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/ North Macedonia
CONTEXTUAL
ANALYSIS

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Executive Summary

In recent years North Macedonia has documented an increase in migrants using the country as a transit hub for onward travel into Western Europe. Since 2011, with the ongoing military conflicts in the Middle East, thousands of migrants have passed through the country with the aim of reaching other destination countries in Europe. In 2015, North Macedonia became one of a number of South Eastern European countries that would form the "Western Balkan Route", over which many migrants traveled onwards to the European Union. In that year, the UN Resident Coordinator's office reported an estimated 815,000 migrants who entered the country. In 2016, the EU-Turkey deal almost completely closed the Western Balkan Route, strongly limiting the number of migrants arriving in North Macedonia. Despite this, new arrivals increased in 2019, with a notable surge in 2020. It must be noted that not all migrants use the country for transit. In the period 2015 - 2020 the total number of foreigners who resided in North Macedonia totaled 63,584 persons, of which 58,756 had temporary residence and 4,828 foreign nationals had permanent residence.

The narratives on migration in North Macedonia are predominantly negative, with some notable exceptions. Public opinion on North Macedonia's perceived responsibility towards migrants to assist "those in need" generated varied responses. While half of the respondents (50%) believed that the country bears the responsibility to provide assistance, 42% maintained the viewpoint that such a responsibility does not rest with the nation. Several studies reported a rise in xenophobia, discriminatory treatment and hate speech against migrants since 2015. Among other things, this lead to aggressive campaigns, social media calls to expel migrants, and even proposed referendums opposing their acceptance and integration. Political reactions to integration strategies varied, with some municipalities expressing concerns about financial burdens and demographic changes. Some explicitly voiced their preference for North Macedonia to remain a transit country, rather than taking on responsibilities to house and integrate newcomers. Nonetheless, the NGO 'Legis' reports positive interactions between migrants and the local population, emphasizing the impact of volunteer efforts and support from citizens. It is concluded that a lack of knowledge and misinformation contributes to societal prejudices which are a barrier to integration. In order to combat this, awareness-raising activities among young people are identified as a particularly powerful tool. People's perceptions and attitudes can be changed if they are not subjected to misinformation and inciting political rhetoric.

In North Macedonia, the narratives on migration are predominantly shaped by media outlets, which are heavily influenced by political representatives. These representatives tend to publicly criticize actions taken by those institutions that are tasked with dealing with migration issues, leading to negative narratives. Another main source of migration narratives is social media, especially Facebook and X (formerly known as Twitter). Prevalent narratives on social media platforms include intolerance, racism, hate speech and other forms of hateful communication.

Furthermore, media reports on the Western Balkan Route, or on cases of criminal behavior by migrants, have a significant influence on public attitudes.

Some of the most common sub-narratives on migrants in North Macedonia include:

1. "Accepting migrants is a significant risk". This narrative emphasizes potential economic, security, and health risks associated with accepting migrants.
2. "Migrants and refugees are a potential danger to the local population", aimed at spreading xenophobia and opposition to the government.
3. "A new wave of migrants awaits us!" This narrative presents migration as a continuous imminent threat, and the government as incapable of dealing with the issue.
4. Conspirative hateful narratives toward migrants such as the alleged plan for the "Islamization of Macedonia," are occasionally used to justify protests, verbal attacks, and even physical force against migrants.
5. "Accepting migrants is servility to EU and NATO" is a narrative that opposes the unwanted influence of powerful political blocs on the country.

In contrast to these negative narratives, local institutions, as well as government officials, occasionally present counternarratives. In the case of migrants from Afghanistan in 2021, local institutions actively attempted to spread narratives that encourage tolerance, emphasizing that accepting refugees is safe. Security checks and protocols were highlighted to reassure the public.

When exploring the challenges of the media landscape in the context of migration narratives, the report first defines the responsibilities of the media toward society: To critically monitor developments in society through accurate, timely and responsible reporting that is always focused on protecting the public interest. One major threat to the media landscape is information warfare and threats posed by disinformation, including attacks on information systems. The spread of disinformation, especially in the context of politics, has become a conventionalized way of conducting political confrontations. Social media, as a key medium, plays a significant role in the dissemination of disinformation campaigns, leading to increased political polarization and societal divisions. These platforms, driven by algorithms, favor provocative and extremist content which often achieve higher user engagement, resulting in lies spreading faster than facts. In this environment, disinformation can easily spread. Disinformation can easily be inserted into existing narratives, making it hard to detect. One of the most damaging effects of disinformation is the formation of distrust in media and institutional systems.

In North Macedonia, social media has become a primary tool for political propaganda and manipulation. The lack of regulation and openness in these networks has facilitated various forms of manipulation, from coordinated dissemination of disinformation to polarization strategies. Due to low professional standards and media partisanship, disinformation on migrants has also circulated widely through traditional media in North Macedonia. Some of the manipulative strategies employed

by politically organized groups include dramatization, systematic dissemination of disinformation, and coordinated attacks on individuals and groups. These activities can have both commercial and political goals. Organized dissemination of disinformation can be recognized by rapid increases in frequency, repeated types of disinformation focused on key goals (intolerance, panic, and undermining institutions), and the escalation of polarization and crisis in society. Additionally, it delves into techniques like the creation of bots and fake profiles used for spreading online propaganda.

All of the above emphasizes the need for regulation, media literacy, and increased vigilance to counteract the harmful effects on societal trust and stability, and to facilitate fertile ground for awareness campaigns to harvest positive effects. The choses narrative frame to achieve this goal holds the form of an interactive video campaign. Recognizing that the country is both a transit and an origin country for migrants, the National Multidisciplinary Creative Group (NMCG) of North Macedonia came up with an interactive 3-minute animated story that covers these two realities simultaneously. One reality where the protagonist is a North Macedonian migrant in a Western European city, and a second reality where the protagonist is a non-European migrant in a North Macedonian city. Other than their origins, the rest of their story of struggle is identical, and they even rather look alike. The two protagonists also meet each other at the end of their stories, bringing their two stories neatly together. The interactive element is that the audience is able to switch between the two realities, inviting them to reflect on the similarities between "us" and "them", and on any stereotypes they may hold about especially the "other". The result is an edutainment campaign that effectively uses the identitarian contraposition of "us" versus "them" as a positive storytelling arc.

Introduction

North Macedonia is a signatory of the 1951 Convention concerning the Status of Refugees and its 1967 Protocol. Based on this Convention the country has developed procedures for determining who is a refugee among asylum applicants in North Macedonia. The Sector for Foreigners and Immigration Issues within the Ministry of Interior Affairs is responsible for migration issues in North Macedonia. This sector has two subsectors: Sector for Asylum and Migration and Sector for Border Affairs, Foreigners and Travel for Macedonian citizens. The Sector for Asylum and Migration is the administrative institution responsible for the asylum procedure (UNHCR). The Transit Center functions within the Sector for Foreigners and Immigration Issues (Bimbilovski, Daskalovski, Kostovska, & Risteska, 2007).

Regarding the legal framework, the Law for Foreigners was adopted on 23 March 2006 and promulgated on 21 May 2018 (Law on Foreigners, 2018). This Law is in compliance with EU standards as a request in the Stabilisation and Association Agreement. It regulates the conditions of entry, exit, stay, departure and return of foreigners, as well as their rights and obligations in the Republic of North Macedonia.

Another Law important in this context is the Law for Asylum and Temporary Protection adopted on 25 July 2003. This law regulates the status, rights and duties of refugees and asylum seekers and the status of persons protected by humanitarian law (Law on Asylum and Temporary Protection, 2003). On 4 April 2018 the law was renamed to the Law on International and Temporary Protection in order to incorporate the EU Directives on refugees and migrants.

In North Macedonia, so far, three Resolutions on migration policies have been adopted with relatively similar content according to the areas covered (visa regime; citizenship; legal migrations - emigration of North Macedonian citizens and immigration and employment of foreigners; asylum; integration of foreigners; illegal migration, migrant smuggling, trafficking in

human beings and readmission). Hence, the Resolution on the Migration Policy of the Republic of Macedonia 2009-2014 ("Official Gazette of the Republic of Macedonia" No. 6 from 15.01.2009); the Resolution on the Migration Policy of the Republic of Macedonia 2015-2020 ("Official Gazette of the Republic of Macedonia" No. 8 from 16.01.2015); and the Resolution on the Migration Policy of the Republic of North Macedonia 2021-2025 ("Official Gazette of the Republic of Macedonia" No. 98/19 from 09.03.2021).

The Crisis Management Center and other responsible institutions such as representatives of the Ministry of Interior (MOI), the Ministry of Labor and Social Policy (MLSP) and the Ministry of Health (MH) manage the reception-transit camps and reception centers. The so-called "migration crisis" in North Macedonia which escalated in the spring of 2015 found North Macedonia unprepared to accommodate

people for longer periods. Migrants taking the Balkan route entered North Macedonia from Greece on the southern border in Gevgelija. They generally continued their route to the northern border point in Tabanovce, where they enter into Serbia. North Macedonia has two camps, the Refugee Transit Centre (RTC) Vinojug in Gevgelija and the RTC Tabanovce, Kumanovo.

In recent years North Macedonia has documented an increase in migrants using the country as a corridor for onward travel into Western Europe. Since 2011, with the ongoing military conflicts in the Middle East, thousands of migrants have passed through the country with the aim of reaching other destination countries (commonly EU member states). In the period 2011-2013 the majority of migrants were older males, who were often emigrating with an economic incentive, with the aim of creating better conditions for other family members (SOP, 2015). However, this trend changed in 2014-2015, when the number of migrants under the age of 35 evidently increased, as well as the number of women and children, especially unaccompanied and separated children (SOP, 2015). Since September 2015, North Macedonia, jointly with Serbia, Croatia and Slovenia, became the Western Balkan route. Struggling to organize the increased influx of refugees and migrants, it caused problems of both a security and a humanitarian character. The migratory movements were largely transitory, with most migrants arriving from the main source country Greece and leaving North Macedonia after a couple of days. Greece is considered one of the transit countries for thousands of migrants who aim to reach Europe in search of security and better economic opportunities.

A large percentage of migrants belong to the most vulnerable categories. According to the statistics of the Ministry of the Interior for the period September 2015-February 2016, out of a total of 467,569 persons registered, 83,097

were women (2,956 were pregnant women, of which 11 gave birth in the Republic of North Macedonia) and 125,700 were minors (of which 36,136 were unaccompanied minors)(SOP, 2016).

On 1 July 2015, 778,768 refugees and migrants have departed from Gevgelija. The Ministry of Interior's statistics of North Macedonia reported that 477,856 migrants declared their intention to apply for asylum including 148,245 (31%) children, of whom 18,349 (4% of children) were registered as unaccompanied since 19 June 2015 until 7 March 2016. Of these 260,897 (55%) of the arrivals were Syrians, 122,289 (26%) Afghans, 73,329 (15%) Iraqis, and the remaining 21,441 (4%) represented other nationalities such as Iranians, Palestinians, Pakistanis, Somalis, Congolese and Bangladeshi. Women and children registered made up 49% of the refugee flow. The UN Resident Coordinator's office reported an estimated 815,000 migrants who entered the country in 2015. Approximate daily arrivals ranged between 10,000 in October and 5,000 in November (Šelo Šabić & Borić, 2016). The number of migrants considerably decreased in 2016 to 89,197 due to closing of the border between Greece and North Macedonia. As a result about 13,000 migrants stranded at the border. The same year Serbia closed its border with North Macedonia (The Borgen

Project, 2017). Regardless of the closed Balkan route as a result of EU-Turkey deal in March 2016, migrants are still seeking to use it undetected, although in lower numbers and by using more diversified routes (Rakočević, Krstović, Gligorović, & Koprivica, 2021). In December 2019, the number of new arrivals in North Macedonia was 40,955 mixed migration "new arrivals" which in comparison with the previous year increased with 126.4%. The percentage of unaccompanied children was low in 2019, only 0.07%. In 2020, Western and Central Mediterranean routes took over, with 2,689 new migrant entries officially registered (Rakočević, Krstović, Gligorović, & Koprivica, 2021). Regardless of stricter border controls and restricted movement for all due to COVID-19, in 2020, North Macedonia received 15,065 new migrants, mostly from Greece, and several pushbacks from Serbia were reported. Only 2% of new arrivals were children, 77% of whom were boys and 60% were children travelling alone (Balkans Migration and Displacement Hub, 2020). Adult new arrivals were predominantly men (95%). When analyzing the country of origin, most migrants originate from Pakistan (28%), Afghanistan (27%), Bangladesh (15%) and Syria (8%) (Balkans Migration and Displacement Hub, 2020).

According to the U.S. Department of State (2021) more than 28,000 persons transited North Macedonia in 2020, but neither UNHCR nor the International Organization for Migration (IOM) registered any hate crimes against them.

Adequate mechanisms were provided by authorities of North Macedonia to protect refugees, asylum seekers, migrants, and stateless persons from abuse. Standard operating procedures

(SOPs) were used to provide protection from gender-based violence (U.S. Department of State, 2021). UNHCR reported that strengthening the system is necessary to ensure universal and systematic application of the SOPs, particularly regarding case identification (U.S. Department of State, 2021).

In the period 2015-2020 the total number of foreigners who resided in the Republic of North Macedonia was 63,584 persons, of which 58,756 persons had regulated temporary residence and 4,828 persons had permanent residence (Government of the Republic of North Macedonia, 2021). In the period from 2015-2019 a total of 6,616 employed foreigners were registered in the country, out of which 6,415 (97.0%) had temporary residence and 201 persons (3.0%) had permanent residence. During this period 72 foreigners were registered as unemployed (of which 64 persons with regulated temporary residence and 8 persons with regulated permanent residence) (Government of the Republic of North Macedonia, 2021).

The integration process of foreigners occurs in three phases (Government of the Republic of North Macedonia, 2021, p.278):

• In the first phase, which is the period after the arrival of third-country nationals, the country allows them to be included in the existing system of national protection, which refers to access to health care services and the education system.

• The second phase is the developmental phase and aims to develop independence among third-country nationals in order to meet their needs for housing, employment, as well as vocational training and development.

• The third phase refers to the process of naturalization i.e., obtaining permanent residence in the country or obtaining citizenship which enables their full integration into the new society.

# /Chapter One

Migration narratives in North Macedonia

Solano and Huddleston (2020) argue that government policies influence the integration process of immigrants, how well immigrants and the public interact and think of each other. Based on their 130 scientific studies using MIPEX, integration policies are identified as one of the key factors shaping the public's willingness to accept and interact with immigrants as well as immigrants' own attitudes, belonging, participation and health in their country of settlement. As indicated by MIPEX indicators, little has changed in North Macedonia regarding integration policies of immigrants as they encounter more obstacles than opportunities for social integration in the country. North Macedonia scores 42 on the 100 point MIPEX scale, which is lower than the average country score of 49/100. Major obstacles emerge in the labor market, education, political participation, health, and access to citizenship (Solano & Huddleston, 2020). North Macedonia's approach to integration is classified by MIPEX as 'equality on paper' only, since immigrants enjoy basic rights and some security but not equal opportunities (Solano & Huddleston, 2020).

People are inclined to fear and discriminate against refugees and immigrants based on their prejudices imposed by the society as a result of a lack of adequate knowledge about refugees, or because they are not informed or misinformed about the real situation (Petroska Beška, 2018). Empirical results based on the project supported by the UNHCR office in Skopje and conducted by the Center for Human Rights and Conflict Resolution during 2016-2017, indicate that "working with young people on raising their awareness about refugees' needs and rights is a powerful tool for combating prejudices against refugees" (Petroska Beška, 2018, p.33). Results are based on the two day workshops organized with 124 participants (unemployed youth, university students and high-school students) where participants were involved in interactive activities concerning issues on forced migration, cultural diversity, stereotypes, prejudices and discrimination, human rights in general and in relation to refugees in particular. A questionnaire measuring the participants' level of prejudice towards refugees were first administered before the workshop started

(pretest condition) and repeated after the workshop ended (posttest condition). Results suggest that participants had neutral attitudes towards refugees and felt socially distant from them and prejudices against refugees appeared lower after implementation of the awareness raising activities compared before that. What was noted in this study is that the attitude toward the perception of seeing refugees as dangerous ('dangerous people hide among the refugees') was the most negative attitude of participants and did not change a lot in the posttest condition (Petroska Beška, 2018).

A project of IRI (2015) investigated the perception of citizens of North Macedonia on how the government was handling the refugee crisis in 2015. Based on the results (Figure 1) most of the respondents (34%) felt that the government was providing sufficient support to refugees.

Figure 1. Given its capacities, how do you feel the Macedonian government is handling the current refugee crisis?
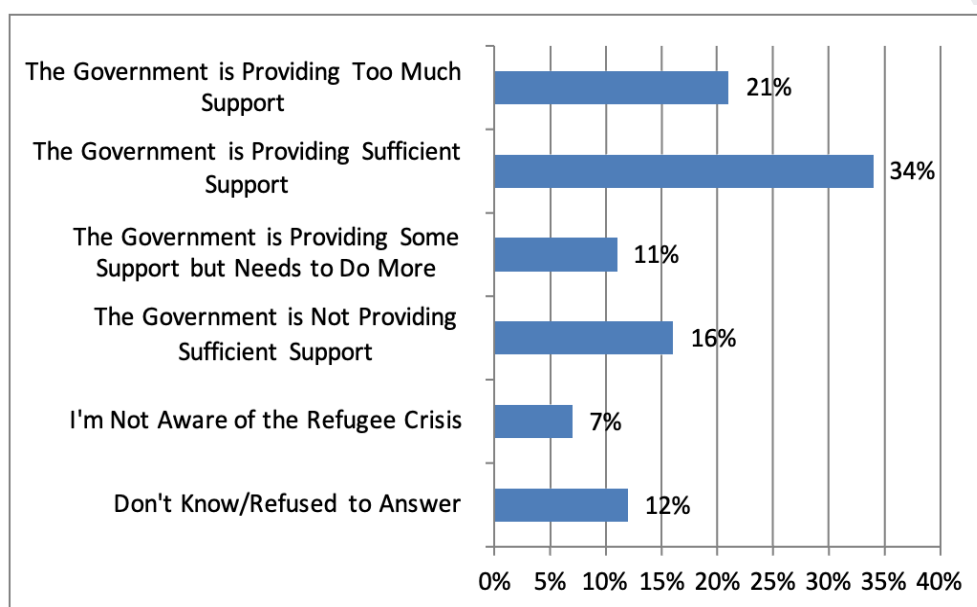
Source: IRI, 2015.

Whereas in the question: "In your opinion, how is the EU's handling of the refugee crisis affecting Macedonia?" most of the respondents (46%) answered 'negatively', 21 % answered 'it has no effect' and only 16% answered positively. The remaining 17% refused to answer or answered 'don't know' (IRI, 2015).

The report "Help on the Route" indicates that the number of cases of xenophobia and hate speech directed at migrants has increased. "In North Macedonia, a wide public debate opened in which the right-wing parties stressed that North Macedonia should not accept migrants on its territory. There were calls on social media to expel migrants from the country, framing the migrants as terrorists who would

threaten the country and the safety of the population. The negative campaign was so aggressive that there were initiatives to hold a referendum that would say NO to the acceptance and integration of migrants. Seventeen municipalities have announced that they will hold a referendum on the same day as well as the local elections, which were then cancelled by order of the State Election Commission" (Ana and Vlade Divac, 2019, p. 5).

A later poll in 2020 of IRI analyzing the opinion of North Macedonian's about refugees and migrants reveal the following results (IRI, 2020):

• Our country has a responsibility to help those in need by taking in refugees and migrants, regardless of the costs in financial, social, and security realms (10%).
• Our country has a responsibility to help those in need by taking in refugees and migrants, but only after certain steps have been taken to ensure that they will not place excessive financial, social, or security burden on our country (40%).
• Our country does not have a responsibility to help those in need by taking in refugees and migrants (42%).
• Don't know/Refused (8%).

The NGO 'Legis' in North Macedonia provides humanitarian aid and assistance to refugees, asylum seekers, internally displaced persons, irregular and detained migrants and people in need. In their website, [1]Legis report migrant and volunteering stories and they all shared good experiences in North Macedonia referring to the interaction with volunteers, NGOs and sometimes with citizens of North Macedonia. For example, Ibrahim Mardini, a 25 years old Syrian reported: "I couldn't stay in Macedonia because it has limited possibilities, that is, if 40% of the Macedonians are unemployed, it would be very difficult for a refugee who doesn't even speak the language to get a job under such harsh conditions even for Macedonians themselves. But I liked Macedonia, I liked the people in Macedonia. We became friends and they helped us a lot. When I arrived in Gevgelija, Macedonians were initially afraid of us and didn't want to be friends. But then we got to know each other better, they realized that we're not terrorists as the media presents us and that we're ordinary people. Thus, they grew to love us and some even cried when we were leaving Macedonia" (Legis, 2018).

According to an analysis by Cvetanovska (2020), discriminatory treatment, xenophobic and racist attitudes and statements, as well as the intense spread of hate speech against refugees and migrants was observed in North Macedonia with the beginning of the high influx of migrants in 2015. Refugees, migrants and asylum seekers were often victims of hate crimes. The discussions on the Strategy for 2017-2027, which succeeds the Strategy for the Integration of Refugees and Foreigners and the National Action Plan from 2008-2015, increased xenophobia and the spread of hate speech against migrants in North Macedonia (Cvetanovska, 2020). Politically motivated assaults against government officials for planning

1 Migrant Stories – Legis.mk

mass settlement of refugees and migrants were not excluded. Few municipalities submitted their opinion on the Strategy to the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy and the rational of most of municipalities were on the line of xenophobia. Most of them had negative attitudes about the proposal and stated, for example, that North Macedonia should remain a transit country for migrants and that municipalities do not have the spatial, financial and infrastructural conditions to respond to the measures foreseen by the Strategy (Cvetanovska, 2020).

In the opinion of the Municipality of Novo Selo, among other things, it is stated that with this Strategy the state will be unnecessarily burdened financially and the demographic picture would be permanently disturbed, taking into account that "in the municipality of Novo Selo,

99.9 percent of the Macedonian population with Orthodox religion lives." At the same time, the municipalities announced referenda for the citizens to express themselves on this issue. The municipalities of Demir Kapija, Kriva Palanka, Prilep and Gazi Baba stated that accepting refugees and foreigners in North Macedonia "will destabilize the region and the country as a whole". To the criticism directed at the Strategy, the Government replied that the document is an international obligation of North Macedonia and it does not mean at all that it will lead to the influx of migrants to the country, or to the construction of homes for them (Cvetanovska, 2020). During that period, a civil movement "Budenje" appeared, which collected signatures against "the settlement of migrants in Macedonia", spreading messages like "migrants will be thrown away in your, our neighborhood, they will go to school with our children, they will they take your job, the immigration of migrants also means increase in the rate of crime and violence" etc. (Cvetanovska, 2020, p.23).

In August 2017, Gallup International published an index for acceptance of migrants where it was determined that North Macedonia is the country least willing to accept migrants. The country has the lowest rating -1.47, followed by Montenegro, Hungary, Serbia, Slovakia and several other European countries (Cvetanovska, 2020).
Based on the above evidence, the perception of migrants in North Macedonia has not changed a lot over years, however perception and attitudes can be changed if citizens are not misinformed and deliberately incited against migrants, in most cases for political purposes.

/Chapter Two

2.1. Shaping the narratives on migration

The key narratives about migrants, since the high influx of migrants took place back in 2015, are mainly shaped by the media outlets and the political representatives, who are dominant sources for the media reports. In these reports we can distinguish two sides: the institutions responsible for dealing with migration issues, and on the other hand the political parties' representatives who often engage in criticizing institutional actions about the issues related to migration. The second main source, which serves as generator of key narratives on migrants, is social media, for North Macedonia mostly from Facebook and X (formerly known as Twitter). The issues of migrants are often "hot topic" on these platforms and very frequently include intolerance, racism, hate speech and other forms of hateful communication. The reports on the so-called Balkan route for migrants, that include, besides North Macedonia, Greece, Serbia, Croatia and Hungary, also has significant outside influence on the most dominant attitudes and approaches to the issue of narratives in the country. The treatment of migrants and the reported cases, sometimes incriminating migrants for various cases of physical assaults, thefts, sexual harassment, etcetera, have a strong influence on the general atmosphere and the perception of migrants and the migrant issue in North Macedonia.

2.2. The most common sub-narratives -"Accepting migrants is a significant risk"

The media often emphasize the potential risks of accepting migrants in the country, even in transit. Around this spread believe, the narrative is developed that accepting migrants carries economic costs as well as security and health risks in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic of 2020. This narrative can be mostly registered in a politically biased media that aims to use this issue to attack political opponents who present more tolerable discourses in public. The rest of the media and political entities devote much less space for such messages. Often articles are published and shared on social media with statements by politicians and officials from other countries (Serbia, Slovenia, Greece, Hungary, Bulgaria) who oppose the reception of migrants or refugees, such was the case of the relocation of Afghan refugees in August and September 2021.

The politically biased media regularly broadcast the statements of senior representatives of the parties who oppose the acceptance of migrants or the

refugees from Afghanistan, "The government is a threat with this move for democracy in Macedonia, the government does not care at all what the citizens think about bringing hundreds of Afghans[2]".

Also, the increased influx of migrants during 2015 and in 2021 were used by the media for additional dramatization and strengthening of the feeling of uncertainty and fear among the citizens ("The number is only growing: Macedonia will receive 780 Afghans", "Does Macedonia have the capacity for security checks of refugees?"). These media also published unconfirmed information and speculations about how many and where the evacuated civilians from Afghanistan will be accommodated ("30-50 Afghan refugees are waiting for a flight from Berlin to Skopje at any moment, hoteliers from Ohrid are ready to welcome them", "Afghans are landing tonight in Skopje", information later confirmed as incorrect).

Complementary to the news from the country, these media also published information that further strengthened citizens' fears about potential security risks, such as, for example, that terrorists will arrive among the migrants ("A person from the black list flew from Afghanistan to Britain").

"Migrants and refugees are a potential danger to the local population"

During the last two years protests were held by residents of a local Bardovci settlement in Skopje, where the construction of a center for foreigners is planned. These protests are related to the acceptance of migrants in general but were most frequent during the action of relocation of refugees from Afghanistan in September 2021. During these gatherings, migrants and refugees are not mentioned directly. However, the monitoring of these protests by part of the media, as well as live reports, confirmed numerous attempts to spread the xenophobic atmosphere in the country and to use these protests to strengthen the narrative that "for the citizens, new groups of migrants and refugees are not welcomed, while the government, by accepting them, is working against the will of the people." In the statements of the participants of these protests, the messages were emphasized that for the citizens, migrants and refugees represent a potential threat.

These types of reactions and public gatherings reiterated during the temporary transit of the Jewish religious group Lev Tahor in February 2022. First the local population in Kumanovo reacted by verbally assaulting their members who rented local houses for temporary stay.

The eviction of the religious group from Kumanovo took place because of the avalanche of negative reactions and hate speech on social media, as well as the gathering of citizens in front of their house and throwing eggs and stones, because of which their safety was threatened and they had to be guarded by the police[3].

2 Vlado Misajlovski, September, 2021.

3 "The jewish religious group transferred to Skopje with police security because the Kumanovo residents threw at them eggs and stones", source https://sdk.mk/index.php/dopisna-mrezha/evrejskata-verska-grupa-prefrlena-vo-skopje-so-politsisko-obezbeduvane-oti-kumanovtsi-gi-gagale-so-jajtsa-i-kamena/

The reaction from the Ministry of Interior quoted that: "These persons respect the laws of the Republic of North Macedonia, are fully legally residing in the country here, and temporarily stay in our country. The mentioned group does not pose any danger and we appeal for tolerance and solidarity towards them".

"A new wave of migrants awaits us!"

Presenting migrants as a continuous imminent threat is a very common sub-narratives in the local and regional media. Users on social media often share these publications and develop polarized debates on online platforms, thus significantly affecting the negative public perception on these issues. Political representatives are usually trying to find some sort of "understanding" for this type of moral panicking, stating their support for the local population and giving promises to protect them. The sub-narrative evolves constantly and is addressing the ever-present threat of a new influx of migrants is coming into the country. Part of the media focuses on various political and professional sources with queries whether the institutions are ready to deal with new arrivals of migrants The country is rapidly preparing for a possible new influx of asylum seekers. Both in 2015 and 2021, when an increased number of migrants and asylum seekers were expected, the media tried to polarize the citizens by spreading mainly unverified reports that the country is not ready to deal with a high influx of migrants, with critical tones towards the institutions, emphasizing its alleged disorganization, "Macedonia is yet to develop a strategy and plan for refugees from Afghanistan[4]".

Some local media combined various mentioned narratives with the already established method by speculating on the uncertain number of migrants expected. With such techniques of combining information and speculation, these media fueled the fear for potentially incoming migrants.

Conspirative hateful narratives towards migrants

The registered narratives against the migrants occasionally involve use of conspiracy theories to justify protests, verbal attacks and the use of physical force. One of the most frequent conspiracy theories is the alleged plan for the "Islamisation of Macedonia".

On August 23, 2021, Republika portal published a short article under the title: "Abdullah and Marko, good colleagues: Soros with billboards around Belgrade convinces Serbia how good it is to receive refugees from Afghanistan", which also carried the front page of Srpski Telegraf from 21 August 2021. According to this text, George Soros' foundation is financing billboards around Belgrade ostensibly to convince the citizens of Serbia that it is good to accept asylum seekers from Afghanistan, as North Macedonia and Albania have done, although the Serbian authorities are adamant that they will not allow their territory to have asylum seekers from Afghanistan.

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4 Alpha TV, September 2021.

It is a propagandist narrative which implies that George Soros is an "evil billionaire who creates hell in the countries of the region and pushes Afghans into Serbia".

On August 28, 2021, Republika portal published an article reporting on the reception of Afghan civilians in the Republic of Albania, some of whom worked in the "Soros organizations". Republika, later continued its negative narrative about George Soros and his foundation, portraying it to its audience as a powerful and influential organization under the protection of the United States.
-"Accepting migrants is servility to EU and NATO"

On 24 September 2021 during the conference organized by the "Global Initiative against Organized Crime", in Skopje, local media widely reported the statements of one of the participants that the entire operation to evacuate civilians from Afghanistan in 2021 is "servility to NATO". Other online media cited this report and it gained significant traction on social media. Often this widespread narrative changes its form, and key stakeholders who allegedly control North Macedonia. Sometimes it is EU, sometimes USA, or Germany, and sometimes some other internationally influential sides.
This narrative dominated the online discussions and tended to challenge the government's narrative that the reception of refugees was a humanitarian operation. The wider background of this particular narrative variations is the opposition to some recent political events, such as the signing of the Prespa agreement between North Macedonia and Greece on the change of the name of the country.

"Cases of institutional counternarratives: "Accepting refugees is safe"

In the case of the transit migrants from Afghanistan in 2021, the local institutions were frequently present in the media and in the public discourses with their attempts to create counter narratives that would encourage tolerance for the incoming foreign citizens. This example shows the capability of the institutions to counter narratives encouraging intolerance when addressed in joint coordination and channeled properly.

One of the key counter-narratives in that context was that "accepting refugees is safe". The media reported the statements of the Minister of Interior: "Our priority is the safety of the citizens, the Afghans will not cause any problem", as well as the Prime Minister stating that the accepted refugees will have a temporary stay and one part of the procedure to issue a temporary residence permit is to perform a security check through the National Security Agency".

This narrative was reinforced in 2021 by President Stevo Pendarovski, statements on September 13, 2021:

"Refugees have passed security checks - special protocols for the stay of refugees have been drawn up: Competent ministers and representatives of the institutions informed that all the necessary security checks have been made and for which the security protocols for their stay in the country have been designed".

Concerning frequent reports about migrants entering the country, state institutions, mainly led by the Ministry of Interior, regularly connect the arrival of migrants to criminal groups or individuals who are trying to profit from them by offering them transport or residence. the key narrative approach by the institutions is that they are protecting the country from the migrant' "threat" by efficiently dealing with criminal elements that help them use the country for transit.

/Chapter Three

3.1. Information warfare

The media has very high responsibility in society in crisis situations and must focus more on their work in line of the public interest. This should be done through accurate, timely and responsible reporting and information dissemination. The media should continue to critically monitor developments in the society and in crisis situations, with a key focus on their work on the protection of the public interest.
In the declarations of the last few NATO summits, especially after the NATO summit in Lisbon in 2010, a longer list of conclusions on cyber-security were published, along with the other key conclusions typically present in the NATO reports. Conclusions on cyber-security are now a regular and integral part of NATO reports and analysis on security issues. Security in cyberspace today is becoming an integral part of the security of states. The definition of the relatively new "cyber threats and attacks" and the strategic planning for protection against them have expanded the space of military-security action from land, sea and air, now into cyberspace. This includes online networks, virtual space of new communication technologies, and popular digital platforms.

Security threats in relation to new communication technologies include various types of attacks targeting the information systems of different states, unions, institutions, companies or other organizations. They can be realized through the transmission of computer viruses, or the so- called "malware", into a system, through data theft, "phishing" attacks, destroying devices, blocking or taking over websites, and various other operations with serious consequences for the infrastructure of countries.

The second key front in the information warfare, as defined above, is the spread of disinformation. Various types of attacks through information systems in many countries have gradually included politics, so that online warfare has become a common, or conventionalized, way of conducting political confrontations. Political parties' members, activists and supporters, in parallel with public political competition, develop various covert or semi-covert ways of political battle including hate speech campaigns directed at individuals or groups, political mobilization for protests or other events, discrediting opponents, disinformation and fake news, as well as other controversial activities, mainly using popular social media.

Marshall McLuhan, one of the leading media theorists, says that "the medium is the message", that is, the medium itself greatly influences what content is circulated and disseminated through that medium. In that sense, the social network is a media platform that favors the so- called interactive content, that is, content that causes a strong involvement and interaction with the content and other users (so-called engagement). Social media encourage interactivity and inclusion, and often cause addiction. As such, the content that results in the biggest engagement is the content that is aimed at our core urges, fears and passions. Certain provoking content or an extremist message has far more potential for "engagement" than some useful cake recipe. Exactly this content is then favored by the social networking algorithms and more often displayed on the users' profiles. While they often encourage such irritating content, it has been proven that they disseminate more easily through social media, especially Facebook and X. Lies travel a lot faster through online channels than facts.

According to a 2020 Oxford University study[5], the presence of disinformation manipulation has been proven in 81 countries around the world. In these countries, the activities of at least one political party or organization that uses social media to manipulate public opinion has been confirmed. In most cases, there are confirmed reports of organized spreading of disinformation during elections or creating crises in sensitive political periods or on sensitive topics, like migration. The mentioned research also uses the term "cyber troops" to name political online groups, which more closely depicts the nature of these operations, and their not only politicization, but also militarization of the internet and social media.

Disinformation can be inserted into a certain narrative, makes it easier to be accepted as believable information. Media information usually fits into political and journalistic narratives, and they are predetermined by ideological, cultural, economic, , religious and other factors and interests. Disinformation is much easier to insert when the news fits into a certain extended narrative.

For example, information on a criminal case involving migrants will receive a different meaning and interpretation depending on which narrative the reader is inclined to:
a) Migrants are bad for our society
b) Migrants are good for our society
c) Migrants are neither bad nor good for our society, i.e. it depends on a particular case.

Depending on which narrative the reader is inclined to, the case can be interpreted as a case that reflects the criminal motives of migrants as a whole or as an isolated criminal case. In order to fit in with the narrative, information can be easily twisted, or disinformation based on fabrications, assumptions or speculations can be inserted into the narrative. In such cases, the established narrative used by the media can serve as an umbrella that covers disinformation and gives it a constructed context and reliability.

5 Source: https://demtech.oii.ox.ac.uk/research/posts/industrialized-disinformation/#continue

The entire narrative can be reduced to one word, that is, by appropriate nominalization, to strengthen the narrative and the attitudes that it implies. In the aforementioned case, the exclusive use of the term migrant, in spite of the exclusive use of the term refugee, in the presence of (economic) migrants and (war) refugees, or (political) asylum seekers, directly establishes and strengthens the narrative. Also, the narrative determines the other language forms, therefore, depending on the negative, the neutral or the positive narrative, he media reports separately that the police; a) has caught migrants; or b) has found migrants/refugees.

One of the most damaging effects of disinformation, propaganda, and fake news campaigns, is the creation of mistrust in the media and the institutions of the system. It is widespread in almost all social spheres and may refer not only to the media and journalists, but also to the political parties, institutions, experts, NGOs and, ultimately, the distrust of all information. This effect of extreme skepticism and broad distrust can have extremely detrimental consequences for society and its normal functioning.

3.2. The case of North Macedonia

North Macedonia is a good example of how media that evolves without protective oversight can become a tool with numerous harmful consequences. Social media, as well as many traditional and new media before them, went through the three phases:

(a)   Popularization,

(b)   Commercialization

(c)   Politicization.

As their influence grew significantly and the influence of television and the press began to decline, the lack of regulation and the openness of these networks was quickly used for political propaganda and for various forms of manipulation. From a secondary platform for re-publishing content aimed for television programs, they are now used as the primary place to run the dirty part of the political activities and campaigns. Various techniques of coordinated dissemination of misinformation for propaganda purposes, running black campaigns, spreading appropriate political narratives, pressures on individuals and groups, as well as many other manipulative activities, have completely shifted to social media. The almost non-existent individual and legal responsibility is driving these networks to continue to be more abused than used for positive and open communication.

Social media are also often used to test certain provocative or extremist-nationalist narratives in order to examine public responses, or indirectly to achieve certain political effects through anonymous indirect or so-called "proxy supporters". In any

case, they prove to be powerful tools for political propaganda, and this efficiency motivates both big political parties and smaller groups to "innovate" and test different manipulation techniques, which is a worrying process.

In the case of North Macedonia, the use of disinformation to polarize political and interethnic relations has had a central role. The spread of disinformation is spread on several levels, and due to the low media literacy, hyper-fragmentation of the media and the drastic fall of journalistic standards, they have found fertile ground and proved to be a very effective means of intergovernmental polarization. The main platform for disinformation has been the online media, but due to the low professional standards and media partisanship, many of them circulated also through the electronic and print media as well.

Some of the key communication strategies, including the abuse of new technologies, are focused on maximizing the effects of the following manipulative approaches, widely used in the context of propaganda against migrants:

a) Dramatization and irresponsible scaremongering

The media are aware that disturbing news causes anxiety and is the type of content that receives the most views and clicks. Even in regular circumstances journalists often use tricks to dramatize the news (so-called scaremongering) in order to incite fear and increase attention and reactions by the audience. Topics such as the pandemic and the coronavirus are a clickbait goldmine for the media. These cases show high ethical irresponsibility of journalists and the media, who sacrifice the public order and interest for their personal gains. One of the consequences of such irresponsible coverage was the panic caused by the expected arrival of migrants from the Middle East.

b) Systematic dissemination of disinformation

A much more serious problem than the previous type is organized disinformation campaigning. Such campaigns are often overlapping with the first type and in the confusion they spread they are often mistaken for individual irresponsibility or isolated incidents.

According to research analyses, reviews of local media monitoring and fact-checking services, the main purposes of using disinformation are:

- Increasing the political and civic polarization. The topic of migrants is included in these polarization activities.

- Increasing the ethnic/inter-religious tensions, as well as inter-racial relations.

- Strengthening nationalist-patriotic activities and their support

- Disputing the pro-western orientation of the country

- Disputing the Prespa Agreement and undermining its support

- Disruption of the local media ecosystem and disruption of professional journalism

- Promotion of pseudo-science, superstitions and conspiracy theories.

The most commonly used methods for achieving these goals include mobilizing local groups and organized supporters through the use of:

- Creating "online groups" or units at the level of local parties or organizations and coordinating their activities on popular social networks. Their key purpose is to reinforce certain propaganda through coordinated sharing and dissemination, as well as taking control of social media discussions. Spread of planned disinformation is usually done through mass publishing, sharing, liking, commenting, linking and so on. They can create false popularity, virality, hysteria or moral panic. Optionally, advertising opportunities are also used to boost message dissemination. The ultimate goal is to somehow "hack" the algorithms used by the social networks and news aggregators and other content through organized publishing and sharing.

- Coordinating attacks on individuals and groups, as well as creating content aimed at defocusing from other topics or problems. Planned and systematic attacks on individuals or smaller groups are carried out by mockery or 'trolling', direct attacks through hate speech or other types of verbal attacks and pressures. Their purpose is to eliminate opposing or alternative narratives and attitudes from those they represent and defend. Various means from the local colloquial inventory are used for this purpose, which are often reduced to hate speech and vulgar verbal assault.

- Creating bots, i.e. fake profiles, orders, and accounts for spreading and disseminating online propaganda. False profiles can be controlled by a human actor or be fully automated.

- Techniques of creating and distributing "fake news" by publishing completely fake content (text, photos, videos) and distributing them online, or manipulating existing events supplemented by disinformation.

- Targeted propaganda, i.e. the use of processed data from social media or official documents to individuals, groups and institutions, which may be framed, decontextualized or manipulated in a variety of other ways.

Unfortunately, in the case of North Macedonia, it has been confirmed that the internet and social media are great platforms used to inform, but they're even better disinformation tools.

The main activities of politically organized groups are the amplification of certain

propaganda content through planned dissemination, which is usually carried out through mass publication, sharing, "liking", commenting, linking, etc. In this way, fabricating viral content, creating moral panic or feelings of fear. The issues of migrants and refugees, especially from the Middle East and North Africa, were in the focus of these actions. This kind of organized activities on social media often manages to "hack" the algorithms used by social media and news aggregators in order to increase the audience reach.

Organized campaigns of attacks on individuals or groups are also a frequent activity on social media for political and ideological purposes. These activities are not intended to be in the headlines of the mainstream media, but in a covert form for the public to put pressure on groups or individuals. Organized group attacks are carried out through mockery, insults, verbal attacks in the form of hate speech or other types of attacks and pressures. Their goal is to eliminate opposing or different narratives and views from those that these users represent. For these purposes, data from social media or official documents are often used, which can be framed, decontextualized or manipulated in various ways ("photoshopped" materials, edited videos, created memes, messages taken out of context, etc.). In the case of North Macedonia, these types of activities were often used to target not only migrants, but also civic activists who are working publicly in the field of human rights and protection of the rights of migrants and refugees.

How can we identify when the spread of panic and disinformation is organized?

- One of the most reliable indicators for this is their rapid increase. When the number and volume of disinformation grows quickly, and so does their effect, it is more than certain that such frequency has more than spontaneous spread of speculation and rumors behind it.

- Types of disinformation that are repeated. Although their numbers may be extremely high, they are essentially focused on several key types: increasing intolerance in society, spreading panic and undermining institutions. This is their primary goal, and when the disinformation effect is exactly in these forms, it is very likely that this is not a coincidence and that the system is under coordinated attack.

- Escalation of the polarization and crisis. Disinformation campaigns with their frequency, coordination and continuousness aim to increase divisions in the society and create conflict. Crises are possible in all societies, but when the media are in the center of the crisis, such cases are under reasonable suspicion that they are driven by organized disinformation campaigns.

Among other frequent techniques of direct or covert political activities on the internet, we can add the widespread creation of "bots", i.e. fake profiles or accounts created to spread online propaganda. Fake profiles can be controlled by a person or can be fully automated.

/Chapter four

Edutainment campaign prototype

Based on the findings of the contextual analysis, the National Multidisciplinary Creative Group (NMCG) of North Macedonia developed a prototype for an edutainment campaign that aims to influence attitudes toward migrants and migration in North Macedonia. The campaign aims to spread the message that "we are all part of a social and relational identity" [6], naturally mixed together, moving beyond the defensive identitarian contraposition of "us vs them". This concept of identity intends to communicate an idea of more cohesive communities, where everyone can feel welcome.

Although North Macedonia is generally not a country of destination for migrants crossing its borders, anti-migrant prejudices prevail that unfortunately result in abuses, inhuman treatment, and in verbal and physical violence fueled by chauvinism and xenophobia. Migrants are perceived as "others" who are a threat to our peace and well-being (e.g., others as terrorists or criminals), but also to our national identity (e.g., others as Muslims with large families). On the other hand, the domestic population of North Macedonia, pressured by economic uncertainty and distrust in the institutions due to ubiquitous corruption, steadily emigrates, be it temporarily or permanently, to the countries of the global West and North. There, it is the North Macedonians who are the others and who are perceived as those who come to take their jobs, who are working for lower wages and salaries, and those who exploit their social services, paid for by their tax money. It is this dual reality that this prototype wants to exploit.

In a 3-minute animated interactive video in which the above construed two realities are presented at the same time, and the viewer has the opportunity to change between them at any time by simply clicking on the screen. The objective is for the audience to attain self-recognition in the migrant stereotype. The idea is for the video to encourage compassion by confronting one's own stereotypes and internalized negative feelings towards others (e.g., those who come to take something from us, those who are not from the West, who are not white, and so on). This objective is achieved by using hope-based storytelling, underlining positively the agency, energy, participation and proactivity of the characters involved, and by the effective use of the contraposition "us and them" in the story. The language used is appropriate, leveraging irony, paradox dissonance and empathy. The target group of the edutainment campaign is the "movable middle" of North Macedonia that lives in the country. One other specified target groups is the North Macedonian diaspora in Western countries.

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6 Turin Workshop Main Outcome

The story of the edutainment campaign follows two different protagonists who represent the two different realities. The main protagonist, characters and sequence of events is identical in both realities. The specific socio-political context and identity features of the characters is what makes the realities seem different. Realities sometimes flow into each other. This effect is strengthened by the fact that all the characters in both realities are played by the same actors who at certain moments meet/pass from one reality to another (for example, the main protagonists meet. In one reality we see the perspective of one, and in the other the perspective of the other) Certain objects (instrument, records, clothing, furniture, bowl of soup, etc.) are also identical in both realities.

The story follows a young (30-40 year old), highly educated man who decides to leave his country due to the inability to find a job, uncertainty and insecurity. After delaying the inevitable decision for a long time, due to the connection with family, friends, and the city, after a conflict situation, he decides to leave forever. He sends out dozens of applications, none of which are accepted because of his country of origin. He finally manages to find work and accommodation through intermediaries/agencies. He says goodbye to his loved ones, packs his life in a suitcase and leaves. On the way, he changes different modes of transport, waits in long queues for passengers from "other countries" and faces constant document checks. Finally he reaches the destination. He spends hours in front of various counters convincing clerks who do not understand him/think he does not understand anything. He starts working in a service industry that is far below his qualifications. Co-workers and customers do not accept or respect him. He lives in isolation, on the street he passes by walls with xenophobic messages, and sometimes they scold him because they see him as a foreigner. He fights loneliness occasionally by seeing family and friends on video calls. One evening, returning tired, he passes by a restaurant that is playing music that he recognizes. He goes in. During a break, he asks the musicians to join them. Among the musicians he plays with is the main protagonist from another reality.

Draft scenes

Reality 1: "us"	Reality 2: "them"
30-40 year old academically educated musician. He comes from a family that was once middle class and lived in the city (typical for North Macedonia). The parents with whom he is forced to live because he does not have enough permanent income are retirees with minimum incomes.	30-40 year old academically educated musician. He comes from a family that was once middle class and lives in the city (typical for the countries from the Middle East/North Africa). He is forced to live with his, now retired, parents, because he does not have enough permanent income.
He tries to get a job in an orchestra in a local cultural institution, but after an audition in which he successfully presents himself, the job is given to someone with a party card.	He cannot perform with the local orchestra because the concert hall is ruined, the orchestra has long been disbanded as many have already left the country.
He starts looking for work outside. He writes and sends dozens of applications to which he receives a negative response because of the country of origin. He decides to just leave for another country in the West.	He starts looking for a way to leave the country. He writes and sends dozens of letters to humanitarian organizations to which he receives answers that he is on a waiting list. He decides to just leave for another country in the West.
Saying goodbye to family, friends. It is packed. He is leaving.	Saying goodbye to family, friends. It is packed. He is leaving.
The trip is long and hard. At airports, he goes through humiliating controls, his documents are constantly checked, and he waits in long queues for passengers from "other countries" and faces constant document checks.	The trip is long and uncertain. He changes means of transport. His documents are constantly checked, and he waits in long queues for passengers from "other countries" and faces constant document checks.
Finally he reaches a small industrial town, where he finds a small basement apartment with almost no daylight. Tired, he lies down on an old bed without sheets.	Finally he reaches a small industrial town, where he finds a small basement apartment with almost no daylight. Tired, he lies down on an old bed without sheets.
He fights with the local administration. He waits at counters and tries to explain to the clerk where he is from and why he is coming. He finally gets a work permit.	He fights with the local administration. He waits at counters and tries to explain to the clerk where he is from and why he is coming. He finally gets a temporary residence permit.
He starts working at a local fast food restaurant. Co-workers and customers do not accept or respect him.	He starts working at a local fast food restaurant. Co-workers and customers do not accept or respect him.
He lives in isolation, on the street he passes by walls with xenophobic banners, and sometimes they scold him because they see him as a foreigner.	He lives in isolation, on the street he passes by walls with xenophobic banners, and sometimes they scold him because they see him as a foreigner.
He fights loneliness occasionally by seeing family and friends on video calls	He fights loneliness occasionally by seeing family and friends on video calls
One evening, returning tired, he passes by a restaurant that is playing music that he recognizes. He comes in. During a break, he asks the musicians to join them. He starts playing. Among the musicians he plays with is the main protagonist from another reality.	One evening, returning tired, he passes by a restaurant that is playing music that he recognizes. He comes in. During a break, he asks the musicians to join them. He starts playing. Among the musicians he plays with is the main protagonist from another reality.

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