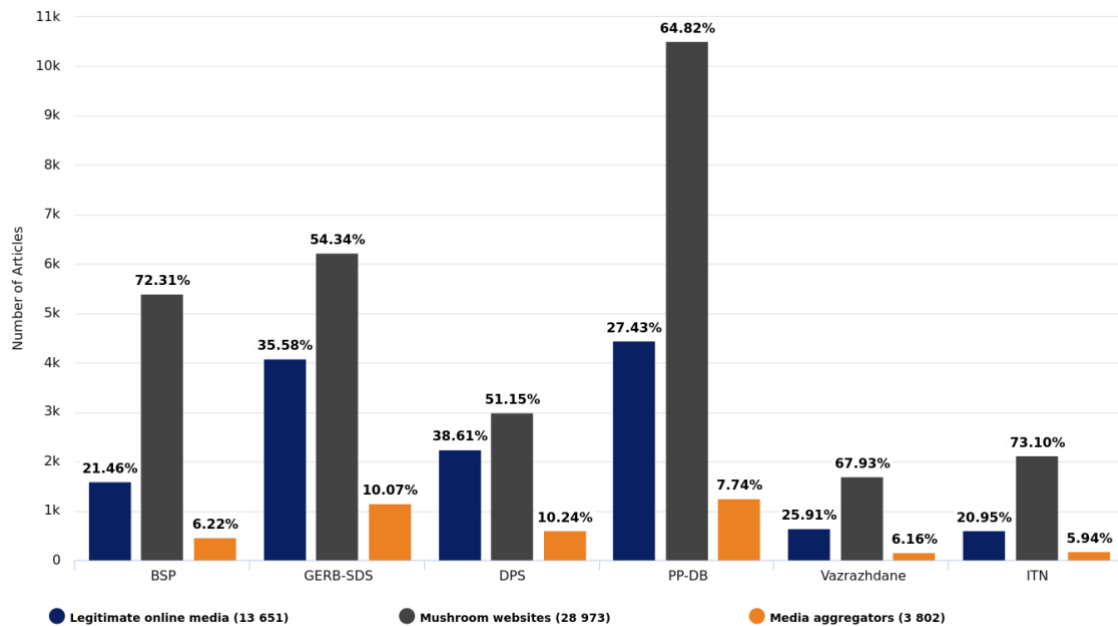

Table 10: The chart represents the volume distribution for each of the six parties and the share of their mentions in the context of the corruption coverage, broken down by source type: legitimate online media, mushroom websites and media aggregators.

The data presented here compares the Bulgarian political parties in the context of the corruption coverage and as per the three distinct source types: legitimate online media, mushroom websites and media aggregators.

It should be noted that GERB-SDS and PP-DB received more coverage from legitimate media compared to the rest of the parties.

PP-DB received a lot of attention from mushroom websites (64.82%), which tracked the party's activities without a clear pattern, mirroring the approach of media aggregators. Meanwhile, the legitimate sources consistently highlighted the party in the context of corruption, revealing divisions on the issue between PP-DB and other coalitions such as GERB-SDS and DPS (StandartNews).

GERB-SDS was consistently mentioned in relation to corruption, with the media focusing on the party's stated commitment to anti-corruption measures, especially during discussions of the Magnitsky sanctions (BNT, Varna24). The GERB leader was quoted asserting that corruption and fiscal issues were the main risks to the government's stability (Novinite.bg). On the other hand, media aggregators repeatedly republished a statement by Former Prime

Minister Nikolay Denkov, who asserted that PP-DB would not support GERB-SDS's mandate until the party changes its approach to corruption ([NetNews](#)).

The ITN party was predominantly featured in articles published by mushroom websites, which were responsible for a 73% of all of its mentions, the highest share among all parties. This includes widespread attention to the critical commentary of ITN's deputy chairman Toshko Yordanov ([VI6](#)) on the potential misuse of funds due to legislation and ITN's party leader Slavi Trifonov's direct accusations against PP-DB leaders, covered in a critical article by [Blitz](#), which mushroom websites amplified and media aggregators, such as [Novini247](#), further propagated.

Mushroom websites were the primary source of articles mentioning BSP in the context of corruption as well, accounting for 72% of their total mentions. These outlets prominently featured BSP's party leader Kornelia Ninova's ([BG7](#)) condemnation of the government's nine-month administration for its ethical breaches and corrupt actions. One of the storylines ([Allbg](#)), later taken up by media aggregators such as [Novinibg.eu](#) and legitimate outlets like [DARIK](#), involved BSP's list of corrupt practices and violations allegedly committed by President Rumen Radev's administration.

Out of all references to DPS, 39% originated from reputable media sources, particularly highlighting the party's parliamentary group chairman Delyan Peevski and his inquiry about the lack of disclosure regarding the prosecution's corruption investigations concerning the presidential administration ([NOVA](#)). Whilst the media aggregators circulated the same news ([Novini247](#)), the mushroom websites prioritised the news about Peevski's response to corruption allegations and sanctions imposed by the US Office of Foreign Assets Control ([Ludsport](#)).

Vazrazhdane received minimal coverage from online media in the context of corruption and was primarily mentioned in articles by mushroom websites which, interestingly, covered the party only during five peak periods throughout the monitored period. Mushroom websites frequently republished articles from [Blitz](#), focusing heavily on the various actions taken by Vazrazhdane. For instance, its MP Ivaylo Papov's statement about "protecting Bulgarian national hero Ivan Vazov from those referred to as *sorosoids*, who seek to destroy him," was often highlighted ([BGVest](#)). In Bulgaria, "sorosoid" is a pejorative term sometimes used by extreme right political forces to refer to an individual or an organisation that promotes western liberal ideas and values.

5.3.2 Overview of the political parties mentions per source type in the context of corruption-associated keywords
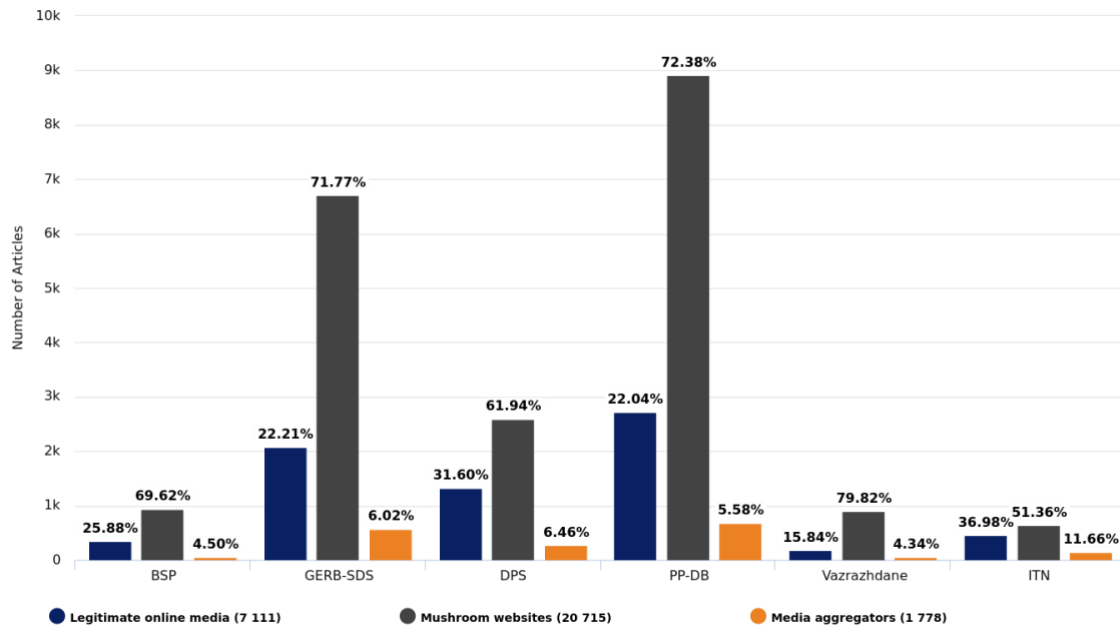

Table 11: The chart represents the volume distribution for each of the six parties and the share of their mentions in the context of the corruption-associated coverage, broken down by source type: legitimate online media, mushroom websites and media aggregators.

During the monitored period, PP-DB and GERB-SDS garnered the highest number of mentions. Among the most prominent narratives were the allegations of voting machine abuse (Actualno). Additionally, these coalitions were the most frequently cited by mushroom websites, which regularly repurposed content from legitimate sources like Blitz, Trud or Petel. They highlighted the concerns about the integrity of the democratic elections and the potential for corrupt practices to influence election outcomes.

BSP, while receiving less coverage in online media, saw mushroom websites substantially relaying its representatives' scepticism regarding the reliability of electronic voting systems, echoing fears of potential manipulation and political meddling, a narrative commonly found in outlets such as Blitz.

DPS's presence in the media was quite distinct, with 32% of its mentions originating from legitimate online sources, peaking notably after Delyan Peevski's inquiries about alleged corruption within the presidential administration (Epicenter). Conversely, mushroom websites did not exhibit significant fluctuations in coverage but featured Peevski alongside individuals like Ilko Zhelyazkov and Vasil Bozhkov all three faced sanctions from the US and UK for corruption offences under the Magnitsky Act. Media aggregators, including Novini247, also echoed these allegations.

Vazrazhdane received almost 80% of its mentions from mushroom websites. These sources, such as BG7, predominantly portrayed the party amidst conflicts and scandals. For example, it was referenced in regard to allegations that it was connected to three Bulgarians arrested

for Russian espionage in the UK. The articles also mentioned Vazrazhdane's MP Angel Georgiev, who, according to the texts, was beaten and threatened at the border crossing between Bulgaria and North Macedonia.

ITN received the biggest share of coverage from legitimate media outlets, compared to the rest of the parties. The party's deputy chairman Toshko Yordanov emerged as the most cited figure, primarily due to his allegations concerning compromised voting machines (BTA). This narrative was further amplified by the mushroom websites and media aggregators like Novini247, which led to a significant peak in ITN's media visibility.

5.3.3 Overview of the political parties mentions per source type in the context of anti-corruption keywords
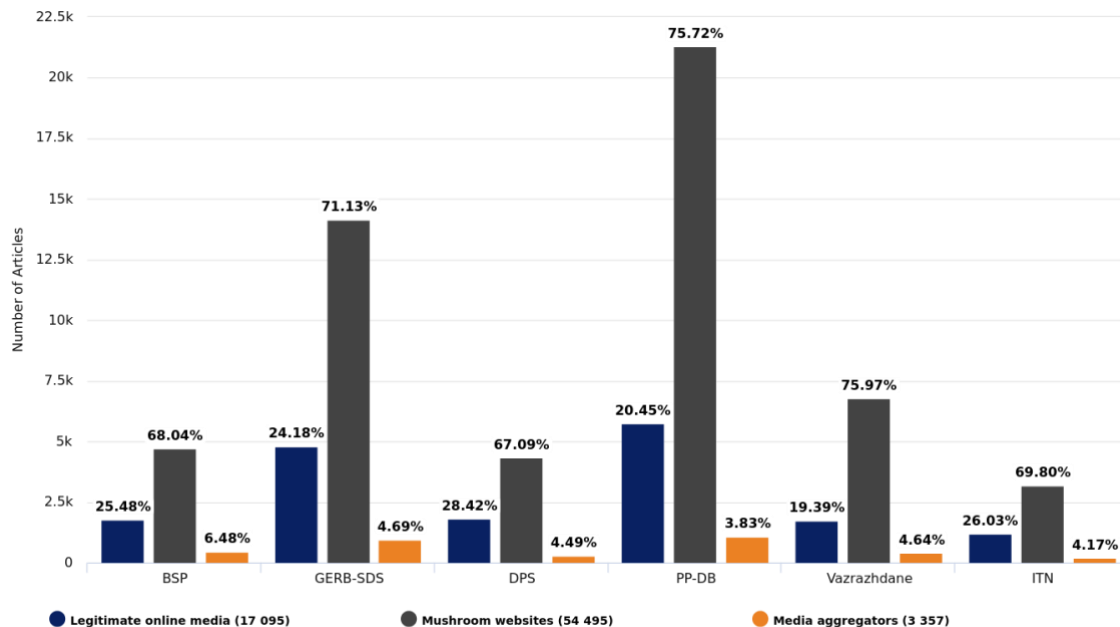

Table 12: The chart represents the volume distribution for each of the six parties and the share of their mentions in the context of the anti-corruption coverage, broken down by source type: legitimate online media, mushroom websites and media aggregators.

Mushroom websites, among them BG7 and BGUtro, which often republish articles from outlets like Blitz, prominently featured Vazrazhdane. They accounted for almost 76% of the party's total mentions in the context of the anti-corruption narratives, such as the one about MP Dimo Drenchev's filing of a report to the Anti-Corruption Commission concerning a potential conflict of interest with Andrey Gyurov who was serving as a deputy head of the Bulgarian Central Bank at the time from the PP quota.

Additionally, the analysis revealed that GERB-SDS and PP-DB also received extensive coverage by mushroom websites, with this type of articles substantially outnumbering those in legitimate media. The predominant narratives revolved around the Parliament's decision to adopt the new anti-corruption law and to introduce reforms within the Anti-Corruption

Commission (Vesti). Conversely, the media aggregators played a smaller role, contributing to only about 4-5% of the total mentions of these two political alliances.

Furthermore, almost 70% of the content mentioning BSP originated from mushroom websites as well. In January 2024 these sources disseminated news about BSP presenting a list of alleged violations and reports of corruption by the caretaker government appointed by President Rumen Radev. This narrative was also covered by legitimate sources (Radio Free Europe) and media aggregators (NetNews).

ITN's leader Slavi Trifonov drew the attention of both legitimate sources and mushroom websites by officially declaring his assets to the Anti-Corruption Commission, which he had not done previously despite being a public official (Radio Free Europe). It should also be noted that the party's aggregator coverage was quite modest compared to the other parties.

DPS's mentions primarily revolved around statements made by Delyan Peevski regarding the anti-corruption policies in the country (Blitz, DARIK), as well as his personal advocacy for more public disclosure as part of broader anti-corruption efforts (NOVA). The data reveals that references to the party and its members were more than twice as much on mushroom websites compared to legitimate media outlets. For their part, media aggregators contributed to less than 5% of the total content related to DPS.

5.3.4 Overview of the political parties mentions per source type in the context of integrity keywords
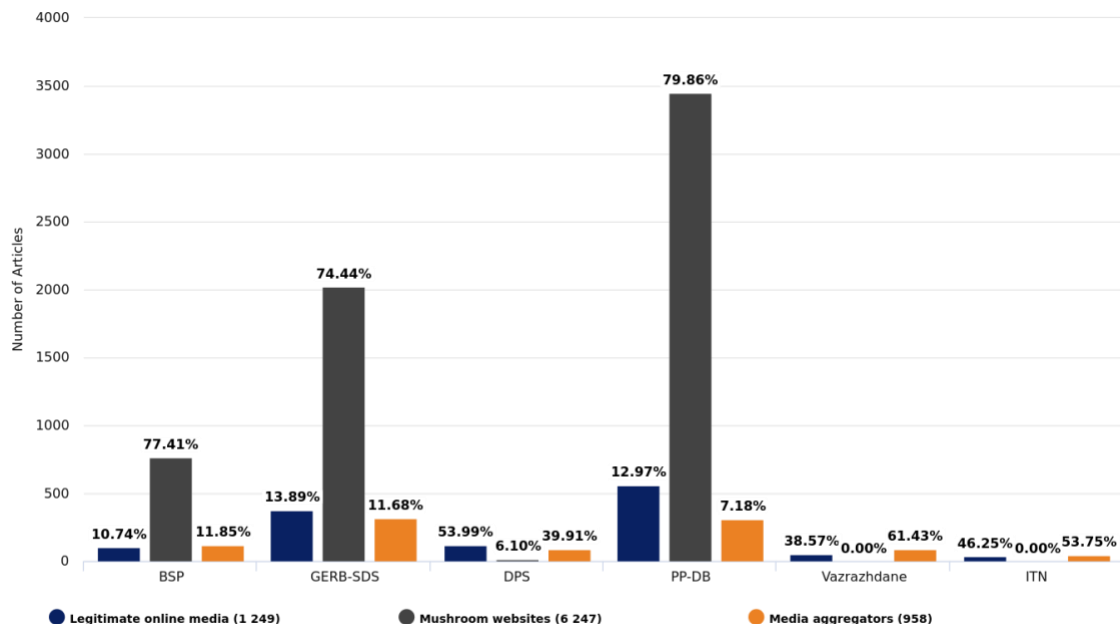

Table 13: The chart represents the volume distribution for each of the six parties and the share of their mentions in the context of the integrity coverage, broken down by source type: legitimate online media, mushroom websites and media aggregators.

PP-DB received the biggest coverage, with about 80% of the narratives that mentioned it originating from mushroom websites. This was largely driven by the Former Minister of

Transport Nikolay Sabev's statement, according to which if Asen Vasilev and Daniel Lorer were people of integrity, they would resign from their positions and leave the political party [PP] (BG7).

Similarly, mushroom websites were the main source of mentions of the BSP and GERB-SDS, with 77% and 74% respectively. A highlight from July 2023 was BSP leader Kornelia Ninova's endorsement of the integrity of her party's candidate during the National Health Insurance Fund director elections, a story first covered by legitimate outlets such as DARIK and subsequently taken up by mushroom websites and media aggregators. During the same period, GERB-SDS MP Kostadin Angelov stated that PP-DB had to drop their candidate for the head of the National Health Insurance Fund, arguing that this was the only logical decision that could be taken by a political party claiming to be comprised of people of integrity (Focus). This statement triggered an immediate increase in content by the mushroom websites. Similarly, in January 2023, GERB-SDS MP Denitsa Sacheva's criticism towards PP and the party's self-identification as people of integrity was initially covered by legitimate sources (BNR), but later the mushroom websites republished an article about it by Blitz, further amplifying the discussion.

In contrast, mushroom websites showed little or even no interest in the integrity narratives related to the political figures from DPS, Vazrazhdane or ITN. This created a marked disparity in content volume between these parties and the abovementioned ones, with the former group accumulating around 360 articles compared to the latter's 7000.

Coverage for DPS, Vazrazhdane and ITN tended towards an even split between legitimate media and media aggregators, with Vazrazhdane seeing the highest percentage of its mentions by aggregators at 61%. The party's leader Kostadin Kostadinov addressed the voters of GERB and PP-DB as people of integrity, who were lied to by their chosen parties (BTA), while ITN's Slavi Trifonov opted to characterise the singer Toto, who was involved in a serious scandal regarding violence against women, as "a person of integrity" (Novinata). DPS was mostly mentioned in relation to PP-DB, who were frequently sarcastically addressed as "the party of the people of integrity" (PIK).

5.4 Overall source audience observations in the online content

5.4.1 Source audience by age per source type

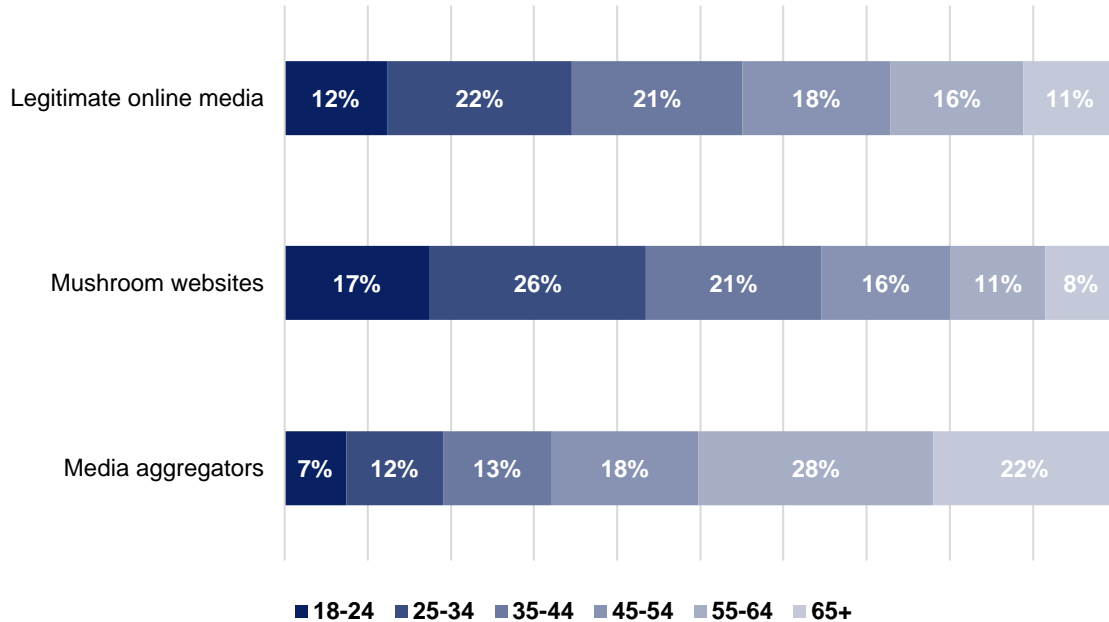| Source	18-24	25-34	35-44	45-54	55-64	65+
Legitimate online media	12%	22%	21%	18%	16%	11%
Mushroom websites	17%	26%	21%	16%	11%	8%
Media aggregators	7%	12%	13%	18%	28%	22%

■ 18-24 ■ 25-34 ■ 35-44 ■ 45-54 ■ 55-64 ■ 65+

Table 14: The chart represents the age groups of the readers of the online content segmented by the three source types: legitimate online media, mushroom websites and media aggregators.

The source audience's age distribution indicates that legitimate media was preferred mostly by the 25-34 and 35-44 age groups. The majority of the mushroom websites' readers fell within the 25-34 age group. Meanwhile, media aggregators exhibited a different trend, with their biggest readership in the older age categories of 45-54 and particularly 55-64 and 65+, suggesting that these platforms are preferred by an older audience.

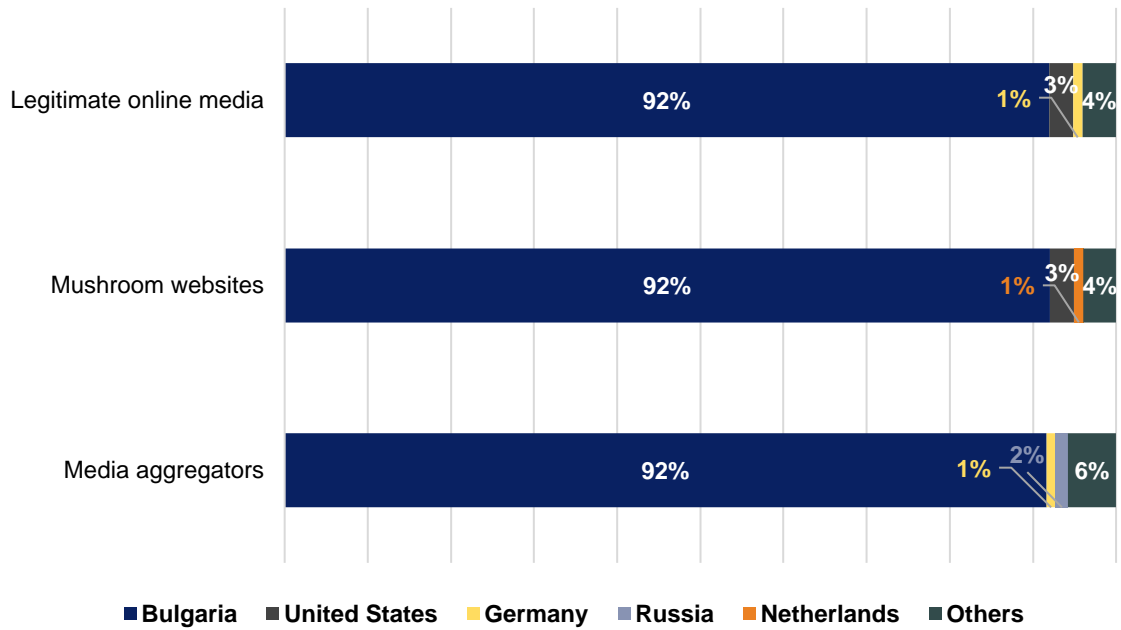## 5.4.2 Source audience by country per source type

Table 15: The chart represents the countries of the readers of the online content segmented by the three source types: legitimate online media, mushroom websites and media aggregators.

The chart, highlighting the geographic distribution of the readership across the various types of online media, showcases that Bulgarian online media was predominantly consumed by a local audience with 92% of the readers of legitimate online media, mushroom websites and media aggregators being based in Bulgaria. There was, however, a small but notable global engagement, particularly from the United States, Germany, Russia and the Netherlands.

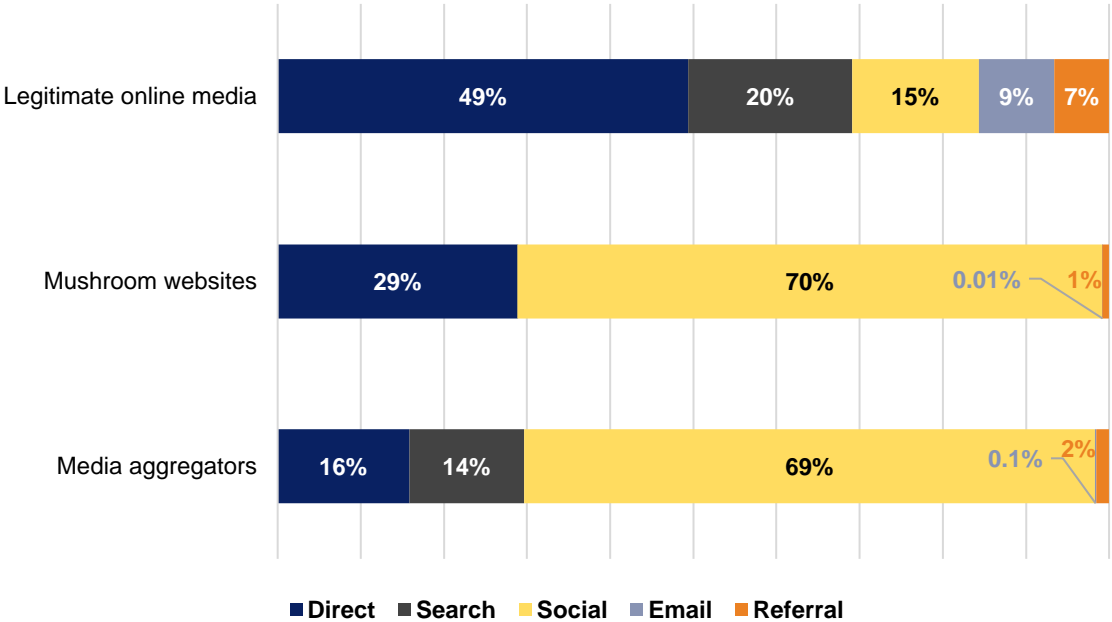## 5.4.3 Source audience by traffic source per source type

Table 16: The chart represents the top ways in which the readers accessed the online content segmented by the three source types: legitimate online media, mushroom websites and media aggregators.

Legitimate media received almost half of its traffic from direct hits. Search was the next significant driver, responsible for a fifth of the traffic, followed by social media, email and referrals. Meanwhile, mushroom websites and media aggregators heavily relied on social media, which accounted for 70% and 69% respectively of their traffic. However, unlike mushroom websites, media aggregators received a portion of their readers also through search channels.

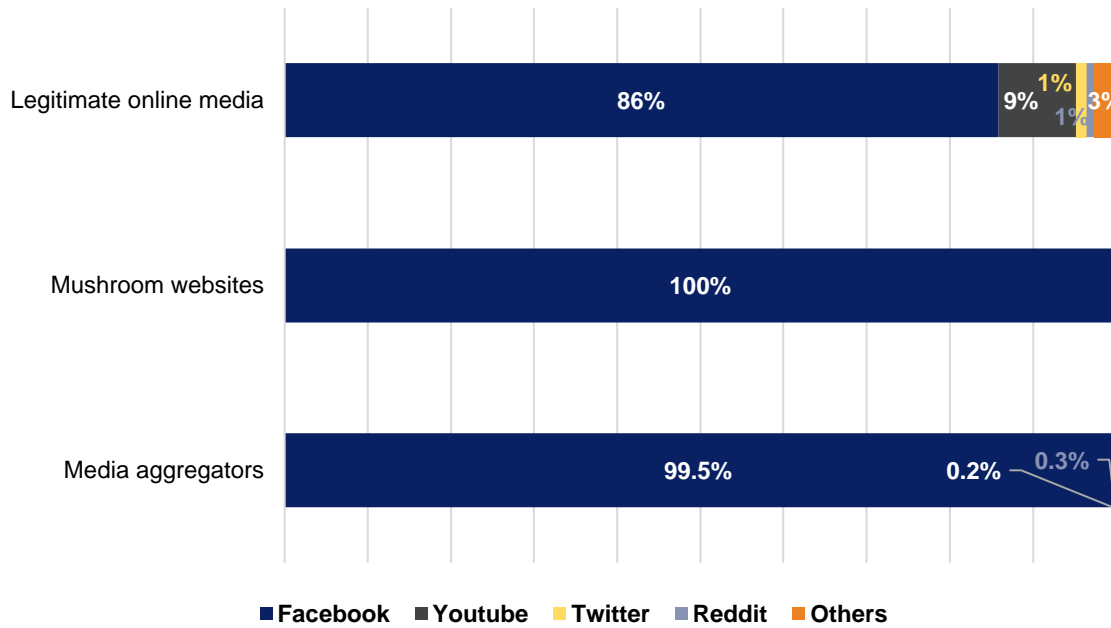## 5.4.4 Source audience by social network per source type

Table 17: The chart represents the top social media networks that send traffic to the online content segmented by the three source types: legitimate online media, mushroom websites and media aggregators.

The chart demonstrates the clear dominance of Facebook as the primary social network directing traffic to the various media source types. When it comes to legitimate online media, Facebook contributed with 86% of the total social traffic, followed by YouTube, Twitter and Reddit. For their part, mushroom websites received 100% of their social media-driven traffic from the Facebook platform. This underscores Facebook's role in the spread of content from less authoritative sources. Last but not least, media aggregators also showed a heavy dependence on Facebook with 99.5% of their traffic from this platform, while YouTube and Reddit played a negligible role.

6 Overview analysis of the Bulgarian Facebook coverage

6.1 Overview of the four keyword sets

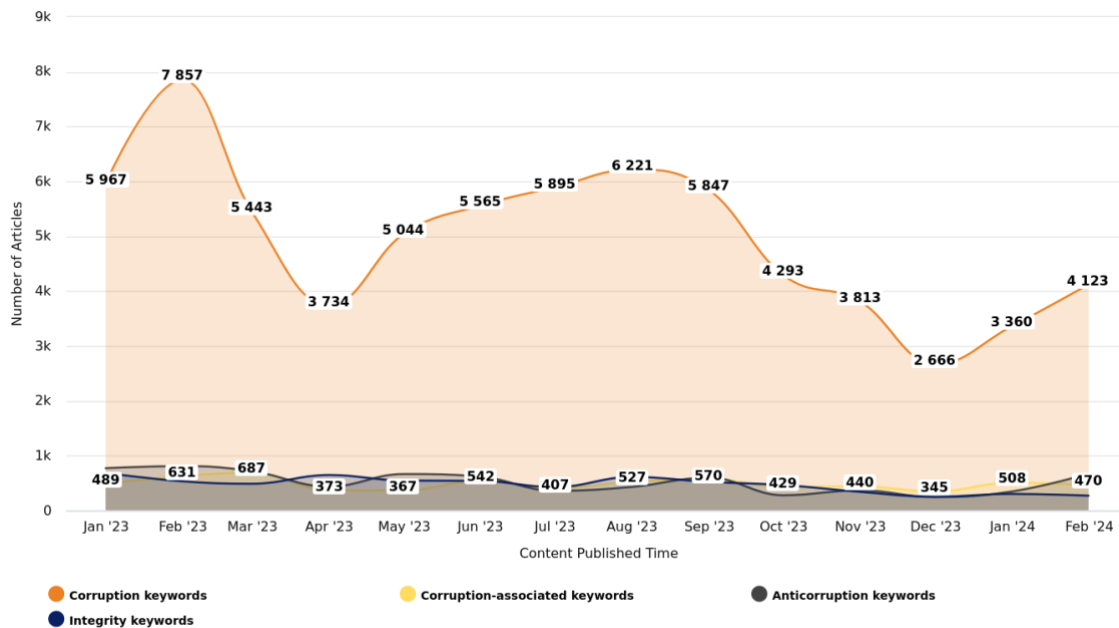### 6.1.1 Overview of the four keyword sets by volume

Table 18:   The chart represents the overall volume distribution per month and per keyword set.

In early 2023, there was a notable surge in the conversations regarding corruption, with users attributing it to Bulgaria's government in their comments. It was also noticed that over 1500 identical comments were repeatedly posted by a single user across various pages of political figures, news outlets and other politically oriented pages. These comments consistently criticised the policies of the former government in 2023.

Regarding the remaining keyword sets, there was far less variation. This suggests a consistent but relatively minor interest in the ongoing activities associated with those topics. The use of the anti-corruption keywords showed moderate engagement, with slight peaks coinciding with periods of intensified anti-corruption initiatives or successes.

Finally, the integrity keyword set showed the least variation. It was also predominantly mentioned together with the political parties GERB-SDS and PP-DB, with the word integrity often used provocatively or sarcastically.

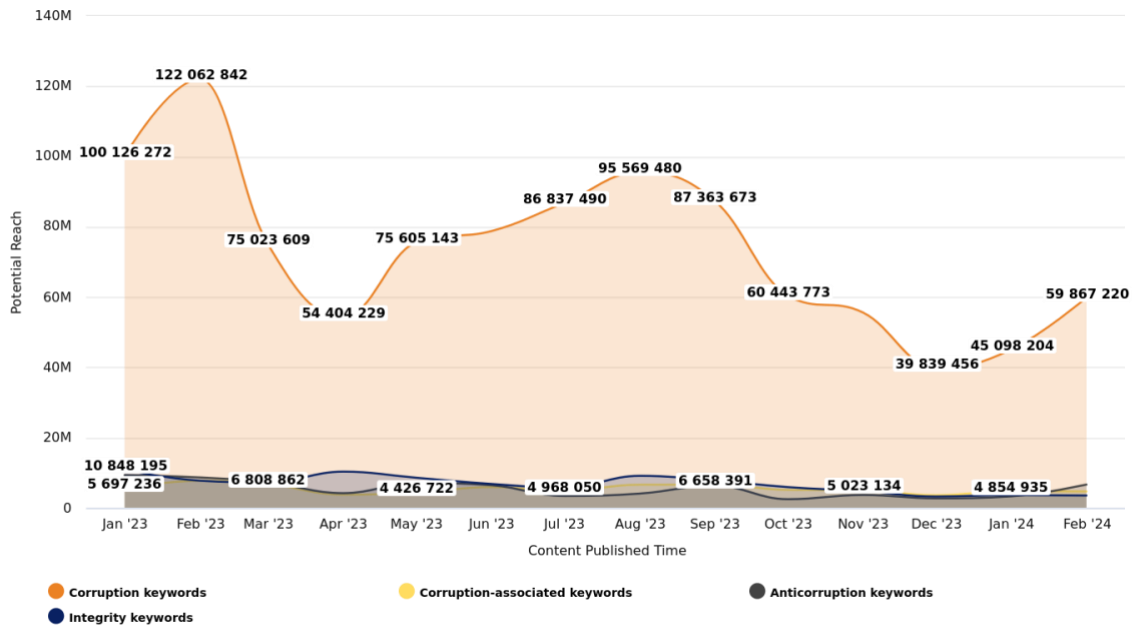## 6.1.2 Overview of the four keyword sets by reach

Table 19: The chart represents the overall potential reach distribution per month and per keyword set.

At the start of 2023, there was a notable surge in the reach of corruption keywords, aligning with the content volume surge observed in the previous chart. Similarly, the reach of the other keyword sets showed a correlation with the volume depicted in the previous chart, demonstrating comparatively lower numbers.

The anti-corruption keyword set exhibited the lowest potential reach, indicating a smaller audience actively engaged in issues related to transparency, justice and reform.

In general, when comparing the potential reach with content distribution, it's apparent that corruption issues, despite their variances in content volume, have a broader and more enduring impact on public discourse.

6.2 Overview of the four keyword sets segmented by post type

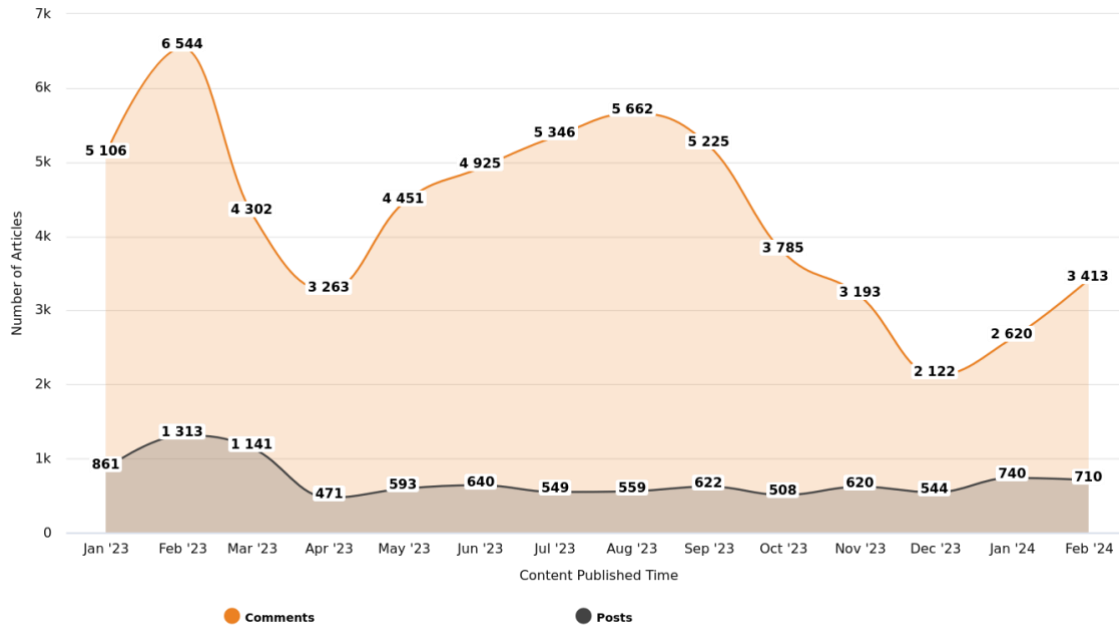### 6.2.1 Corruption keywords coverage by post type

Table 20: The chart represents the volume distribution per month for the topic of corruption and the coverage peaks produced by the two types of posts: posts and comments.

The analysis reveals that the user engagement through comments was substantially higher than that from original posts. This indicates that while the number of posts provided the initial information or opinion, it was the comments section that truly stimulated the conversation and demonstrated the public's reactive nature.

What is more, the posts concerning corruption often prompted users to express their views on the Bulgarian government, highlighting widespread discontent and assigning of blame for the country's corruption to the ruling officials. It should also be noted that the spike in both posts and comments observed in February 2023 aligned with the announcement of new sanctions by the US against five prominent Bulgarians under the Magnitsky Act.

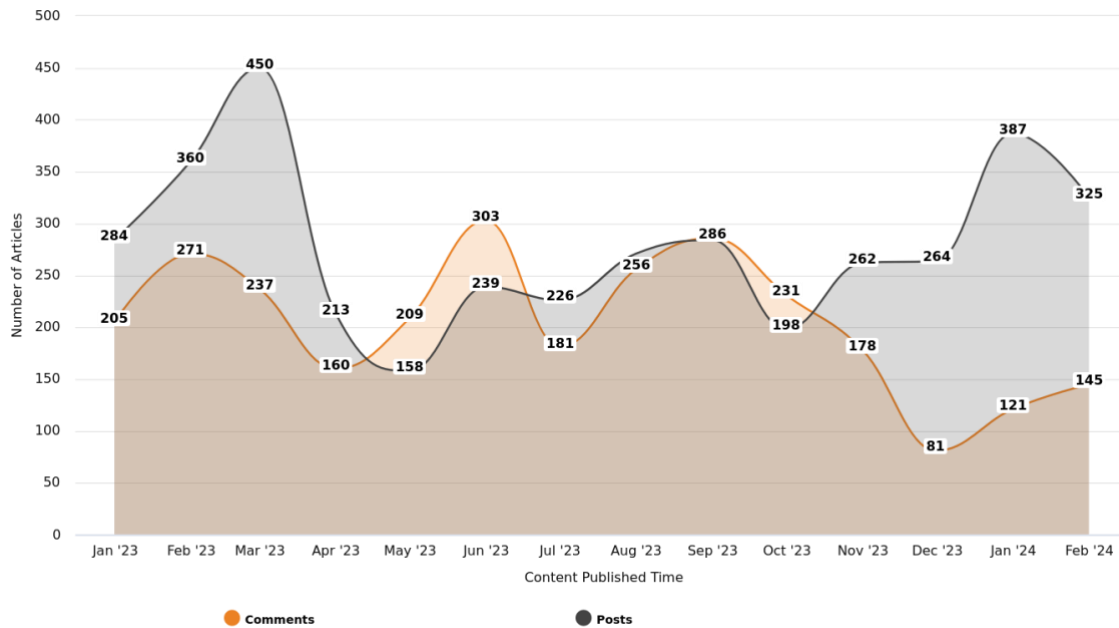## 6.2.2 Corruption-associated keywords coverage by post type

Table 21: The chart represents the volume distribution per month for the corruption-associated keywords and the coverage peaks produced by the two types of posts: posts and comments.

In the context of the corruption-associated keywords, the Facebook content displayed an intriguing pattern of interaction between posts and comments. Notably, there was a close competition between the number of posts and comments each month, which signifies an active audience engagement. Unlike the trend of comments far outnumbering posts from the previous chart, here we see a more balanced dynamic.

The relatively proportional distribution shows that topics associated with corruption not only prompted users to participate in the discussions (as indicated by the number of comments) but also to initiate dialogue through original posts. Another interesting observation is the spike in activity in March and September 2023 when the numbers for both posts and comments increased.

In March 2023, the rise in original posts primarily stemmed from efforts against vote-buying preceding the April 2023 parliamentary elections, leading to a subsequent increase in related comments. Meanwhile, in September 2023, a new peak emerged, driven equally by both posts and comments, primarily focusing on original posts discussing actions against corrupt practices.

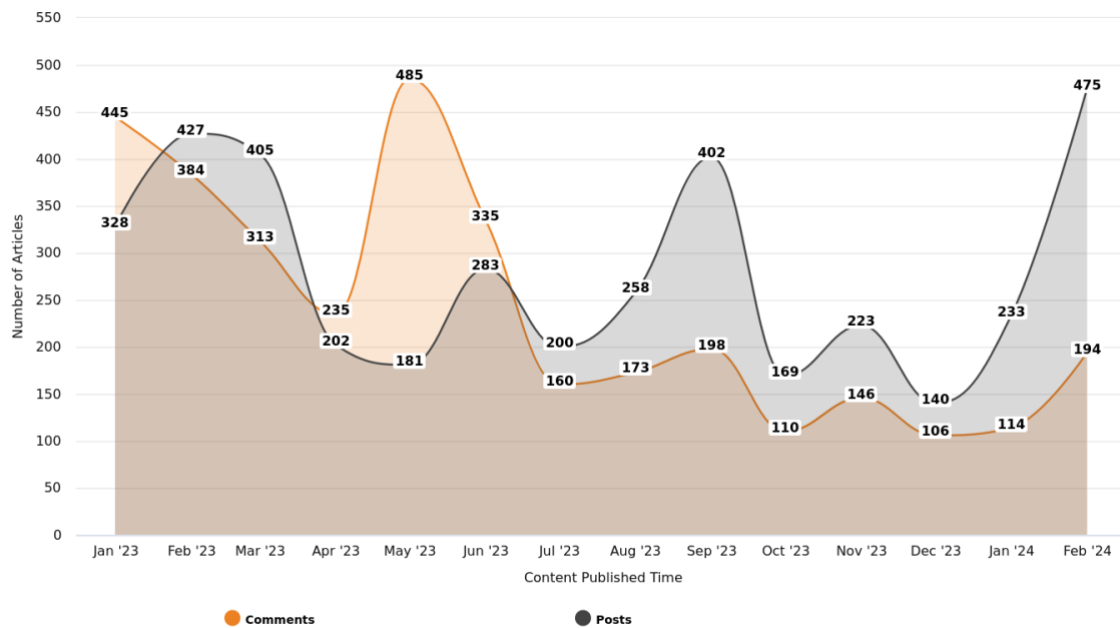## 6.2.3 Anti-corruption keywords coverage by post type

Table 22: The chart represents the volume distribution per month for the topic of anti-corruption and the coverage peaks produced by the two types of posts: posts and comments.

The data highlights the consistent user engagement with the anti-corruption topic, as evidenced by the significant interaction through both posts and comments.

In May 2023, the heightened comment activity stemmed from users reposting similar comments across various posts, accusing Former Chief Prosecutor Geshev and members of the GERB party of misconduct and pointing out political interference in the media. Furthermore, users shared a video, which allegedly showed the Chief Prosecutor and the head of the Commission for Anti-corruption and Illegal Assets Forfeiture intimidating journalists during the arrest of Desislava Ivancheva, Former Mayor of the capital's Mladost district, and Bilyana Petrova, her deputy, on bribery charges.

In contrast, in February 2024, the content distribution on Facebook showed a surge in posts due to the assassination of Martin "The Notary" Bozhanov. Despite the rise in posts, however, the number of comments did not show an equivalent increase.

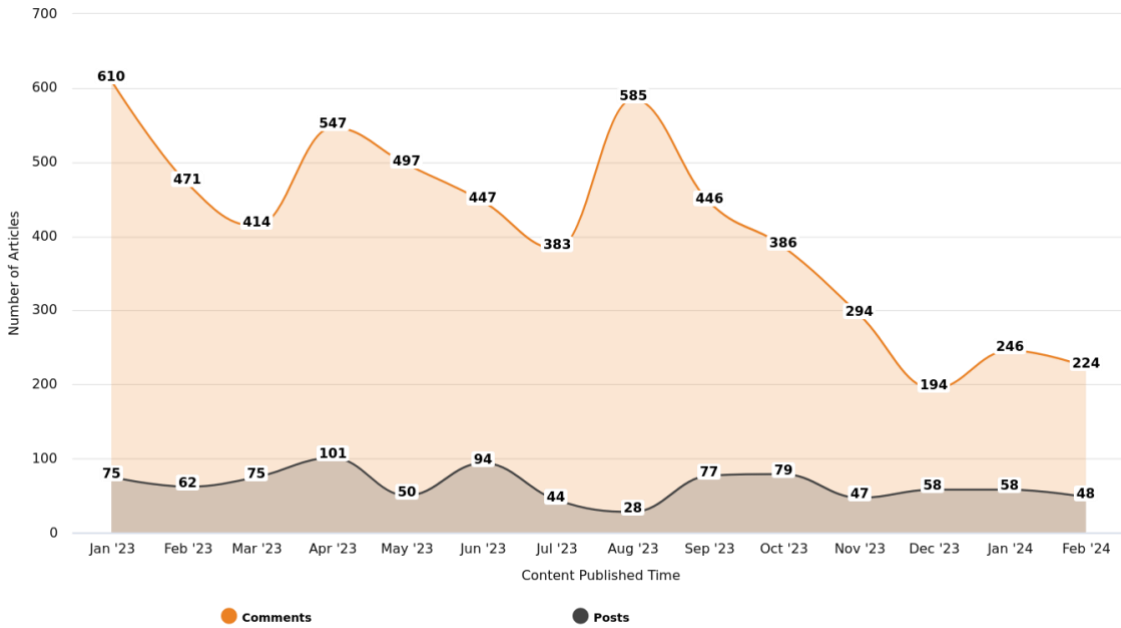## 6.2.4 Integrity keywords coverage by post type

Table 23: The chart represents the volume distribution per month for the topic of integrity and the coverage peaks produced by the two types of posts: posts and comments.

The data for the integrity-related content on Facebook reveals a consistent trend where comments significantly outnumbered posts each month. This engagement indicates that although the number of initial posts featuring integrity-related keywords was not high, the discussed subjects were impactful enough to spark various conversations.

In January 2023, original posts mainly covered a report from GRECO, the Council of Europe's anti-corruption body, highlighting concerns regarding the lack of integrity frameworks for high-level government officials and the judicial system in Bulgaria.

Despite this, the comments were not directly related to these news articles. Instead, Facebook users mostly mentioned integrity in reference to political parties, highlighting concerns about the government's integrity.

Overall and throughout the entire period, integrity was frequently used by users to sarcastically refer to politicians and their lack of this quality.

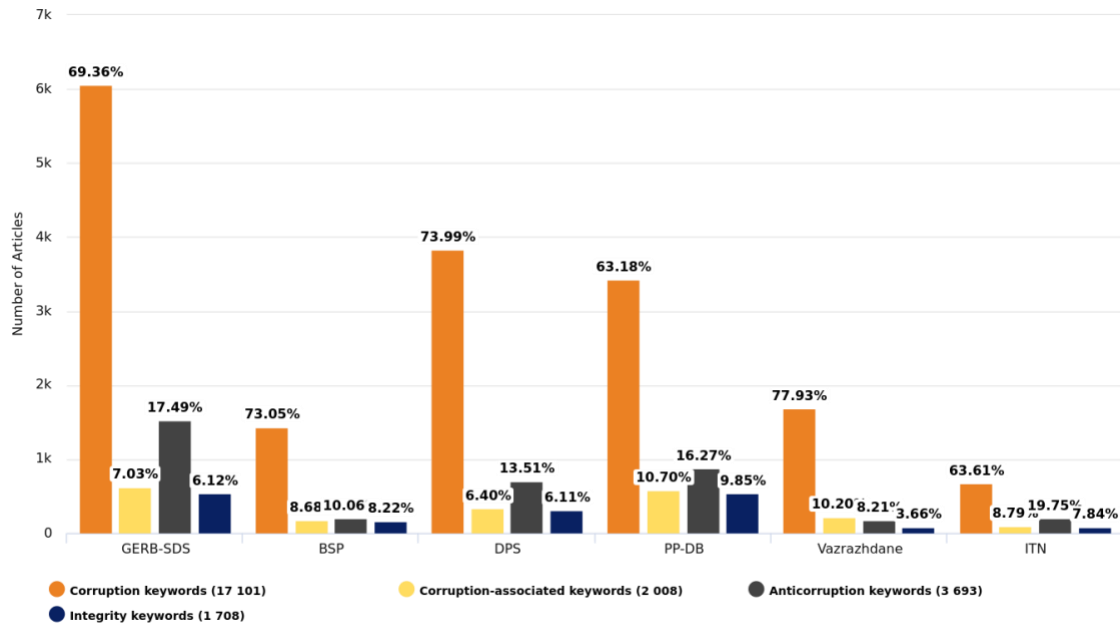## 6.3 Overview of political parties mentions in the four keyword sets

Table 24: The chart represents the volume distribution for each of the six parties and the share of their mentions in the context of the four keyword sets: corruption, corruption-associated keywords, anti-corruption, and integrity.

While online media outlets prefer vocabulary traditionally associated with crime, such as scheme, bribe, etc. (corruption-associated keywords), than using the word corruption directly, on Facebook it is visible that corruption was used way more frequently in comparison to the other keyword sets.

GERB-SDS led the conversation with the highest number of mentions across all keyword sets. The bulk of this attention came from posts/comments directly using the word corruption, hinting at ongoing controversies or scandals involving the party. DPS was frequently mentioned in the same context, with the pages of media outlets and users often linking the party's activities to those of GERB.

PP-DB ranked highest in terms of integrity mentions, as the party was frequently referred to in a sarcastic way as "people of integrity".

BSP, Vazrazhdane and ITN were mentioned less frequently in connection with the topics and did not stand out, as they were mainly referenced in passing within the context of those keywords.

Overall, the distribution across the keyword sets underscores a complex landscape, where mentions of corruption draw significant attention, while discussions on integrity and anti-corruption efforts are vital but less dominant.

6.3.1 Overview of the political parties mentions per post type in the context of corruption keywords

Table 25: The chart represents the volume distribution for each of the six parties and the share of their mentions in the context of the corruption coverage, broken down by post type: posts and comments.

The Facebook posts and comments related to the mentioned political parties exhibit varying degrees of engagement. In this regard, it is also important to consider the nature of posts versus comments. Posts by the parties themselves are controlled, exposing intentional communications, while comments are organic responses by the public, which can sometimes lead to viral trends, especially if the content is contentious or resonates deeply with the audience's values and concerns.

GERB-SDS received the highest number of comments regarding corruption, followed by DPS and then PP-DB. These three parties were prominently linked by users to allegations of support of corrupt practices. Meanwhile, BSP was cited for allegedly supporting corrupt practices, yet many users also characterised the party as being voiceless.

It should also be noted that Vazrazhdane received largely positive comments from users who asserted that the party was resistant to corruption or bribery. For its part, ITN faced allegations of passivity in addressing corruption issues.

6.3.2 Overview of the political parties mentions per post type in the context of corruption-associated keywords
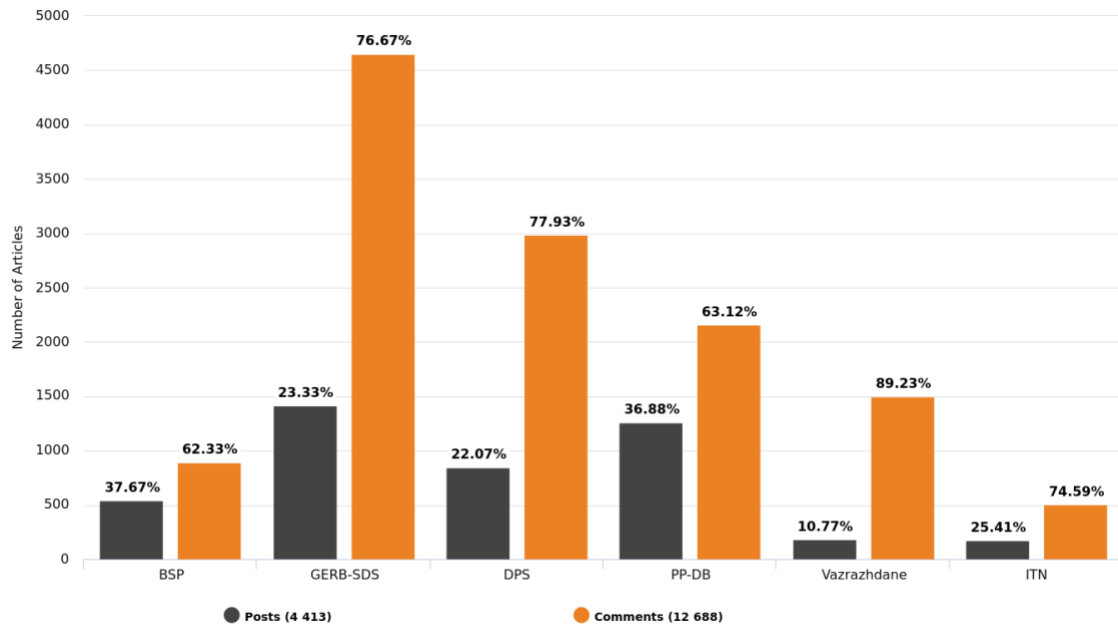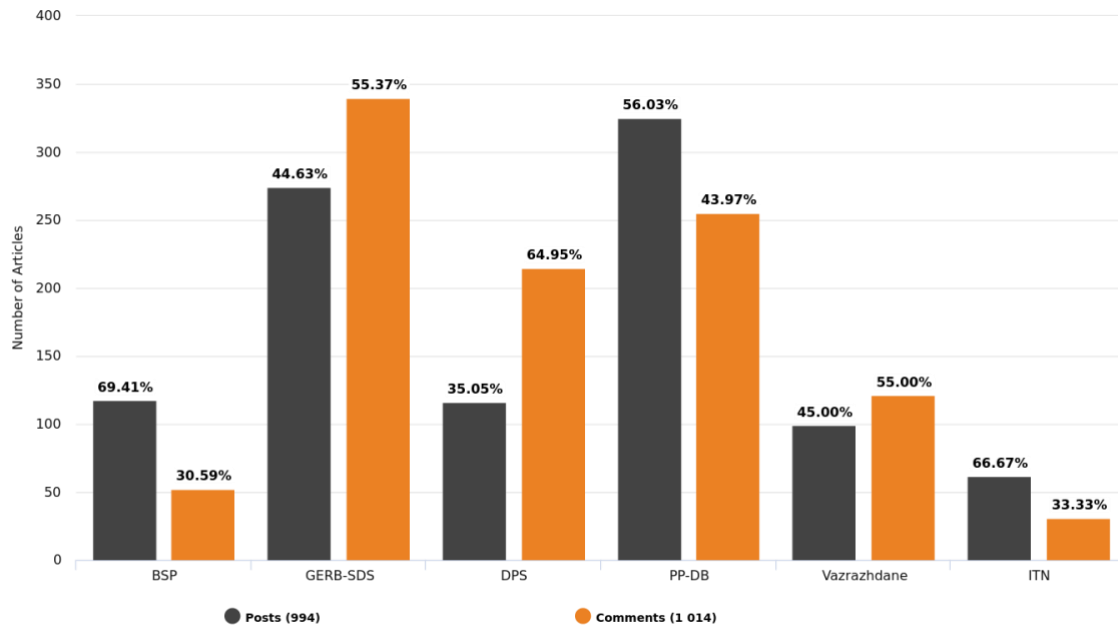

Table 26: The chart represents the volume distribution for each of the six parties and the share of their mentions in the context of the corruption-associated coverage, broken down by post type: posts and comments.

The results indicate varied levels of discourse and public engagement. GERB-SDS and PP-DB stood out with a significant number of both posts and comments, indicating their central role in the conversations associated with corruption.

For GERB-SDS, the comments outnumbered the posts. While the original posts referencing the GERB-SDS coalition featured a range of news from media outlet pages, the comments predominantly centred on the accusations against GERB-SDS for alleged involvement in corrupt practices like schemes and bribes.

PP-DB received more posts than comments, indicating proactive content sharing about the party. The original posts frequently spotlighted it in relation to corruption investigations, primarily by the BIRD's official investigative journalism page. Comments also tended to be highly critical, often linking the party with laziness and disinterest, with multiple identical comments from the same users appearing across different posts.

For its part, DPS was mostly mentioned in comments. While the original posts covered various news, especially regarding DPS MP Delyan Peevski's sanctions under the Magnitsky Act, the comments primarily criticised the party, linking it to corruption and claiming it originated from the communist security services.

BSP was mentioned in more posts than comments. This could imply that while the party is a frequent subject of original social media content, it does not incite as much reactive discussion. A significant portion of the original posts was published by the party and its official leaders, while comments largely revolved around the party's connection to the Russia-Ukraine war.

Vazrazhdane's Facebook presence within the context of the topic was relatively subdued compared to that of the other parties. Despite this, the engagement remained steady, with both posts and comments highlighting the party's involvement in arrests and perceived aggressive tactics.

ITN was last in terms of volume, with posts exceeding comments, indicating lower engagement with the party on the corruption-associated topic. Meanwhile, the discourse appeared to centre around topics such as election manipulations, aligning with the party's own statements on the matter.

6.3.3 Overview of the political parties mentions per post type in the context of anti-corruption keywords
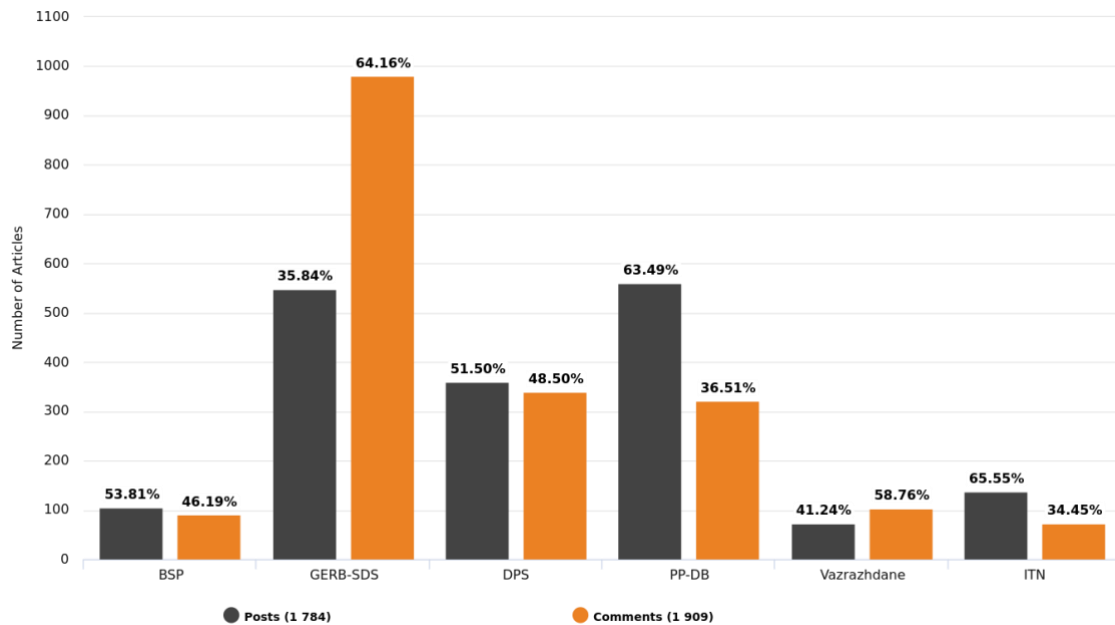

Table 27: The chart represents the volume distribution for each of the six parties and the share of their mentions in the context of the anti-corruption topic, broken down by post type: posts and comments.

GERB-SDS stood out, with the number of comments almost double that of posts. This notable level of engagement indicates that anti-corruption discussions linked to GERB-SDS managed to trigger substantial public discourse and debate, particularly concerning the party's position on judicial reforms in the country, with criticisms demonstrating GERB's lack of support.

Meanwhile, for PP-DB, posts outnumbered the comments. The former primarily emphasised anti-corruption measures and reforms, while the latter mainly criticised the party's handling of these issues.

DPS demonstrated a relatively equal distribution of posts and comments. They mostly revolved around criticisms directed at its MP Delyan Peevski concerning allegations of corruption within the context of the anti-corruption initiatives.

ITN's presence in the anti-corruption discourse on Facebook was more limited. The party was mentioned in the context of Slavi Trifonov, its leader, disclosing his assets to the Commission for Anti-corruption and Illegal Assets Forfeiture (Anti-Corruption Commission) for the first time.

The data for BSP reveals a slightly higher volume of posts relative to comments. BSP was often mentioned incidentally, except in repetitive comments associating BSP MP Elena Yoncheva with allegations of collaborating with the Russian secret services to undermine Bulgaria via EU legal channels, purportedly under the guise of anti-corruption efforts.

Last but not least, Vazrazhdane garnered more comments than posts, with the party frequently mentioned incidentally in discussions about anti-corruption, signalling a lack of confidence in its leader Kostadin Kostadinov.

6.3.4 Overview of the political parties mentions per post type in the context of integrity keywords
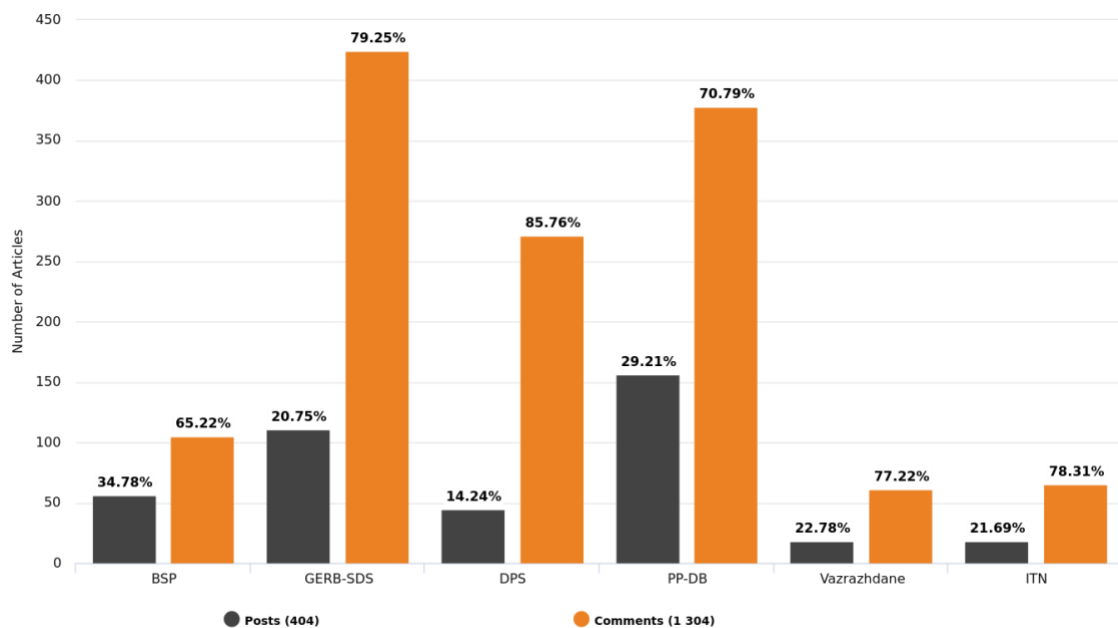

Table 28: The chart represents the volume distribution for each of the six parties and the share of their mentions in the context of the integrity coverage, broken down by post type: posts and comments.

Overall, the chart reveals a pattern of social media engagement where comments play a more significant role than original posts in shaping the way the political parties are perceived in the context of the topic. While PP-DB was a leader in terms of number of original posts that mentioned it in the context of integrity, the overwhelming number of comments, especially those sarcastically labelling the party as "people of integrity," indicates a critical sentiment among users.

In addition, despite appearing in a small number of posts, GERB-SDS received a substantial number of mentions in comments, largely portraying the party negatively in terms of integrity. Furthermore, BSP, DPS, Vazrazhdane and ITN all received greater attention through

comments rather than posts, with integrity being employed sarcastically, which shows widespread scepticism regarding the integrity of these political entities.

7 Top 20 corruption/anti-corruption narratives

7.1 The most prominent corruption narratives for the monitored period

Narrative	Volume (online)	Potential reach (online)	Volume (Facebook)	Potential reach (Facebook)
Bulgaria's Schengen bid	242,083	95,026,221	17,489	200,334,795
Lukoil	100,865	47,327,164	15,274	175,896,831
External influences on the judiciary system	72,227	34,157,133	6,253	68,090,258
Magnitsky and the UK Sanctions	38,209	21,069,579	19,119	243,985,578
Barcelonagate case	20,772	11,313,604	2,664	26,725,116
The scandal involving Daniel Lorer and Asen Vasilev	6,404	3,022,731	826	6,294,187
Gemcorp	3,894	2,274,714	829	9,618,200
Varna's Appellate Prosecutor investigated for bribery	3,261	1,776,341	142	1,215,332
Abuse of EU funds (yellow pavement scandal)	2,162	1,475,901	215	1,775,927
Corruption at the Kapitan Andreevo border facilities	2,128	2,525,272	364	3,461,838
Bulgaria's grey-listing by the Financial Action Task Force (FATF)	619	305,380	79	752,353

The analysis of the online and social media landscape revealed a distinct set of corruption-related narratives that garnered considerable attention, based on their large coverage and wide reach.

Two of the narratives in particular dominated the online discourse. The country's long-standing bid for the Schengen area remained a focal point, with coverage centred on Bulgaria's endeavours and the associated corruption concerns (BNT). Parallelly, the Lukoil case captured significant media interest, underscored by reports on Former Prime Minister Denkov addressing potential sanction evasion tactics by the oil company (BNR).

On the other hand, the most prominent narrative on Facebook was the Magnitsky and the UK sanctions, followed by the Schengen bid and the Lukoil case. This indicates that social media users primarily engaged with topics of international significance.

Another key narrative in both online and social media revolved around the external influences on the judiciary system, highlighted by the murder of Martin "The Notary" Bozhanov. This incident prompted renewed scrutiny over structural judicial issues (SEGA). Similarly, this narrative gained traction on Facebook, with many users associating the case with mafia and corruption.

Furthermore, in online media, as in Facebook, high-profile investigations such as the Gemcorp case stirred various reactions, especially following inquiries into a billion-dollar deal in January 2023 (Actualno). The Facebook page PIK played a prominent role by actively engaging with this subject.

Early 2023 saw a significant re-emergence of the Barcelonagate case (DARIK) in online media, with Former Chief Prosecutor Ivan Geshev probing into Former Prime Minister Boyko Borisov's alleged involvement in a money laundering scheme. However, despite this, not much content on the narrative was observed on Facebook, which suggests a lack of interest from users.

The Magnitsky sanctions (BTV) also stayed in focus both in online and social media, especially after the USA sanctioned five high-profile Bulgarians for corrupt activities.

While not in the lead, stories such as Bulgaria's grey-listing by the Financial Action Task Force (Eurocom) raised alarm over financial transparency issues, alongside the spotlight on corruption at the Kapitan Andreevo border. These narratives were hardly visible on the Facebook platform, which signals a serious lack of interest. Domestic scandals, such as the allegations of misused public funds involving parliamentarian Daniel Lorer and Finance Minister Asen Vasilev (Trud), as well as the yellow pavements scandal invoking public outrage over EU fund misuse (Mediapool), received only modest attention in both online and social media.

The coverage of the corruption-related narratives in Bulgarian online and social media illustrates the significance of corruption as a critical issue, with continued exposure of scandals across various domains. These narratives uncovered systemic concerns within the governmental, judiciary and law enforcement sectors. Collectively, they not only achieved impressive media coverage volume, but also reached extensive audiences, underscoring the gravity of corruption as a key societal issue.

Overall, there seems to be no clear correlation between the volume and potential reach of the narratives across online platforms and Facebook. While some of them gained significant traction online, they did not resonate as strongly with Facebook users, indicating differing levels of interest and engagement on each platform.

7.2 The most prominent anti-corruption narratives for the monitored period

Narrative	Volume (online)	Potential reach (online)	Volume (Facebook)	Potential reach (Facebook)
Dismissal of Chief Prosecutor Geshev	259,724	125,340,476	10,898	121,165,107
Constitutional reforms	93,460	52,226,592	7,943	75,226,361
Bulgaria's membership in OECD	27,291	11,326,856	225	1,522,465
The adoption of the new Anti-corruption Law	21,903	11,360,587	1,129	9,766,728
International Fair Plovdiv	12,833	10,023,738	954	8,465,980
The adoption of the Whistleblower Act	3,024	1,707,982	35	256,205
Regional Minister stopped BGN 4 billion orders	2,427	1,213,981	29	316,440
Visit by European Chief Prosecutor Laura Kovesi to Bulgaria	2,172	1,365,522	351	3,830,028
Cut of high salaries in state-owned companies	1,812	449,738	33	353,179
Lobbying regulation	211	375,554	81	750,230

The highlighted narratives summarise the key anti-corruption events in Bulgaria as emphasised by the Bulgarian media during the reviewed period.

Throughout 2023 and early 2024, Bulgaria sustained its anti-corruption momentum with several initiatives and reforms. The constitutional reforms (Capital), designed to dismantle entrenched corruption, and the enactment of a new anti-corruption law (Dnevnik) secured significant media coverage. However, the most prominent topic was the dismissal of Chief Prosecutor Ivan Geshev, a move perceived as critical to reinforcing the rule of law. His dismissal incited widespread media debate on governance accountability and transparency (NOVA), indicative of the critical role the Chief Prosecutor holds in legal oversight and justice. Subsequently, authorities introduced a mechanism aimed at investigating the Chief Prosecutor's conduct, reflecting a commitment to accountability and transparency within Bulgaria's legal system. This move came amidst both support and criticism from various political factions (BTV, NOVA). Additionally, the narratives related to these developments were actively discussed on Facebook, which further amplified the public discourse and engagement on issues of governance and justice.

Bulgaria's aspirations to join the OECD and the ongoing discussions regarding its potential accession were another subject of media attention (Vesti), signifying a dedication to bolstering governance frameworks in line with international standards. This was exemplified by the implementation of the whistleblower protection act (DARIK), which is often seen as integral to

enhancing transparency, accountability and integrity within a country's institutions, and thus aligns with the principles promoted by organisations like the OECD. However, these discussions were not as widely covered on Facebook, indicating a difference in the level of attention and engagement on social media platforms.

Various enforcement measures were also intensified to curb corrupt practices, as seen in the International Fair Plovdiv case, the halt of orders worth four billion leva by the Regional Minister, and the salary reductions for state-owned company executives. The investigation into Puldin Turinvest's acquisition of shares in the International Fair Plovdiv, following media allegations of legal infractions (Radio Free Europe), the cancellation of restrictive public tenders by the Road Infrastructure Agency (BTV) and the inspection into excessive remunerations in state enterprises (Dnevnik) all showcased a concerted government effort to ensure legal compliance and fiscal responsibility. However, while the Fair Plovdiv case received significant coverage on Facebook, the other measures were not widely covered on the platform, indicating a disparity in the dissemination of information and public engagement between traditional and social media.

For its part, European Chief Prosecutor Laura Kövesi's visit in November 2023 underscored Bulgaria's ongoing commitment to anti-corruption measures. Her discussions with Former Prime Minister Nikolay Denkov and Deputy Prime Minister Maria Gabriel focused on expanding the European Public Prosecutor's sanctions against Russia and on bolstering its Bulgarian office (BTV), a testament to the country's active engagement with European law enforcement bodies in the anti-corruption arena. However, these discussions were not extensively highlighted on Facebook, suggesting a moderate level of interest and engagement on the platform.

The efforts to establish a legal framework for lobbying in Bulgaria were discussed throughout the coverage period but received low coverage in both online media and Facebook. In November 2023, Former Justice Minister Atanas Slavov advanced these efforts by releasing the National Concept for Lobbying Regulation, which defined clear rules and accountability mechanisms and proposed the establishment of a Transparency Register, set to improve legislative transparency and prevent corruption (Lex News).

8 Conclusions

The analysis of corruption and anti-corruption narratives in Bulgarian online media and Facebook from January 2023 to February 2024 reveals significant trends and variations in media coverage and public engagement. Utilising Sensika's media monitoring platform, the research processed extensive volumes of content across the platforms, identifying both persistent and shifting patterns of media behaviour and audience response.

Unlike previous years, both the corruption and anti-corruption narratives received continued attention throughout the year, contrary to the earlier pattern of sharp but short-lived spikes in media focus. Moreover, Bulgarian media outlets still tend to avoid direct mention of corruption, often employing indirect language to discuss corrupt practices, with mushroom websites resorting to sensationalism.

In online media, legitimate media, mushroom websites, and media aggregators each played distinct roles in disseminating the content, with social media platforms, particularly Facebook, playing a crucial role in driving traffic to mushroom websites and media aggregators. Coordinated disinformation campaigns, often involving mushroom websites, aimed to disseminate biased or selective news.

Meanwhile, Facebook emerged as the predominant social media platform for news dissemination in Bulgaria, with heightened engagement observed in the context of corruption stories with international implications.

Some narratives that received extensive coverage in online media were less prominent on Facebook, pointing to the varying roles that the different platforms play in disseminating information and engaging the public. The level of engagement on Facebook, particularly the volume of comments relative to original posts, highlighted a community highly responsive to corruption-related developments.

This analysis highlights the complexity of media dynamics and public engagement in Bulgaria regarding corruption narratives, pointing out the important roles of the various media types in shaping public discourse and the nuanced ways in which the public interacts with these narratives.