

The Electoral Participation of People with Disabilities and the Election Administration in North Macedonia

Activity Brief

Photo by Steven HWG on Unsplash



Funded by
the European Union

With funding
from the



Austrian
Development
Agency

The assessment of the Electoral Participation of People with Disabilities and the Election Administration in North Macedonia, conducted between November 2021 and August 2022, analyses and provides recommendations on the electoral participation of people with disabilities from the perspective of the activity of the election administration.

This research is the result of a collaborative effort between the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights' (ODIHR) project Support to Electoral Reforms in the Western Balkans, funded by the European Union and the Austrian Development Agency, and the International Foundation for Electoral Systems (IFES) within the project Support to Electoral Reform in North Macedonia, of the Government of Switzerland.

The framework for assessment is the United Nations (UN) Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD), which North Macedonia ratified in 2011, as well as OSCE commitments and other international standards for democratic elections, and previous recommendations of ODIHR election observation missions. The research involved 48 interviews, 2 surveys each of 100 election officials, 11 focus group discussions (primarily with people with disabilities and representatives of organizations of people with disabilities (OPDs), as well as document reviews. The report offers 33 recommendations, of which 19 are for the SEC and 14 are for other bodies.

EFFORTS TO DATE

To date, the SEC has undertaken positive initiatives to enhance the inclusion and participation of people with disabilities, making information more accessible and improving election-day accessibility. Initiatives included mapping polling station accessibility with civil society, providing 134 ramps at polling stations (often schools, thereby also making schools more accessible to students and teachers with disabilities), and introducing a Braille template to use when marking ballots for people who are blind or have poor vision. The SEC has also introduced a free telephone line in an accessible format where people with sensory disabilities can communicate via video with the SEC. Sign language interpreters are present at some SEC meetings, its website is more accessible, and the SEC included trainers involved in disability issues in its pool of trainers. The SEC also signed a Memorandum of Cooperation with the OPD Inkluziva covering awareness-raising of SEC commissioners and headquarters staff.

KEY FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Challenges with electoral participation further the difficulties faced by people with disabilities, leaving people feeling humiliated and discriminated against, according to respondents. They noted the lack of an enabling environment, an outdated national strategy on disabilities, the continued dominance of the medical and charity model, lack of data on disabilities, and scarce knowledge of the CRPD and its principles. They also highlighted that difficulties in electoral participation are particularly pronounced for women and people with disabilities from non-majority ethnic groups. The assessment recommended that the SEC could establish a comprehensive policy on the electoral participation of people with disabilities, as soon as possible and in advance of the next elections, based on the CRPD and ODIHR recommendations, and developed through an inclusive process with OPDs and other stakeholders.

Challenges around **accessibility to political parties and their internal structures** compromise the ability of people with disabilities to run for office, make informed electoral choices, associate, and take part in political life.

Moreover, findings show that people with disabilities are under-represented in media coverage of elections, as disability issues are rarely brought up and there is insufficient accessible programming. This perpetuates marginalization and negative stereotyping, leaving people with disabilities at risk of being disconnected and under-informed in making electoral choices. The assessment recommended that political parties could undertake steps in their internal rules and policies, such as elaborating party policies on the inclusion of people with disabilities in leadership and executive structures within the party and in candidate lists and undertaking efforts to ensure the accessibility of party offices, information and meetings.

The **legal framework** for elections should include explicit provisions for people with disabilities and be harmonized with CRPD obligations to prevent the exclusion of people with disabilities based on intellectual or psychosocial disability. Previous working groups on revising the North Macedonian Electoral Code have only included representatives from OPDs on an ad hoc basis. The assessment recommended that people with disabilities and their representatives should be systematically consulted in future legislative processes.

Thanks to SEC initiatives, **information on electoral processes is now more accessible** to people with disabilities and those involved in supporting people with disabilities. However, focus group participants noted gaps and difficulties in accessing SEC information, and showed a lack of awareness of SEC policies and actions. The assessment recommended that the SEC should further develop its information provision, voter education and outreach policies to build public awareness of the electoral participation of people with disabilities, and also trust in the institution.

The assessment recommended that the implementation of SEC initiatives to improve **election-day accessibility** should continue and advance and that the SEC should review voting arrangements to identify other possible improvements. While the lack of independent physical accessibility of polling stations remains challenging and needs further engagement with relevant authorities, the SEC should explore possibilities and options for voting in residential care facilities for people with disabilities, as it does for elderly people in such facilities. Home voting provides increased opportunity for participation; however, the primary emphasis should be made on maximising access to polling stations.

NEXT STEPS

Specific measures are needed to provide de facto **equal opportunities** for people with disability to fully participate in elections. The findings and recommendations of this assessment offer SEC and other institutions and organizations a range of next steps, including possible action plans.

Contributors to the report are committed to monitoring the changes resulting from this report, and also to supporting the stakeholders who will work towards implementing the recommendations. The report will provide the foundation for organizing a series of participatory roundtable discussions with relevant stakeholders at the local and central levels to increase public awareness and trigger advocacy actions.

To learn more visit: www.osce.org/odihr/wb

*The views, opinions and content expressed in this report
do not necessarily reflect those of the donors, the projects or the implementers.*

