



**SUPPORT TO  
ELECTORAL REFORMS**

ПОДДРШКА НА ИЗБОРНИ РЕФОРМИ  
MBËSHËTETJE E REFORMAVE ZGJEDHORE

## **WOMEN'S PARTICIPATION IN POLITICAL PROCESSES IN NORTH MACEDONIA**

**A MIXED PICTURE FOR**

**GENDER EQUALITY IN THE CONTEXT**

**OF THE 2021 LOCAL ELECTIONS**



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# Executive Summary

Twenty years have passed since a gender quota was introduced in North Macedonia's legal framework for elections. This quota was intended both to increase the participation of women in the country's electoral processes and to support efforts to promote gender equality in society as a whole. This study assesses the progress achieved in these aims over the past two decades, drawing on quantitative and qualitative research into the participation of women in the country's most recent local elections held in October 2021.

In spite of the gender quota having been applied in over twenty national and local elections since its introduction in 2002, prior research has generally assessed the level of women's participation in electoral and political processes in North Macedonia as low. This current study confirms these findings, identifies key obstacles, and offers recommendations to overcome these obstacles.

Undertaken within the framework of the project *Support to Electoral Reforms in North Macedonia*,<sup>1</sup> this study was designed to attain a better understanding of the root causes of persistent obstacles to women's participation in electoral and political processes. For this purpose, the study conducted a public survey to capture citizens' attitudes towards and perceptions of the role of women in politics, as well as discussions with

focus groups to gauge the perceptions and experiences of aspiring women candidates, women members of political parties, and elected women councilors. In addition to reviewing the practices of the country's media outlets in relation to the local elections of 2021, focus group discussions were also held with journalists and media practitioners.

The study finds evidence that women remain under-represented in politics in North Macedonia and identifies key factors that continue to limit women's capacities to exert substantive political influence. The results of the study's survey of public perceptions further show that the level of public support for the participation and representation of women in politics exceeds the current level of women's participation, including within the country's political parties. However, the study also confirms the persistence of gender stereotypes among male citizens and corresponding resistance to the imposition of gender quotas.

Overall, the study concludes that women continue to struggle for equal opportunities and participation in political and electoral processes that are still dominated by men. For example, women still struggle to gain nominations on the candidates list, from their political parties, for winnable seats and for sufficient backing during election campaigns. They also need to gain the support of voters in a social environment in which patriarchal attitudes persist among the electorate and are perpetuated in the media. Women involved

<sup>1</sup> *Support to Electoral Reforms in North Macedonia* is a project of the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC) implemented by the International Foundation for Electoral Systems (IFES).



in politics face particular challenges arising from public exposure, moreover, including demeaning portrayals in traditional and online media and the use of hate speech and other discriminatory language on social networks.

The study offers a number of practical recommendations and proposals for targeted follow-up activities to tackle the main impediments identified to the greater participation of women in politics and electoral processes. These recommended measures and strategies have been developed in accordance with the study's findings and include proposed changes to the legal and regulatory framework. Regarding the use of gender quotas, in particular as a means to consolidate and increase the number of women in elected positions, the study proposes the introduction of a "zipper system" or "vertical parity" approach in their candidates lists. This system requires parties to alternate between women and men on their candidate lists, thereby achieving fairer and more proportional representation<sup>2</sup>. Further, to help protect women from gender-based online abuse, the study proposes improvements in the regulation of online content during elections. The study also recommends that concerted efforts be undertaken to improve the capacities of

the State Election Commission to produce and disseminate comprehensive sex-disaggregated electoral data and proposes the development and implementation of a targeted education program on gender equality and specific capacity-building activities for women candidates.

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2 A "system alternating the sex of candidates on the party list", in Venice Commission Glossary of Terms, available at [https://www.venice.coe.int/webforms/documents/?pdf=CDL-EL\(2020\)006-bil](https://www.venice.coe.int/webforms/documents/?pdf=CDL-EL(2020)006-bil)

# Acronyms and abbreviations

<b>AVMS</b>	Agency for Audio and Audiovisual Media Services
<b>CEDAW</b>	Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women
<b>COE</b>	Council of Europe
<b>DOM</b>	Democratic Renewal of Macedonia
<b>DPA</b>	Democratic Party of Albanians
<b>DUI</b>	Democratic Union for Integration
<b>EBs</b>	Electoral Boards
<b>EC</b>	European Commission
<b>EU</b>	European Union
<b>EMBs</b>	Election Management Bodies
<b>EOM</b>	Election Observation Mission
<b>EIGE</b>	European Institute of Gender Equality
<b>IFES</b>	International Foundation for Electoral Systems
<b>LDP</b>	Liberal Democratic Party
<b>MECs</b>	Municipal Election Commissions
<b>MP</b>	Member of Parliament
<b>NSDP</b>	New Social Democratic Party
<b>ODHIR</b>	Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights
<b>OSCE</b>	Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe
<b>SDC</b>	Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation
<b>SEC</b>	State Election Commission
<b>TMORO</b>	Macedonian Homeland Organization for Radical Renewal
<b>UN</b>	United Nations
<b>USAID</b>	United States Agency for International Development
<b>WPC</b>	Women Parliamentarians' Club

# Introduction

A gender quota was introduced in North Macedonia's electoral legal framework in 2002 to increase women's participation in political and electoral processes and to support the attainment of greater gender equality not only within the country's elected assemblies but across society as a whole. The formula of the gender quota has been improved since its introduction, with an increase in the representation threshold from 30 percent to 40 percent and the addition of two placement mandates.<sup>3</sup> Several other initiatives to promote and support gender equality have also been implemented since 2002, and several studies have been conducted on the key parameters of women's participation.

Twenty years after the introduction of the gender quota, however, the numerical increase of women in elected assemblies still does not appear to have triggered adequate change in the imbalance of power between men and women in the political and electoral fields. Notwithstanding this lack of progress, the results of the mayoral race of the 2021 local elections confirm that the number of elected women is significantly lower where no quota threshold is imposed.

This study has been undertaken within the framework of *Support to Electoral Reforms in North*

*Macedonia*, a project of the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC) implemented by the International Foundation for Electoral Systems (IFES). The project aims to support democratic and credible election processes that facilitate greater political participation and social integration by enabling voters to select their representatives freely and to hold them accountable.

Gender equality is a cross-cutting theme throughout the project's activities, with the overarching aim of fostering equal gender representation and participation in elections and political processes.

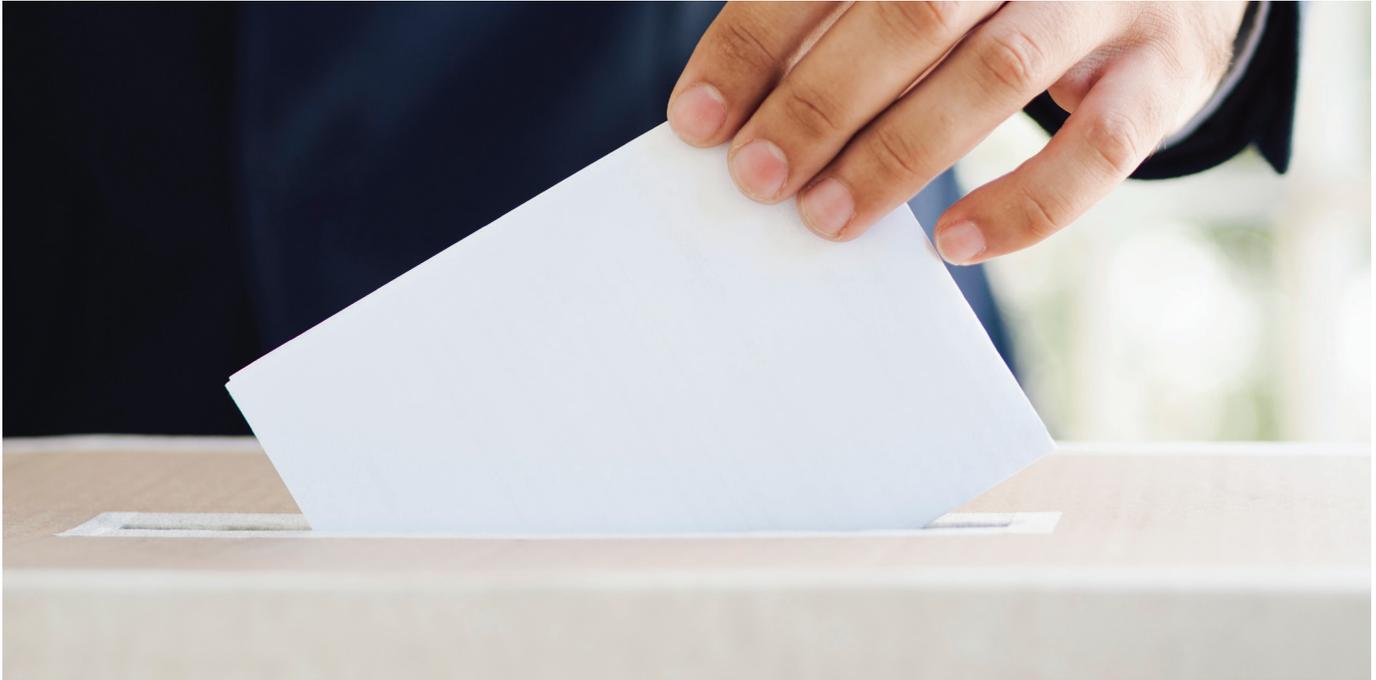
This study includes a survey and analysis of public perceptions of women's representation in politics and women's access to leadership and decision-making positions in North Macedonia. The rationale for this focus is based on the premise that positive public perceptions of women's participation in politics have a crucial role in facilitating substantively equal gender representation beyond the achievement of any "critical mass"<sup>4</sup>. From this perspective, the study includes analysis of data specifically related to the local elections of October 2021 to derive lessons and develop recommendations for improving women's participation in electoral and political processes in the country.

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3 Regulations for gender ordering in party lists. See article 64.5 of North Macedonia's Electoral Code: "At least one out of every three places shall be reserved for the underrepresented sex, with at least one additional place out of every ten places."

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4 In studies of women's legislative behaviour, the concept of critical mass is used as a tool for understanding the relationship between the percentage of female legislators and the passage of legislation beneficial to women as a group.



More specifically, the study has the following aims and objectives:

- to analyze available electoral data;
- to identify issues and propose improvements for key electoral bodies and processes;
- to identify the main barriers to more positive perceptions of women candidates among voters and to propose measures and strategies to overcome identified gender stereotypes;
- to attain a greater understanding of key issues related to women's visibility on the political scene, notably during the electoral campaign and in the media;
- to propose practical strategies to enhance women's participation in electoral processes and public life;
- to make a positive and informative contribution to discussions on how to improve women's participation in public life and political representation through the dissemination of the study's key findings to targeted electoral stakeholders.

The study is structured as follows: the first chapter provides an overview of the normative and institutional context of women's participation in electoral and political processes in North Macedonia. The second chapter identifies key issues related to gender equality and the administration of elections. Subsequent chapters present

an analysis of the results of the citizen survey and an assessment of the present obstacles to women's participation, including the role of the media in perpetuating gender stereotypes. The final chapter summarizes the main findings and offers recommendations for achieving greater gender equality in politics, including specific actions to tackle the obstacles identified in the study.

# Methodology

The methodological approach applied in this study was designed to capture perceptions of women's participation in electoral and political processes from a range of actors, including the perceptions and experiences of serving women politicians and women candidates who ran for the local elections held in 2021, as well as prevailing perceptions of women in politics among members of the public, journalists and other representatives of media outlets.

To measure and document current levels of public awareness and support for women's representation and participation in politics, the study included a structured questionnaire to elicit citizens' opinions on 27 key issues. These included questions on public perceptions of women candidates, levels of adherence to the provisions of the gender quota, and questions aimed at identifying key gender stereotypes and other persistent forms of barriers and obstacles to women's participation in politics.

The questionnaire was conducted using a computer-aided personnel interviewing methodology (CAPI) to survey a pool of respondents purposefully selected to reflect the country's population structure. Multistage stratified sampling was used to select 1,085 respondents reflective of the distribution of the general population in terms of ethnicity, age, sex and place of residence in the eight regions of the country. The estimated margin of error was 2.97 percentage points, with a 95 percent level of confidence.

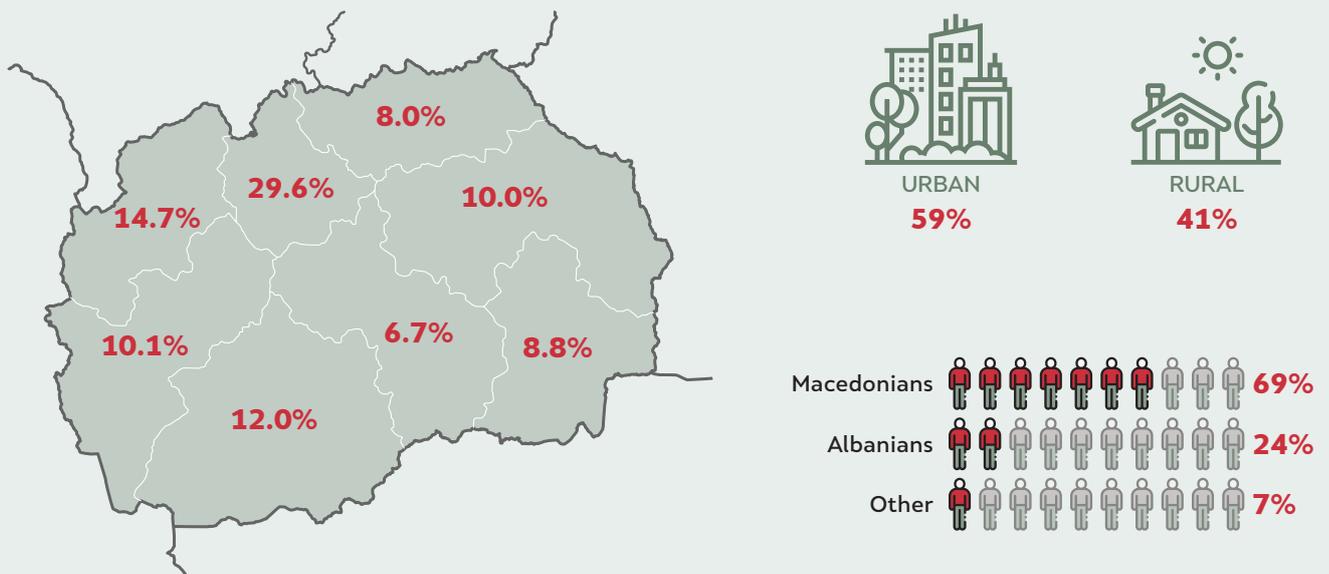
In addition, four focus groups were held with (i) women members of political parties; (ii) aspiring women candidates in the local elections of 2021; (iii) elected women councillors; and (iv) journalists and other representatives of media outlets, with the aim of eliciting and documenting the experiences, perceptions, opinions and recommendations of these actors regarding women's participation and representation in politics.

The focus groups involved a total of 32 participants and were held between 17 December 2021 and 10 February 2022, with discussions structured around targeted questionnaires. Specific topics included questions related to the process of selecting party candidates for elections and women's participation in the 2021 local election campaign, the participants' perceptions of the presence of women in politics and in the media, the prevalence of gender bias in media coverage of women in politics, and major challenges to increasing women's participation in politics.

To complement the quantitative and qualitative data from the survey and focus group, a desk review was conducted of previous studies and relevant electoral legislation, together with data from the State Election Commission's (SEC) online candidate application, as well as from direct interviews with key actors.

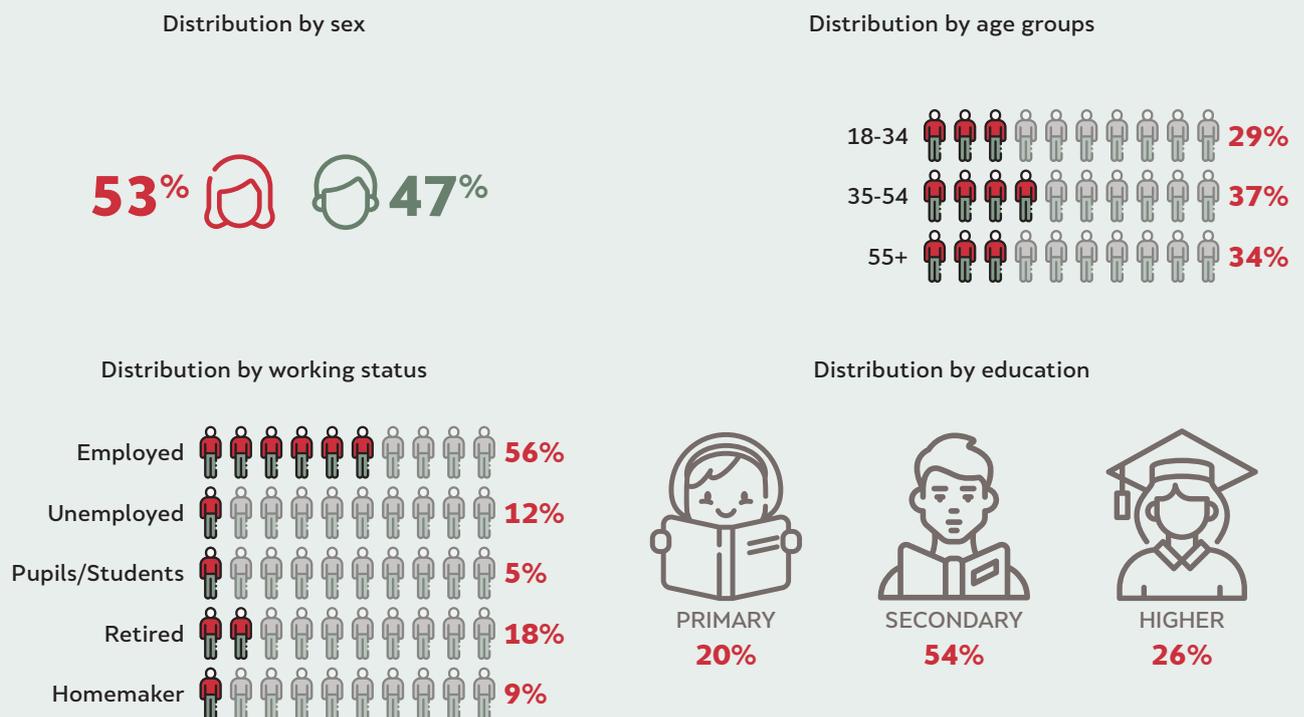
**Figure 1**

Demographic structure of the survey respondents



**Figure 2**

Respondents of the survey disaggregated by sex, age group and education



# 1. Context

According to the 2021 Census of Population, Households and Dwellings, there is an almost equal proportion of males and females in North Macedonia's population of 1,836,713, with women comprising 50.4 percent and men comprising 49.6 percent of this total.<sup>5</sup> Although recent comparative research on women in politics has ranked North Macedonia 29<sup>th</sup> out of 188 countries in terms of the percentage of women elected to parliament, the same research ranks the country much lower in terms of the number of women appointed to ministerial positions, in 93<sup>rd</sup> place out of 182 countries.<sup>6</sup> This notable disparity between the country's rankings for the representation of women in elected as opposed to nominative positions can be attributed to the lack of a gender quota formula or the lack of consistent compliance with gender equality provisions in nominative and elected positions.

The Final Report of the Election Observation Mission conducted by the OSCE's Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODHIR) in North Macedonia to cover the local elections of October 2021, underlined that women remain "underrepresented in public office, holding 45 of the 120 seats (37.5 per cent) in the current parliament and 4 of the 15 ministerial posts in the government".<sup>7</sup>

5 This census is available at: [https://www.stat.gov.mk/PrikaziSooopstenie\\_en.aspx?rbrtxt=146](https://www.stat.gov.mk/PrikaziSooopstenie_en.aspx?rbrtxt=146)

6 See *Women in Politics 2021* (The Inter-Parliamentary Union & UN Women), reflecting nominations/appointments as of 1 January 2021 at: <https://www.ipu.org/news/women-in-politics-2021>

7 Final Report of the OSCE/ODIHRs Election Observation Mission. Available at: <https://www.osce.org/odihr/elections/north-macedonia/514666>

## 1.1. General normative and institutional framework

In the three decades since the country became an independent parliamentary republic in 1991, it has made significant commitments to advance gender equality, including through its ratification of the following gender equality-related international treaties and policy frameworks:

- 1994: ratification of the UN's Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), including its Optional Protocol
- 1995: ratification of UN's Beijing Platform for Action
- 1997: ratification of the Council of Europe's Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms
- 2018: ratification of the "Istanbul Convention" on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence.

The country has also expressed its commitment to the UN's Women, Peace and Security Agenda.<sup>8</sup>

Article 9 of the country's 1991 Constitution provides for the equality of all citizens regardless of sex, race, skin color, national and social origins, political and religious beliefs, property and social status. Although there is no separate provision on equal opportunities for women and men in the constitution, special protection provisions

8 UN Security Council Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security, as well as follow-up resolutions. In 2021, the Ministry of Defence and the army adopted an operational plan for the implementation of UN Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security and for institutional coordination in partnership with civil society.



for women were introduced in the Labor Relations Act in 1993. In addition, a Law on Equal Opportunities for Women and Men was adopted in 2006 and a Law on Prevention and Protection from Discrimination was passed in 2010 as part of the country's National Action Plan for the Implementation of the Law on Prevention and Protection Against Discrimination (2015–2020) and the National Equality and Non-Discrimination Strategy for 2016–2020.

Within North Macedonia's Parliament, a Women Parliamentarians' Club (WPC) composed of female members of parliament (MPs) with a current mandate was established in 2003 and has since served as an effective informal consultative body on the rights and representation of women in politics. For example, the WPC has proven instrumental in uniting women from different political parties to find common solutions to address gender equality. The WPC adopted a Strategic Plan for 2018–2020 with a renewed focus on advocating for the better political representation of women at both central and local level. In line with this plan, the WPC initiated a discussion on amendments to the Electoral Code, including a proposal for the introduction of a 50 percent gender quota. However, this proposal was not among the amendments of the Electoral Code adopted in September 2021.

The Parliamentary Committee on Equal Oppor-

tunities for Women and Men has also played a central role in gender-sensitive law-making and in overseeing the implementation of the country's international obligations to gender equality in national legislation. The Committee consists of 11 representatives of all political parties, including the chairperson. The participation of men in this Committee has been very low in recent years, with only one man representative participating from 2016 until 2020. The current composition of the Committee includes two men deputies but no sitting man member.

In accordance with the Law on Equal Opportunities,<sup>9</sup> an inter-ministerial consultative and advisory group was created in 2020 with "gender coordinators" deployed both in ministries and at local government level. The Ministry of Labour and Social Policy is tasked with coordinating and overseeing the application of this law in all public administration bodies at both central and local level.

## 1.2. Political commitments

In March 2021, a new Law on Gender Equality was drafted to replace the existing Law on Equal Opportunities. Importantly, this draft proposed the introduction of a gender quota within the management and executive bodies of political parties.

<sup>9</sup> Articles 10, 11, 12 & 14 of the Law on Equal Opportunities.

The convergence criteria for EU accession require the country to make its legislation compliant with EU Gender Directives that reflect the commitments of EU member states to protecting equality between men and women.<sup>10</sup> In its *Roadmap for Equality between Women and Men (2006–2012)*, the European Commission added to these criteria the need for members to develop and maintain a Gender Equality Index, later including this requirement in its Action Plan of the Strategy for Equality Between Women and Men 2010–2015. In compliance with this criterion, a National Gender Equality Index for North Macedonia has been developed by the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy and the State Statistical Office in cooperation with the European Institute of Gender Equality (EIGE) and published in 2019. Regarding the theme of gender and political power, the Index reached the following conclusions:

**The lowest gender gap exists in the indicator for participation of women in the Parliament, which is mainly due to the legally established quotas for the election of Members of Parliament from the less represented gender in Parliament. On the other hand, the largest gender gap in the sub-domain of political power exists in the participation [of women] as ministers in the Government, where women are represented in much smaller percentage compared to men... The indicators show that if there were to be no quotas for the participation of the less represented gender in the different domains of political power (for example: Government, Parliament, local government), the participation of women would be significantly smaller compared to men, i.e. the distribution of political power is disproportionately higher in favor of men.**<sup>11</sup>

Although the use of a gender quota was found to have helped enhance gender equality in the Parliament and in municipal councils, the Index noted that women's representation in other pub-

lic institutions in the country remained below the 40 percent target set by the Council of Europe's Recommendation Rec (2003)3 of the Committee of Ministers to member states on the balanced participation of women and men in political and public decision-making.

### 1.3. Electoral system and legal requirements

The Parliament of North Macedonia is a unicameral body with a maximum of 123 members. Each of the six in-country electoral districts directly elects twenty MPs for a four-year term through a proportional representation system using closed lists<sup>12</sup> with seats allocated to candidate lists according to the *D'Hondt* method of the highest average<sup>13</sup>.

Local councilors and mayors are also elected for a four-year term in direct elections held in the country's 80 municipalities and in the City of Skopje in a closed-list model of proportional representation. The number of councilors ranges from 9 to 33 according to the population of the municipality, while 45 representatives are elected to the Council of the City of Skopje. The same "highest average" formula is applied for the allocation of seats as for the repartition of seats within the newly elected councils.

Presidential and mayoral elections are conducted according to a two-round majoritarian system whereby if no candidate receives an absolute majority of votes cast in the first round, then a second round is held two weeks later between the two candidates with the most votes. At least a third of voters registered in a municipality must turn out in the first round for a mayoral election to be valid, otherwise the election must be re-

10 These directives are the European Council's Directive 2004/113/EC on the principle of equal treatment between men and women in the access to and supply of goods and services and Directive 2006/54/EC on the implementation of the principle of equal opportunities and equal treatment of men and women in matters of employment and occupation.

11 The National Gender Equality Index report is based on the methodology and framework of the 2017 Gender Equality Index developed by the European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE, <http://eige.europa.eu/>). The data used for the calculation of the Gender Equality Index for North Macedonia refer to 2015 and are based on the EIGE's Index methodology for 2017.

12 Up to three MPs are elected from a single out-of-country electoral district, in accordance with Article 175.2 of the Electoral Code.

13 The allocation of seats in collegiate organs such as parliaments requires a method to translate votes proportionally into whole seats. The 'd'Hondt method' is a mathematical formula used widely in proportional representation systems, although it leads to less proportional results than other systems for seat allocation such as the Hare-Niemeyer and Sainte-Laguë/Schepers methods. Moreover, it tends to increase the advantage for the electoral lists which gain most votes to the detriment of those with fewer votes. It is, however, effective in facilitating majority formation and thus in securing parliamentary operability. In Understanding the d'Hondt method, allocation of parliamentary seats and leadership positions » European Parliament, available at [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2019/637966/EPRS\\_BRI\(2019\)637](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2019/637966/EPRS_BRI(2019)637)

peated. (This turnout requirement does not apply to possible second rounds and to council elections.)

The successful introduction of these nominative 30% gender quotas as special measures in legislation in 2002 and 2004 was the outcome of vital cross-party cooperation and collaboration between elected women politicians and women in civil society movements. This collaboration has also been of paramount importance in facilitating subsequent improvements in the design of the gender quota formula with the inclusion of two placement criteria.



### **Electoral Code article 64 (5):**

“In the submitted list of candidates for Members of Parliament from paragraph 2 of this Article and for Members of Council of the municipality and the City of Skopje from paragraph 3 of this Article, at least 40% of the candidates shall belong to the underrepresented sex, namely: in every third place at least one place shall belong to the underrepresented sex and, additionally, at least one place in each ten places.”

Since 2015, the existing quota formula was enhanced. It has imposed a 40 percent threshold of women candidates in lists for parliamentary and local elections. In practice, however, this quota does not always directly translate into 40 percent of elected MPs and councilors being women. For example, the local elections held in 2017 resulted in only 15 of the country’s 81 municipalities having 40 or more percent of women councilors while 31 municipalities had less than 30 percent of women councilors. Following the most recent local elections of October 2021, and based of the data on elected councilors for 68 municipalities out of 81 in total, only 21 municipalities had more than 40 percent of women councilors and 18 had less than 30 percent.<sup>14</sup>

In addition, it is important to note that the Electoral Code includes no provisions to ensure balanced gender representation in the nomination of the heads of candidate lists by electoral contestants:

<sup>14</sup> No data were available for 13 of the 81 municipalities due to their websites/pages being inaccessible.

The election of mayors is conducted according to the majoritarian model, which has often been deemed unfavourable to women’s representation. The two different electoral systems used at local level to select councillors and mayors produce contrary results in terms of gender representation. Only six women mayors were elected to the country’s 81 local-self-government units and city of Skopje, in 2017 and only two women mayors were elected in the 2021 elections. The percentage of women MPs and local councillors has been continuously on the rise since 2002. These trends clearly indicate that women have only attained better representation in institutions for which a gender quota has been applied, further suggesting that the “glass-ceiling<sup>15</sup>” for leadership positions such as municipal mayors is harder to crack.

In the event of the early termination of the mandate of an MP or a municipal councilor, the Electoral Code does not foresee the organization of a new by-election but rather the transfer of the mandate to the next candidate in line on the list. In this circumstance, the Electoral Code foresees preserving gain provisions for gender representation, with the next female candidate on the list becoming an MP or local councilor for the remaining duration of the term of office.

<sup>15</sup> “Glass ceiling” is a metaphor used to represent an invisible barrier that prevents women from rising beyond a certain level. This is most often due to discrimination based on sexism.

## 2. Political parties are holding back the door to women's representation

The under-representation of women in North Macedonia is a general pattern evident in governmental and other nominative and elected positions at central and local level, especially in the leadership and structure of political parties. The outcome of the 2021 local elections is a further signal that legislated nomination quotas alone are not sufficient to ensure a change in the existing power balance between men and women within political parties. The male domination of politics in general and of party politics in particular has a significant influence on the process of candidate-selection and constitutes a major obstacle to the access of female politicians to leadership positions.

### 2.1. Politics remains a male-dominated arena

The country has never had a woman President or Prime Minister and has had only one woman serve as Speaker of the Parliament, though it should be noted that women candidates have run, albeit unsuccessfully, for the presidency. Within the current government there are, only three ministerial positions were held by women (out of 16 in total), while only one woman holds a deputy prime minister post (out of 4 in total)<sup>16</sup>. A 2019 study on women's political participation in North Macedo-

nia<sup>17</sup> highlighted the fact that only four women (25%) held positions as general directors or state secretaries, while the representation of women among directors, deputies, spokespersons and coordinators appointed by the government was only 8.85 percent. The same study noted that appointments to public entities and state-owned companies by political party leaders were mostly given to men, with only 11.18 percent of women nominated for these posts.

This low level of representation of women in government in large part reflects women's low level of participation in political parties, where they still face strong resistance in terms of access both to party nomination tickets and party leadership structures.

### 2.2. The selection and nomination of candidates for local elections

In the 2021 local elections, 28 political parties, six coalitions and 58 groups of voters fielded a total of 10,649 candidates on 571 lists for the council elections and 299 candidates, including 25 independents, for the mayoral elections.

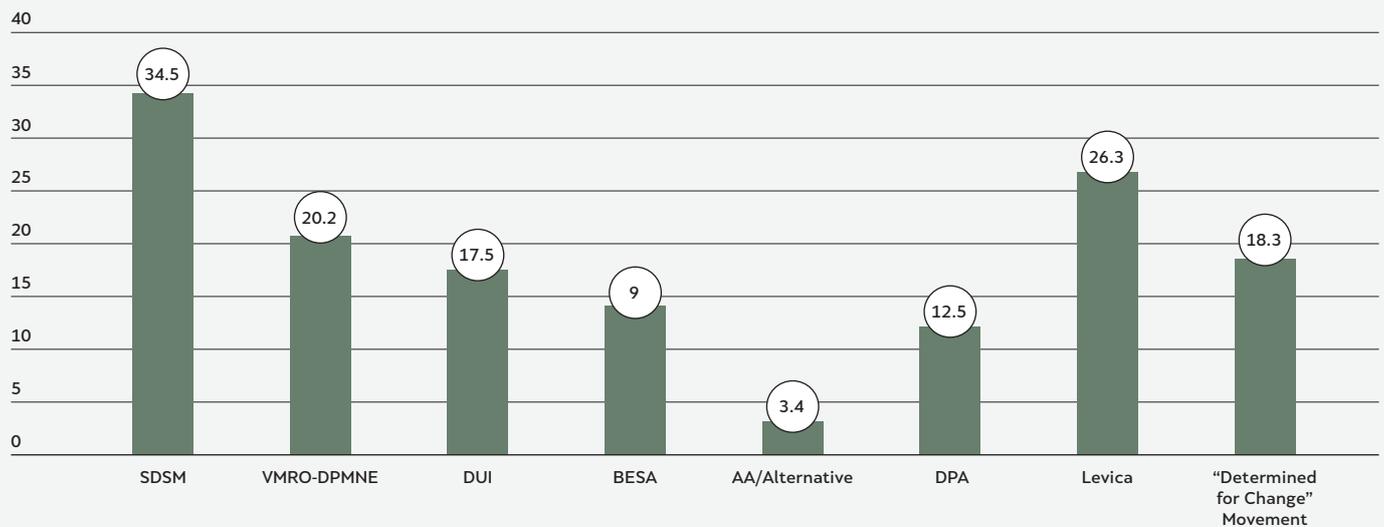
Of the candidates competing for local councilor positions in this election, 56.02 percent were men and 43.98 percent were women. Although the number of women heading party

<sup>16</sup> Government led by Dimitar Kovachevski, elected on January 2022. <https://vlada.mk/node/18031?ln=en-gb>

<sup>17</sup> *Political Participation of Women in North Macedonia*, study and scientific research papers collection, Westminster Foundation for Democracy, Skopje 2019.

**Figure 3**

Percent of women heading candidate lists for local councilors, by main electoral contestants



candidate lists in the 2021 election rose to 19 percent from 14 percent in the previous local elections of 2017, this figure still falls far short of gender parity.

As shown on the graph above, of the 81 heads of candidate lists for councilors from SDSM, 28 were women (c.34%), while in VMRO-DPMNE the representation of women was 20 percent, i.e. 15 of 74 heads of councilor lists were women. The percentage of women heads of lists from DPA was very low, at 12.5 percent, while DUI nominated some 17 percent or six out of 34 holders of lists were women.

As previously noted, imposing a 40 percent gender quota for the selection of candidates (for the candidate lists) does not automatically translate into 40 percent of elected candidates being women. This is largely because a candidate's chance of being elected is greatly increased in the "closed list" system of proportional representation if their position is higher on the list. Given the advantage of a higher ranking on candidate lists, it is instructive to compare the gender composition of elected municipal councils and the ranking of aspiring councilors on the candidate lists of political parties. Thus, whereas women headed 19 percent of the party candidate lists in the 2021 local elections, 35.9 percent of second positions and 59.44 percent of third positions were held by women. Cross-analysis of these candidate lists

according to the main ethnicity of the political parties shows that women candidates nominated by non-Albanian political parties headed 21 percent of their candidate lists, while 40 percent of the second positions and 55 percent of the third positions on these lists were allocated to women. Albanian political parties placed women candidates in first position on 11 percent of their lists, in second position on 16 percent of lists, and in third position on 78 percent of their lists.

These figures indicate a deliberate choice by political parties to generally place women candidates in the lowest possible rank on candidate lists. Further cross-analysis of the lists of candidates competing in the country's five municipalities<sup>18</sup> with less than 20 percent of elected women in their councils demonstrates the same ranking pattern, with women in the third position in 61.8 percent of all 34 competing lists. The average percentage of women's representation in local councils across the country is 36 percent, dropping to 29 percent in municipalities in rural areas<sup>19</sup>.

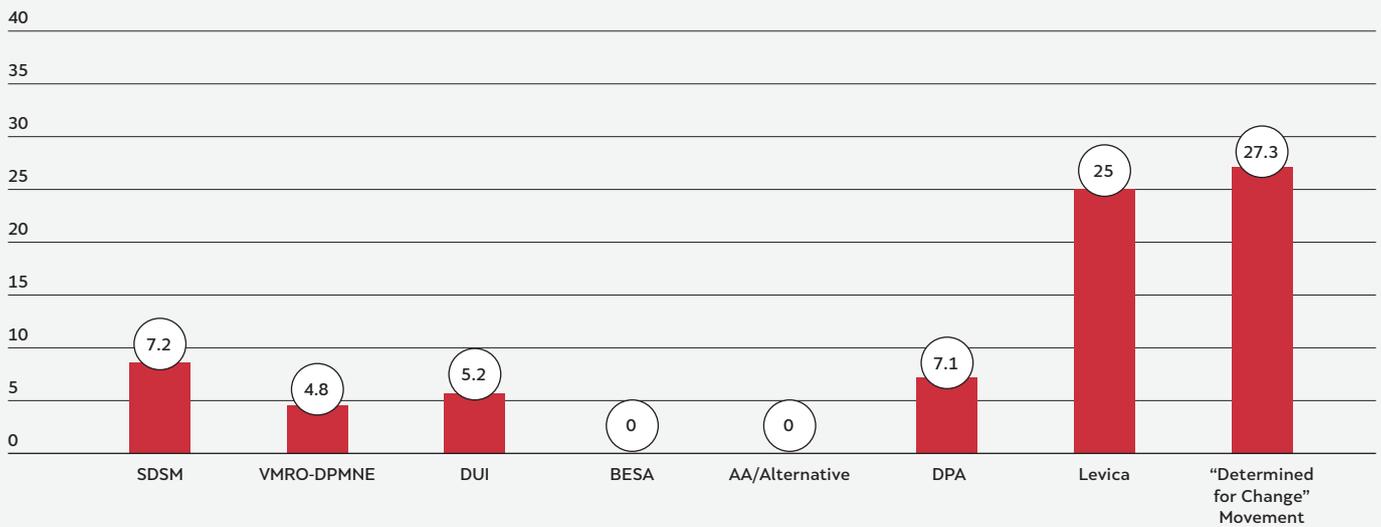
According to data from the SEC on the 2021 elec-

18 Municipalities of Novaci: 1 out of 9 (11.11%); Debarca: 2 out of 11 (18.18%); Gradsko: 1 out of 9 (11.11%); Dolneni: 3 out of 16 (18.75%); and Suto Orizari (15%).

19 On this point, see N. Korunovska et al. "Women in Politics: The Path to Political Functions and Influence at the Local Level in Macedonia", Reactor - Research in Action, Skopje 2015.

**Figure 4**

Percent of women candidates for mayor, by main electoral contestants



tion, only 25 out of 299 women were confirmed as candidates for 80 municipalities and the City of Skopje, i.e. 8.72 percent of mayoral candidates were women while 91.28 percent were men.

Neither the coalition of the Alliance for Albanians and the Alternative party nor Besa put forward a single women candidate for mayor.

Less than five percent of VMRO-DPMNE's mayoral candidates in the 2021 elections were women, with three women out of a total of 63 candidates competing for mayoral positions in the municipalities of Berovo, Krushevo and Centar.

Of DUI's candidates for mayor, only 5.2 percent were women. Both DUI and the DPA had only one woman candidate.

Of the 69 mayoral candidates fielded by SDSM, only five (7.2%) were women. Moreover, these candidates were fielded in smaller municipalities (i.e. Makedonska Kamenica, Aracinovo, Mogila, Petrovec and Staro Nagoricane). The national average percentage of women mayoral candidates in the 2021 election was raised in part by the Levica ('Left') party, which put forward two women out of a total of eight mayoral candidates, and by the "Determined for Change" Movement initiated by LDP and DOM, which fielded five women among its 18 mayoral candidates.

Of the 27 independent candidates running for mayor in 2021, only two (7.41%) were women. In

the Skopje municipality of Kisela Voda, meanwhile, DOM / LDP, Levica and TMORO put forward three women candidates for mayor.<sup>20</sup>

The aspiring women candidates and elected councillors who participated in the focus group discussions held for this study indicated that they had mostly been recommended by the local councils of their party, though also sometimes at the request of the highest party bodies. While all the participants emphasized that the 40 percent threshold had been adhered to and stated their general satisfaction with the process and with their positions on the candidate lists, they acknowledged that the main challenges and obstructions they had faced in their selection process stemmed from political calculations within the central and executive boards of their party leadership, negotiations within the party or with coalition parties for places on the common list, and male domination when making the final decision of who will be on the list and on which position.

<sup>20</sup> A fourth woman candidate for mayor in the municipality of Kisela Voda was nominated by the Integra party, but her candidacy was not confirmed.



### 2.3. The glass ceiling of leadership

A previous comparative study of gender quotas from 2017<sup>21</sup> found that “the transition from a communist party political system to parliamentary democracy ended up in the creation of ideologically different parties led by autocratic, male dominated executive parties”. The study noted that the “ideological shift” that took place in this period “was especially remarkable through the political revival of traditional division of gender roles and conservative cultural stereotypes”. This is reflected in the proportion of women in leading positions in political parties. Thus, as of April 2021 there are 63 political parties registered in North Macedonia, of which 22 are represented in the parliament,<sup>22</sup> and only three of all these political parties have a woman leader.<sup>23</sup>

21 Nacevska, E., & Lokar, S. (2017). The effectiveness of gender quotas in Macedonia, Serbia and Croatia. *Teorija in Praksa*, 54(2), 394–412: p. 396. Available at [https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Elena-Nacevska/publication/317224845\\_The\\_effectiveness\\_of\\_gender\\_quotas\\_in\\_Macedonia\\_Serbia\\_and\\_Croatia/links/5be214674585150b2ba308a7/The-effectiveness-of-gender-quotas-in-Macedonia-Serbia-and-Croatia.pdf](https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Elena-Nacevska/publication/317224845_The_effectiveness_of_gender_quotas_in_Macedonia_Serbia_and_Croatia/links/5be214674585150b2ba308a7/The-effectiveness-of-gender-quotas-in-Macedonia-Serbia-and-Croatia.pdf)

22 Parliament comprises the VMRO-DPMNE coalition, grouping six political parties, the SDSM coalition, grouping seven, DUI, DPA Levica, Alliance for Albanians, Alternative, Besa, Democratic Union, Democratic Renewal of Macedonia and the Liberal Democratic Party. Of the 41 parties not represented in Parliament, 24 are in a coalition agreement with one of the main political parties (12 with VMRO/DPMNE Renewal and 12 with SDSM We can).

23 The three political parties are DOM, PEP21, and Voice for Macedonia.

The low level of women’s representation at all levels in political party structures in the country was further confirmed in a 2020 report on “Violence against Women in Political Parties”:<sup>24</sup>

As the gatekeepers for political aspirants, political parties are struggling in their efforts to achieve equal representation in organizations’ internal bodies: The Executive Committee of VMRO-DPMNE has a total of 25 members, out of which five are women. SDSM’s highest organ, the Executive Board, contains 16 members out of which nine are women. In NSDP’s highest organ, the Executive Board, out of 21 members, eight are women. The Executive Board of LDP comprises 18 members, out of which four are women. BESA’s highest organ is the Central Leadership, which has 24 members, out of which six are women. Out of eight key leadership positions in Alliance, two are held by women. DPA’s Central Leadership has a total of 30 members, out of which seven are women. DUI has the lowest representation of women in its central leadership, as four out of 40 members are women. DOM leads the political parties in female representation, as 11 out of 19 members of its Executive Board are women.

24 “Violence against women in political parties in North Macedonia”, by Win with Women, Skopje, 2020; pages 10 and 11; available at <https://www.ndi.org/sites/default/files/Win%20with%20Women%20VAW-PP%20Assessment%20Report%20ENG.pdf>



Although an increase in the visible leadership of women is likely to foster the greater involvement of women in political parties and their role in developing party policies, manifestos and orientations, there remain significant challenges and barriers to the advancement of women within political parties in North Macedonia. For example, the report of the 2021 OSCE/ODIHR Election Observation Mission noted that “most political parties [met by the ODIHR EOM] do not have effective internal promotion mechanisms and do not engage their women members in developing them”. The report recommended that political parties “should take further steps to encourage the participation of women in the electoral process and in internal political decision-making”.

A 2016 analytical report by the Council of Europe’s Gender Equality Commission on the third round of monitoring the implementation of the Committee of Ministers Recommendation Rec (2003)3 on the balanced participation of women and men in political and public decision-making in member states of the Council of Europe, including North Macedonia, concluded that “the percentage of women in party executives or as party members and candidates remained well below the 40% minimum target”. Overall, the report concluded that “political parties remained male dominated organizations, largely led by men”. Furthermore, the report noted that the percentages of women among party executives and party members roughly correlated with higher per-

centages of women among electoral candidates for national elections:<sup>25</sup>

**Regulations adopted with regard to political parties or adopted by them to improve women’s presence seemed to produce mixed results. The best results were generated by party quotas for elections or for internal party decision-making bodies. This is in line with the findings in other parts of the report: when parties voluntarily adopt strong measures to improve the gender balance, they are usually also (very) effective.**

In the country there are as yet no applicable rules regarding gender balance within political party structures, while previous experiences of voluntary party quotas have proved unsuccessful.<sup>26</sup> Therefore, the country may consider introduction of legislation aimed to oblige political parties to monitor the representation of women in their internal structures, to conduct gender audits, and to publicly report their audit findings.

25 Council of Europe (2016). Balanced participation of women and men in decision-making. Analytical Report of the Gender Equality Commission: 2016 data. Available at: <https://rm.coe.int/analytical-report-data-2016-/1680751a3e>

26 Nacevska, E., & Lokar, S. (2017). The effectiveness of gender quotas in Macedonia, Serbia and Croatia. *Teorija in Praksa*, 54(2), 394–412:

# 3. Gender equality and the administration of the 2021 local elections

**B**etween 2017 and 2021, the SEC operated under three different compositions and lengths of mandate. Although the Electoral Code specifies that “the president and members of the election management bodies shall execute the duties of their office impartially, conscientiously and responsibly”, these multiple structural changes indicate a politically entrenched lack of vision for the SEC’s governance on the Parliament’s part. This lack of stability can hinder the setting of long-term priority goals such as gender equality and gender mainstreaming and the implementation of these goals by the technical departments of the electoral administration.

Inclusive and gender-sensitive election management bodies are characterized by close attention to gender balance in the composition of relevant entities at all levels. This entails undertaking regular gender audits to identify any issues and developing a tailored gender action plan to address these issues. The gender action plan must include the establishment of dedicated gender focal points and the regular use of gender analysis in policy and election-related matters, as well as in the development of internal administrative processes. The collection and dissemination of sex-disaggregated data is an essential task to ensure the inclusiveness of election management bodies, as it allows for continuous monitoring, reporting and analysis.

## 3.1. Composition of the electoral administration

Elections in North Macedonia are administered by a three-tier system of election management bodies (EMBs):<sup>27</sup> the SEC; 80 Municipal Election Commissions (MECs) and the City of Skopje Election Commission; and 3,480 Electoral Boards (EBs).<sup>28</sup> The SEC has responsibility for the overall conduct of the elections, while the 80 MECs, each composed of five members and five deputies randomly selected from among civil servants, are responsible for the tabulation and announcement of the electoral results in their own municipality. The MECs are also tasked with appointing and training the members of the EBs at the lowest level of the electoral administration pyramid. The 3,480 EBs are responsible for the conduct of election-day procedures at the polling stations. These bodies are composed of five members and five deputies, with one member nominated by the ruling parties, one by the opposition parties, and three randomly selected from among civil servants. In 2006<sup>29</sup>, amendments to the Electoral Code introduced the principle of adequate and equitable representation, imposing a gender quota that requires no less than 30% of each sex

<sup>27</sup> Articles 17–40 of the Electoral Code for the composition and competencies of the three levels of the electoral administration.

<sup>28</sup> For out-of-country voting, 46 additional EBs are established in diplomatic-consular offices.

<sup>29</sup> Electoral Code of RM year 2006, Article 21, paragraph 3, Article 64 paragraph 5 and changes from 2015 Article 21 and 64 as above.

to be represented in all election management bodies.<sup>30</sup>

No women have been nominated for the presidency of the SEC since its first establishment as a permanent body. (The authority for nominating this position lies with the main opposition party/coalition.) The electoral management reforms initiated over the past seven years to curb the influence of political parties over the SEC<sup>31</sup> have led to the revival of the precedent formula. In the current composition of the SEC, only two women have been appointed as commissioners which falls short of respecting the principle of adequate and equitable representation and is contrary to the need for balanced gender representation in election management bodies as stipulated in Article 21 of the Electoral Code. The Parliament, with the SEC's confirmation procedure that foresees a two-thirds majority of the votes of the total number of MPs, dealt a major blow to both rule of law and gender equality principles.

In 2017 and 2021, the OSCE/ODIHR election observers noted that the composition of lower-level election management bodies in the country was compliant with the requirements of the Electoral Code for gender and ethnicity representation. In practice, however, 13 out of 81 MECs in 2017 did not meet the representation quota which equally affected men and women.<sup>32</sup> In the 2021 elections, women presided over 39 MECs (i.e. 49% of all MECs). As the SEC did not publish sex-disaggregated data on the composition of the electoral boards, the only indicator comes from the OSCE/ODIHR observation mission,

30 Article 21 of the Electoral Code.

31 The Legislator introduced key amendments to the Electoral Code in 2015 which changed the SEC's composition from a political to a mixed model and increased its size from seven to nine members. Three SEC members had no political affiliation and were selected through open competition, while the other six members reflected the political composition of parliament. The five-year tenure of non-partisan members was reasonably protected, while party nominees had to be changed following amendments in 2017 to align the composition of the SEC with the current composition of parliament. In 2020, the early parliamentary elections were administered by a seven-member SEC with three women, including the vice-president. The SEC's mandate has since been extended on two occasions: first in November 2018 for up to two years; and subsequently, on the basis of a government decree issued on 21 March 2020, until six months from the holding of the 2020 parliamentary elections. The SEC in its current seven-member composition was appointed in January 2021 for a maximum term of two years. The 15 September 2021 amendments extended the term of office of the SEC to five years. However, the tenure of both commissioners and the head of professional services have been subordinated to the majority coalition in Parliament.

32 OSCE/ODIHR EOM Final Report on Local Elections 2017.

which noted that women presided over 55 per cent of EBs and represented 47% of EBs overall in the polling stations observed. While on a positive note the gender balance outpaces the required threshold for the composition of the lower level of the election administration, the possible short tenure and breach of the composition quota requirement for the commissioner positions are not a conducive context for the possibility and interest of strategically mainstreaming gender within the SEC activities.

### 3.2. The SEC and gender mainstreaming

While several initiatives have been undertaken by the SEC, notably with the purpose of directing some of its voter awareness and voter education outreach campaigns towards women voters, the SEC's Strategic Plan for 2017–2020 did not include any specific mention of gender-related issues. However, the SEC's Strategic Plan for 2021–2024 has established the integration of gender aspects in the SEC's internal functioning and activities. The SEC's Gender Action Plan, adopted in 2021, is notably oriented towards the establishment of a system for professional and career development based on the principles of transparency, equitable representation and gender equality, the development of a training program and plan for SEC members and staff with a focus on gender equality, and the collection and publication of sex-disaggregated statistics at all stages of the electoral aspects. Regarding the importance of collecting such data, the UNWOMEN has concluded the following:

**Sex-disaggregated data on a range of points is helpful for an Election Management Body to analyse, report and use in policy and planning decisions. Knowing the gender breakdown of those registered on the voter list, of voters on election day and of staff at all levels, is crucial to allow assessment of gender balance in elections as well as in the development of policies that may redress any identified imbalances in women's participation and access. Post-election period assessments could benefit from analysis and reporting using sex-disaggregated data on registration, voter turnout and staff who worked on the election.<sup>33</sup>**

33 UNWOMEN, Inclusive electoral processes, 2015, page 45 ; available at <https://www.unwomen.org/en/digital-library/publications/2015/7/inclusive-electoral-processes>

The production of sex-disaggregated data and access to these data is more generally regulated by the normative framework. The National Action Plan on Gender Equality 2018–2020<sup>34</sup> assigns the SEC responsibility for collecting and publishing sex-disaggregated data on election turnout, candidate lists, and seats won at national and local level. There is also a legal obligation on all state institutions to provide sex-disaggregated data, as specified in Article 18 of the Law on Equal Opportunities for Women and Men. Although the SEC's Gender Action Plan also foresees improvements in the collection of sex-disaggregated data, the only such data currently available on the SEC website concerns candidate lists. Notwithstanding the political will to gather such data, the proper collection and analysis of gender statistics requires improvements in several of the key electoral forms that serve as its main data-collection tools.

Targeted training should be provided for SEC commissioners and management staff on the importance and modalities of gender mainstreaming in elections to renew the SEC's commitment to gender equality policies and to facilitate the implementation of the activities foreseen in its Strategic Plan and its Gender Action Plan. These training and technical assistance workshops should result in concrete outputs such as the production of guidelines for collecting sex-disaggregated statistics.

### 3.3. Assessment of the implementation of the nominative electoral gender quota

The municipal elections of 2017 were the first local elections to be held in the country in which the enhanced gender quota with the two placement requirements was applicable. However, the SEC ultimately changed the previously adopted guidelines that facilitated compliance with the enhanced gender quota.<sup>35</sup> As a result of this adjustment, 46 MECs registered 9 lists (5% of the total number of lists) with fewer than 40 percent women candidates. Eleven lists did not have a

woman in every third place and six lists did not have a woman in every tenth spot.

Although the SEC's instruction was newly amended in August 2021 and the correct charts were re-introduced, some outstanding issues remain. The instruction chose to highlight the least favorable outcome of gender ranking by explicitly noting that, "If the fourth candidate from the underrepresented sex is placed on the 10th position from the candidate list, then the fifth candidate from the underrepresented sex is placed in one of the positions 11 or 12 from the candidate list."<sup>36</sup> Situations where the fourth women candidate is in all the other available seats (from 1 to 10) are not specified as such. This bias serves to fuel the already documented pattern of generally adhering to the lowest possible gender ranking and should thus be removed.

As this analysis of past SEC operations has highlighted, there is a need for greater commitment to gender equality on the part of the SEC.

34 [https://drive.google.com/file/d/16EGLPg8bJzPnu0\\_OpiYam7Cue0pj2Yws/view](https://drive.google.com/file/d/16EGLPg8bJzPnu0_OpiYam7Cue0pj2Yws/view)

35 Source: OSCE/ODIHR Election Observation Mission Report-Final Report, Municipal Elections 15 October and 29 October 2017, p. 11 <https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/d/0/367246.pdf>

36 Guidelines on the manner and procedure for submission, acceptance and confirmation of candidate list for local elections, August 2020, available at <https://www.sec.mk/upatstvo-za-nachinot-i-postapkata-za-podnesuvanje-priem-i-potvrduvanje-na-kandidatski-listi-za-lokalni-izbori-2021/>

# 4. Public awareness of and support for women's participation in electoral and political processes

Voters are the decision-making stakeholders in any electoral process. One of the strategic objectives of the survey conducted for this study was to ascertain the level of public awareness about and support for women's participation in electoral and political processes. Through clusters of targeted questions, the survey elicited and documented public perceptions about women candidacies and the role of women in the political arena. Attaining a better understanding of voters' attitudes towards gender equality will allow for more targeted advocacy efforts to support electoral reforms for greater equality, more inclusive political parties and processes, as well as more effective programming of tailored activities.

## 4.1. Citizens' interest in and perceptions of women's presence in political and electoral processes

Although local elections are the "closest" elections to citizens, only 45.3 percent of respondents surveyed in North Macedonia declared that they were either "very much" or "somewhat" interested in local politics. A quarter of those interviewed reported having actively followed the last local elections, while 44 percent only partially followed the elections and the remaining third did not follow them at all.

The overall turnout of voters for the first round of the 2021 local elections was 51.44 percent,

and the citizen perception survey indicates that the level of interest in local politics countrywide is around fifty percent. However, when asked to rate their interest in women and their political participation at local and parliamentary elections, the pattern is reversed with 56.1 percent of interested respondents versus 42.7 percent.

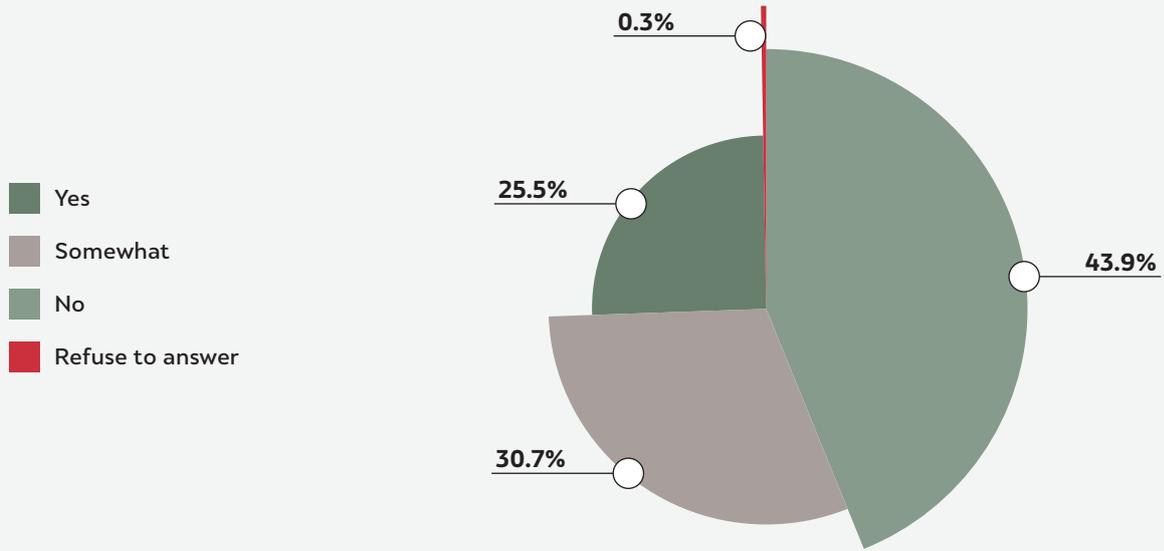
Sex-disaggregation of the survey data indicates that female respondents are significantly more interested in politics than male respondents, while higher levels of education among both male and female respondents also correlate with a higher interest in politics and in women's participation in politics. On this basis it can be argued that an increase in women's candidacies for both councilor and mayoral positions could result in an increased interest in local politics and possibly also a higher turnout. Further, this document an apparent disparity between voters' interests and aspirations and an electoral system that does not fully promote women's participation.

In order to assess the level of awareness about the presence of women in the electoral and political fields, the survey respondents were asked to rank the presence of women in 12 different political and/or professional positions. The three positions that citizens perceived as being least open to women were those of mayor, minister and political party leader. The three positions perceived as most accessible to women were those of party member, civil servant and journalist.

The deficit of women in political leadership positions is clearly perceived by the citizenry. And

**Figure 5**

Interest of the respondents in women's participation in local and parliamentary elections



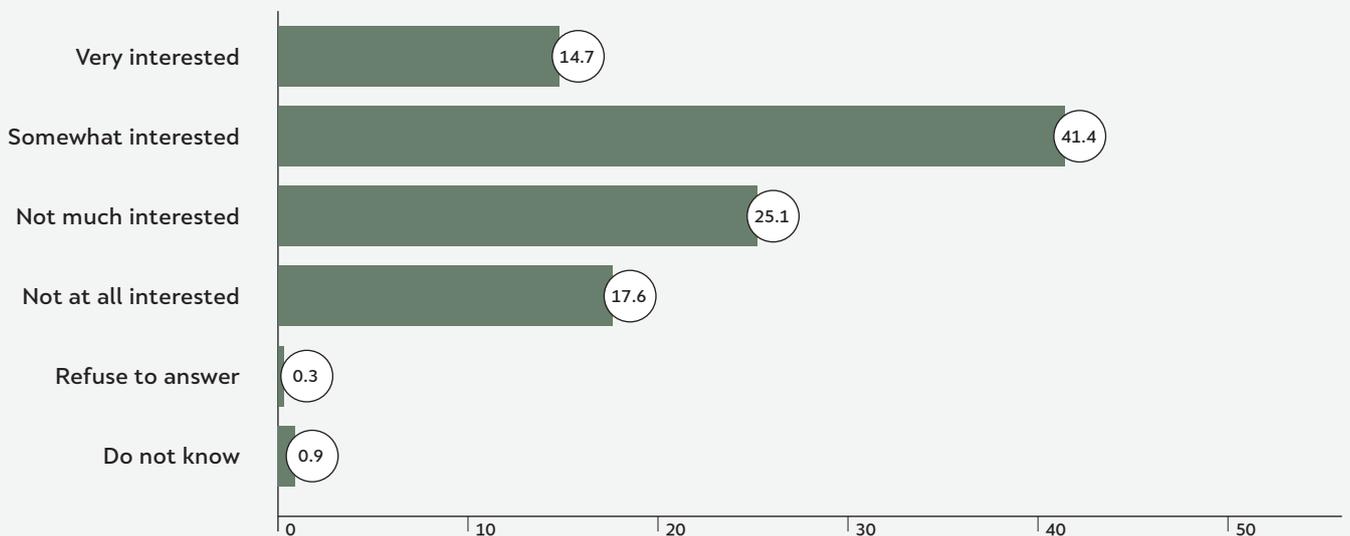
while the data on the local elections of 2021 indicate a slight increase in the number of women candidacies compared to the elections of 2017, this increment was not significant enough to be perceived by the citizens.

Asked to estimate the previous and current num-

ber of elected women mayors, two thirds of the respondents correctly assessed this figure as being below 10 out of a total of 81 mayors in previous local elections. However, a third of the respondents were either unable to answer this question (23.7% of respondents), or overestim-

**Figure 6**

Interest of the respondents in women's participation in local and parliamentary elections



**Table 1**

Percent of women candidates - heads of lists and women candidates for mayor - Local elections 2017 and 2022

Women Candidates	2017	2021
Number of lists headed by women	14%	19%
For mayor	5.2%	8%

**Table 2**

Number of elected women mayors in last four local elections

Year	Number of elected women mayors
2009	0
2013	4 (5%)
2017	6 (7.83%)
2021	2 (2.5%)

ed the number of women mayors as being above 10 (8.1% of respondents).

The survey results have highlighted that it is harder for women to achieve higher political positions in North Macedonia. This perception is almost equally shared by two-thirds of male and

female respondents.. These findings along with above presented data could be interpreted as an indication that even if women's lack of access to leadership positions is mostly perceived by the citizenry, a significant proportion of the population remain unaware of the low representation of women in mayoral position across the country.

## 4.2. Assessment of public perceptions of the existing gender quota

The survey included a series of questions to elicit citizens' perceptions of the gender quota, including whether they agreed with the following statements (proceeding from more general principles to more specific statements about the legislated nominative quota in practice): "equal opportunity for women and men", "guaranteed equality between women and men as citizens", "40% of participation for women in all levels of government", and, more concretely, "on a list with 10 candidates, 4 from one sex and 6 of the another sex".

While the level of respondents' agreement with the four statements was overall very high, the results show a 20 percent difference between levels of agreement with the statements expressing the general principle of gender equality as compared with statements proposing a specific quota formula, with 86.2 percent agreeing with the most general principle and 67.6 percent agreeing with the formula. Sex-disaggregation of the data related to these questions indicates that male and female respondents were closer in their agreement



with general statements about equality (less than 10% difference) than in their agreement with the quota formula, with women being more supportive of the quota than men (more than 10% difference).

Although a third of the survey respondents disagreed with the proposed quota formula, seven out of 10 supported increasing space for women in politics at local level. Of those who disagreed with the need for efforts to increase women's participation in politics at local level, a fifth explicitly disagreed and one out of 10 either responded "do not know" or declined to answer.



Whereas half of the survey respondents agreed that women running for office in local elections was a positive and necessary development, 24.1

**“A gender quota is a positive measurement instrument aimed at accelerating the achievement of gender-balanced participation and representation by establishing a defined proportion (percentage) or number of places or seats to be filled by, or allocated to, women and/or men, generally under certain rules or criteria.”**

*European Institute for Gender Equality*

percent assessed this development as intended primarily to make political parties more attractive to voters. The remaining 18 percent of respondents perceived the increasing number of women running for office as something imposed by law. The level of such public “resistance” to

the use of gender quotas in elections can thus be estimated as reflecting the views of between 25 and 33 percent of the electorate.

Importantly, this resistance is primarily expressed by men, with only 56.6 percent of male citizens declaring support for an increased space for women in politics at local level as compared to 78.9 percent of female citizens in favour. The same 20 percent discrepancy was noted between male and female respondents regarding perceptions of women running for office, with 41 percent of male respondents assessing this a positive development as against 61.1 percent of female of this opinion.

Disaggregating this data by education, ethnicity and age further indicates that those least likely to support increasing space for women in local politics include mainly people with only primary education, among non-Macedonian ethnicities above 55 years old. These indications were confirmed by analyzing the profiles of respondents who expressed support for equal opportunities but not for its concrete application formula as an electoral gender quota.

This analysis confirms that while the introduction of a gender quota has proved a successful means to improve women's numerical representation both in parliament and in local councils, sex-cross-tabulation of the survey data shows that only 41 percent of male respondents perceive women running for office in local elections as a positive and necessary development. Remarkably, 52.4 percent of male respondents evinced the perception that women running for office was something either “forced” to make political parties look more attractive or something which is imposed by law.

**Table 3**

**Percentage of women elected in parliament and in local councils**

	2012-2014	2014-2018	2016-2020	2020-
% of women in parliament	34,1%	34,9%	37,5%	39,17%
	2009	2013	2017	2021
% of women in local councils	27%	30%	33%	36,4%



### 4.3. Are there indications of a preferential vote for women?

When asked whether they would vote for a woman or man candidate if both candidates were of equal interest, 44 percent of the survey respondents declared they would vote for the woman candidate, 25 percent said they would choose the man candidate, and the remaining third either declared they “did not know” which candidate they would choose or declined to answer. Sex-disaggregation of these responses confirms that gender accounts for the highest discrepancy in this data, with 63.5 percent of female respondents choosing the woman candidate as against 42.2 percent of male respondents choosing the man candidate. The data analysis further indicates that female respondents were more decisive in their response to this question, with 23 percent expressing uncertainty as to which candidate they would vote for compared to 32.2 percent of male respondents answering this way. The woman preferential vote, namely “I would choose the woman candidate because I am a woman” ranked 11<sup>th</sup> out of the 24 reasons proposed to choose the equally qualified candidate.

The survey asked respondents to select from among several groups of candidates with distinct characteristics those aspects that would induce them to vote for one list rather than another. The two characteristics that most respondents

opted to vote for were linked to the proximity of the candidates, including “people you know” and “representatives of your local community”. The third characteristic that citizens said would make them more likely to vote for a certain group was the age of the candidates, with a clear preference for younger candidates. Unlike proximity and age, gender was not considered a decisive criterion in the respondents’ selection of preferred lists, ranking fourth in the preferred characteristics of the groups, with a larger number of respondents declaring that the presence of women on the list had no impact on their preferred choice.

When asked which of ten possible criteria they would apply in electing a candidate, the respondents ranked the gender of the candidate in seventh place, placing much greater priority on a candidate’s past achievements and social, educational and professional background. The respondents’ knowledge about a candidate and their reputation were also ranked higher than gender in the respondents’ choice of candidate.

These results shows that the high level of interest and support among women in North Macedonia for the greater participation of women in electoral and political processes does not translate into a preferential vote from women voters for women candidates.

# 5. Main barriers and obstacles to women's participation

The survey also asked the respondents to rank the impact of a given list of barriers to women's effective participation in political and electoral processes. In order of importance, the barriers identified by the respondents were as follows:

- the dual burden and disproportionate share of domestic work and child-bearing;
- traditional gender roles, stereotypes and discriminatory attitudes and norms;
- lack of party support and exclusion from decision-making party structures;
- online hate speech during political campaigns;
- the perception of politics as “dirty”;
- lack of sufficient financial resources to be considered meaningful members of political parties;
- lack of political experience,
- lack of campaign funds,
- lack of media coverage;
- gender-based stereotypes and bias in the portrayal of women by the media;
- lack of training, including in public speaking;
- lack of women branch support;
- lack of support from women's CSOs active in the field of political participation and violence from within and outside the party.

The scoring assigned to these factors by the respondents ranged from 74 to 63.9 percent, indicating they regarded the factors either as “very important” or as of “some importance”. From this it can be concluded that all of these barriers

are perceived as having a significant adverse impact on the effective participation of women in political and electoral processes.

## 5.1. Level of persistence, prevalence and impact of gender stereotypes

A previous study on gender attitudes in North Macedonia by USAID in 2019 included the following conclusion:

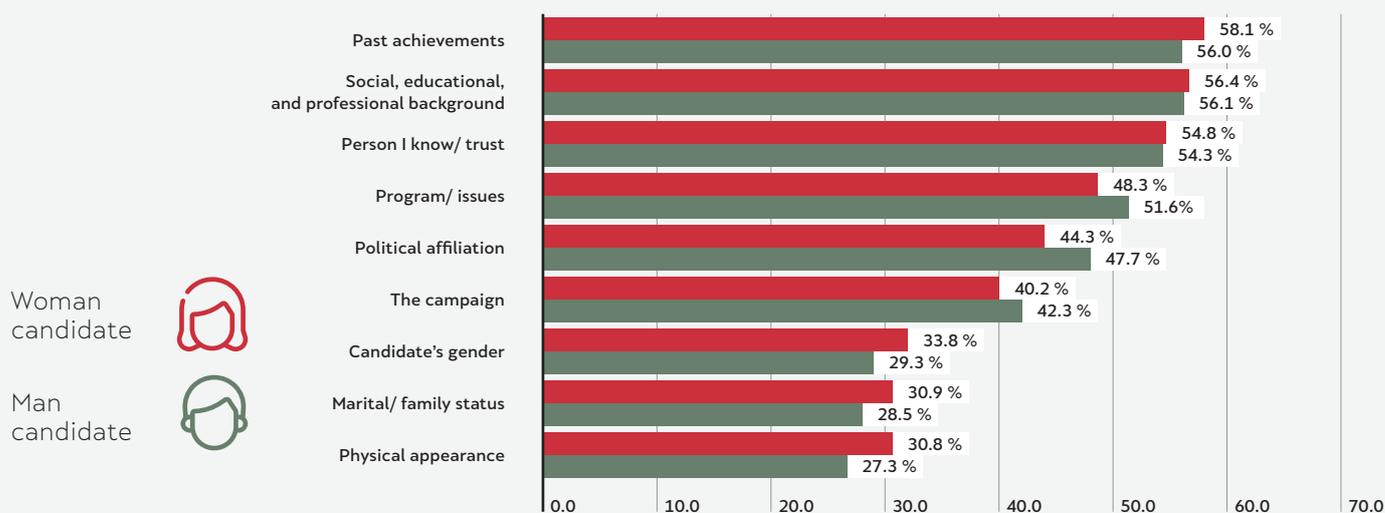
**Patriarchal and traditional social norms prevail in North Macedonia, placing women's responsibilities foremost at home. Cultural norms and beliefs do not differ widely by geographic region, but they do vary by ethnicity and are more pronounced in rural areas. Stereotypes regarding women's economic and political capacities remain widely accepted. Women of all ethnic groups report a lack of confidence to carry out activities that deviate from their traditional roles.**<sup>37</sup>

While the current study does not challenge this conclusion as to the general prevalence of conservative social norms within North Macedonia, analysis of the survey data indicates more support for women's participation in electoral and political processes among the population as a whole than might be expected given the prevalence of such traditional norms and attitudes.

<sup>37</sup> USAID/North Macedonia Gender Analysis Report, published in July 2019.

**Figure 7**

**Main criteria used to select a man/woman candidate**



For example, a slight majority of male respondents (56.6%) declared their support for increasing space for women in local politics, while 78.9 percent of the female respondents declared such support. The primary reason given for such support was the need for gender equality, equal rights and advancement of the democracy. The second most common reason given for such support was the opinion that there is no difference between men and women and that both sexes can be equally capable and successful.

Regarding the barriers to women participation identified by the survey respondents, however, the two obstacles considered most important were (i) the dual burden and disproportionate share of domestic work and childbearing that falls on women, and (ii) the prevalence of traditional gender roles, stereotypes and discriminatory attitudes and norms. These perceptions are particularly prevalent in rural areas, as demonstrated by the data derived from cross-tabulation by place of living, with 53.7 percent of respondents in rural areas assessing traditional gender roles as a very important barrier to women’s participation in politics, as against 32.2 percent of urban respondents citing this barrier as very important. Similarly, whereas 51 percent of respondents in rural areas assessed women’s disproportionate share of domestic work and parenting as a very important barrier to their participation in politics, only

37.9 percent of urban respondents shared this assessment.

As noted earlier, two-thirds of the 20.8 percent of respondents who did not support increasing space for women in politics at local level were male. The primary reason given for this stance was the stated opinion that “politics is for men, not for women”, constituting a patrimonial and “territorial” claim. The second reason given for this objection was based on a conservative and traditional view of gender roles, i.e. that women participating in politics “would not have time for their family and household chores”. Paradoxically, the third reason cited for this stance was the opinion that men are “more capable, active, stable and decisive” than women, when the option that rank numerically third as reason for not supporting space for women in politics is the “do not know” option.

Of the 24.9 percent of survey respondents who declared that they would choose a man candidate over a woman candidate despite both candidates being of equal appeal in other respects than gender, the main reason given for this choice was the opinion that men are smarter, more capable and more resourceful than women. Other motives for this choice were based on the view that men are braver and that men have more experience, knowledge and familiarity with politics. Interestingly, the same qualities of intelligence

and resourcefulness were rated much lower, at only 18 out of 24, among the 478 respondents who said they would choose a woman over a man candidate of otherwise similar appeal.

Analysis of the criteria applied by the respondents to select a men or a womencandidate reveals a clear gender bias. For while the three criteria identified by the respondents as most important in selecting candidates, namely “past achievement”, “social, educational and professional background” and “people I know/trust” were the same for both men and women candidates, gender bias was evident in other criteria. For example, respondents considered the criteria of “program/issues”, “political affiliation” and “the electoral campaign” as being somewhat more important when choosing a man candidate, while the candidate’s gender, marital/family status and physical appearance were considered somewhat more important when choosing a women candidate.

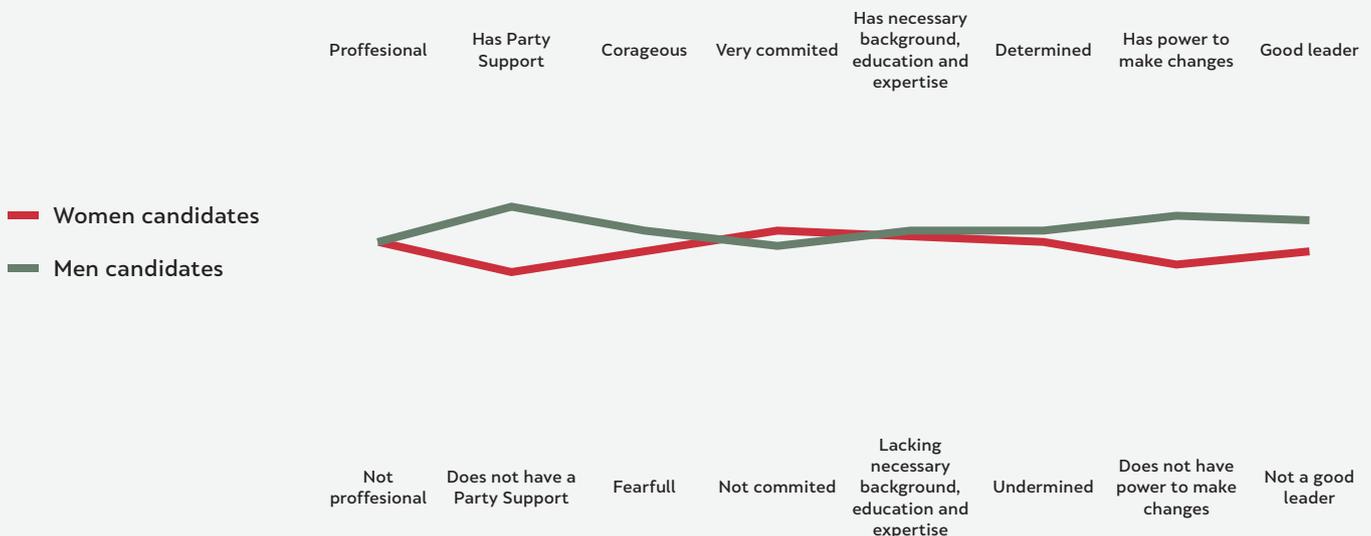
In the focus group discussions conducted for this study, the women candidates for election emphasized that women in North Macedonia are strongly identified with the roles of mother and wife and are thus widely expected to commit much more of their time and priorities to family and household management than men, includ-

ing protecting their children from the stress and pressures that come with a political career. When asked to reflect on their own experiences on the campaign trail, however, the women who had run as independent or party candidates for councilors reported having been more challenged by issues related to their public exposure than by the pressures of combining domestic, professional and campaign activities. Among the stereotypes they had to face as candidates were views such as “politics is not for women”, “that woman is driven by emotion and is not consistent and stable in making decisions” and that “women are not brave enough and capable of making difficult decisions and leading political processes”.

The survey respondents were also asked to rate man and women candidates according to a number of key characteristics on a semantic differential scale that included such traits as “not committed” versus “very committed”, “does not have party support” versus “has party support”, and “not a good leader” versus “good leader”. Echoing the above mentioned perception of lack of smartness, resourcefulness and capacity to make decisions, analysis of these data clearly indicates that the “power to make changes: and be “a good leader” directly correlates with the level of perceived “party support: for a candidate. Thus,

**Figure 7**

**Main characteristics of women and men candidates**





while women and men were perceived as being equally “professional”, “committed” and “determined”, the view that women candidates “do not have the support of their political party” corresponded with less positive perceptions of women candidates as “good leaders” and of women’s “power to make changes”.

## 5.2. Men’s domination of politics

Among the 61 percent of survey respondents who evinced the opinion that women face a more difficult path to higher political positions, the three main reasons cited were women’s family obligations and work, insufficient support from men in party leadership, and the internal rules, practices and competition within political parties. This result is consistent with the respondents’ ranking of the barriers hindering women’s participation in politics and electoral processes.

The focus group of women candidates were unanimous in their assessment that the current number of women politicians is far from satisfactory. These focus group participants attributed any recent increase in women’s membership of political parties and in the number of women on candidate lists solely to the introduction of legislated nominative quota. The women candidates declared that women otherwise only seldom achieve decision-making positions in the leader-

ship of political parties or elective and nominative state positions as mayors or ministers. According to these study participants, one reason for this is that the disproportionate burden of domestic work borne by women results in men having greater time and availability to be active in politics and thus to gain more experience in this sphere than women.

In addition, the participants in the focus group of women candidates expressed the view that there is not enough political will among men in political parties to support women and to nominate them for higher functions within their parties. According to these candidates, men find it difficult to concede power to women or to accept women occupying positions above them in the hierarchy. Further, the participants were of the opinion that since men think they have given a significant part of their power to women, when women do attain higher positions, men place greater expectations and demands on women to justify their positions.

The perception of politics as being dominated by men was particularly prevalent among the survey respondents of Albanian ethnicity. Indeed, cross-tabulation by ethnicity shows the perception that there are much less women party members is higher among respondents of Albanian ethnicity (51.8% against 18.6% for ethnic Macedonians and 27.2% for all the respondents). Of the ethnic Albanians surveyed, 74.1 percent de-

clared they had not noticed any increase in the number of women candidates in the 2021 local elections, as compared to 49 percent of ethnic Macedonians and 56.1% of all respondents who perceived such an increase. A similarly high percentage of ethnic Albanians noted that men and women were not equally present in public debates during these elections, while 52.8 percent of ethnic Macedonians and 58.2 percent of all respondents indicated that both genders were equally present in these debates.

### 5.3. Deconstruction of gender-specific vulnerability to public exposure

The North Macedonia Country Report produced by the EC Directorate-General for Neighbourhood and Enlargement Negotiations in 2021 included the following conclusion regarding the prevalence of online abuse targeted at women, especially those in public life:

Gender stereotyping persists, and women in public life are particularly susceptible to attacks through social media. The two ‘Public Room’ cases, where explicit photos and private information of girls and women were shared on an online platform, raised public concerns and civic protests against the lack of timely action by the authorities and demonstrated that there are gaps in the legislative framework.<sup>38</sup>



“During the whole campaign period, my name was being misused, especially in comments in media articles. I was called horrible things and even slandered on my honor. I think most women fear this kind of reaction as we have brothers, sisters, husbands and kids who are also part of social media and read these harsh opinions about us. There were points where I was asking myself if it was worth the abuse and whether I should continue further with my campaign.”

The women candidates in the focus groups assessed that they had been significantly more

<sup>38</sup> European Commission, Strasbourg, 19.10.2021 Staff Working Document (2021) 294 final.

exposed to hate speech in the media and social networks than their man colleagues. In their view and experience, misogyny, objectification and the sexualization of women is extremely common in the media in North Macedonia, especially on social networks. This pattern of negative portrayal and targeted attacks is far from being conducive to increasing women's participation in electoral and political processes.

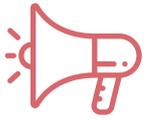
This perception was shared by the participants of the focus group on media and gender issues, who agreed that women are commonly targeted in the media and that their political careers are vulnerable to hate speech and other direct attacks on their character and dignity. Those attacks, especially on social networks and other online media, would have greatly discouraged women and reduced their willingness to engage publicly and actively in politics.

There are four main dimensions to the vulnerability of women candidates to public exposure:

**(I) LACK OF REGULATION AND OR MODERATION OF ONLINE CONTENT THAT ENTAILS A LACK OF ACCOUNTABILITY.** In the focus groups discussions, independent and party-nominated women candidates expressed satisfaction with their positive acceptance by the public and the media, though not with their treatment on social networks.

While the coverage of electoral campaigns by the traditional media (TV and press) is monitored with clear and enforceable rules (at least for parliamentary elections), online media remains largely unregulated in spite of accounting for a high number of outlets. As indicated in the 2019 Venice Commission report on Digital technologies and Elections:

There are, roughly speaking, two different forms of problematic electoral campaigning which are facilitated in this context; firstly, manipulation by political parties, candidates and their campaigns and secondly, malicious activities such as concerted disinformation campaigns, problematic accounts (bots amplifying false messages, accounts impersonating legitimate actors, etc.) or cyber espionage, which involve potentially illegal activities. Moreover, the scattered and anonymous creation of content seriously hampers the identification and attribution of responsibilities for illegal online behaviours, where voters may be seriously affected in their decisions by misleading, manip-



ulative and false information designed to influence their votes, undermining the exercise of the right to free elections and creates considerable risks to the functioning of a democratic system.<sup>39</sup>

*Another participant in the focus group made the following point:*

“People will always attack you since you are women. Even on the street they will treat you as lesser. On social media, due to its reach and anonymity, these attacks are amplified and lead to major problems. On the other hand, there is no institutional response to prevent this abuse, and people are not adequately educated. I have reviewed a lot of life threats and negative comments, mostly touching on my morals but also things about my family. I do not give importance to what such people have to say when I know my own intentions are pure, but I think men do not face the same hate-speech as women.”

In its final report on the October 2021 local elections, the OSCE/ODIHR’s Election Observation Mission noted that due to “the absence of clear regulations on campaigning in social networks and effective moderation by parties and candidates of comments on their social media pages, many candidates, frequently women, were subjected to offensive language”.

**(II) PERPETUATION OF GENDER STEREOTYPES BY TRADITIONAL MEDIA.** The persistence of patriarchal notions in society is evident in media portrayals of women candidates that perpetuate gender stereotypes. (This aspect of women’s vulnerability in public exposure is analyzed in depth in the following chapter.)

**(III) LACK OF SKILLS AND PREPARATION FOR MEDIA APPEARANCES.** The women candidates in the focus groups cited the stress arising from their

39 Joint report of the Venice Commission and of the Directorate of information society and action against crime of the Directorate General of Human Rights and Rule of Law (DGI) on the Use of digital technologies and elections, CDL-AD(2019)016, paragraph 37. Available at [https://www.venice.coe.int/webforms/documents/?pdf=CDL-AD\(2019\)016-e](https://www.venice.coe.int/webforms/documents/?pdf=CDL-AD(2019)016-e)

public exposure and public appearances in the media as another key obstacle. Some participants specifically mentioned having low self-confidence and high levels of self-criticism for slips of tongue made during public speeches. In this regard, many referred to the lack of training they had received for public appearances and media relations, with only three participants having attended such training from their political parties or from international organisations. When asked what they would do differently in a future election in light of the experience they had gained from the October 2021 elections, the most common responses were that they would be less self-critical and more self-confident, “brave” and ambitious, declaring this would enable them to express their demands and opinions more forcefully, clearly and specifically.

**(IV) THE FAILURE OF POLITICAL PARTIES TO EMPOWER AND PROTECT WOMEN CANDIDATES.** None of the ten political parties assessed in USAID’s September 2020 study on “Violence against Women in Political Parties in North Macedonia”<sup>40</sup> had formal codes of conduct regulating the behavior of party members or protecting women politicians and activists from violence. This report included the following assessment:

The representatives of SDSM, DOM, and LDP indicated that their parties plan to draft and introduce codes of conduct including provisions to prevent any form of violence. SDSM functionaries are obliged to sign a Declaration of Honor before taking any post, pledging not to use insults, defamation, violence and threats, hate speech, or give false information or promises. Alternativa is the only political party that has a Code of Ethics specifically prohibiting an official of the party to commit any sexual abuse or any act that is associated with such abuse or harassment.

In the view of survey respondents, a “change of mentality” is the most important way to achieve greater engagement of women in politics and a higher representation of women in local politics. In addition, women candidates should be better prepared to handle public exposure and receive professional training in online communications.

40 See note 20.

# 6. Enhancing participation through balanced access and fair portrayal of candidates: the role of the media in perpetuating gender stereotypes

Given that aspiring candidates for election need to campaign actively to get their presence noticed and their ideas across, and since media appearances are the best vehicle to gain an audience, it is vital to attain a better understanding of the specific role of the media in perpetuating or counteracting gender stereotypes that negatively impact on women's participation in politics.

## 6.1. The coverage of the 2021 electoral campaign in the media through gender lenses

North Macedonia's Electoral Code provides detailed regulations on the conduct of the media from the date of the announcement of the elections to the end of the political campaign. All broadcasters and websites are thereby required to cover the elections in a fair, balanced and unbiased manner<sup>41</sup>.

Several actions have been undertaken in the framework of the Law on Audio and Audiovisual Media Services of the Republic of North Macedonia, as amended by the Law (248/2018), to address the portrayal of women and girls and prevent discrimination and gender bias in the media. This law aims at integrating a gender perspective in policy-making.

Since 2012, the media regulator in North Macedonia, i.e. the Agency for Audio and Audiovisual

Media Services (AVMS), has undertaken several initiatives to document, address, and raise awareness about issues related to the representation of women and men in the media's program concepts and content.<sup>42</sup> Based on Article 17 of the Law on Equal Opportunities for Women and Men, these initiatives have included activities to improve the collection of gender-related data in the media and the provision of training for media professionals to encourage the development and use of non-stereotypical, balanced and diverse images of women and girls in the media.

The findings of an AVMS analysis<sup>43</sup> of media coverage of the 2020 parliamentary election campaign 2020 found that the media was remarkably prone to promoting men MP candidates and male perspectives and expertise on developments relating to the elections. Women candidates were thus overshadowed by their men counterparts in media coverage, with less access to various forms of promotion for their platforms. As a consequence, the profiles and messages of women candidates remained largely unseen and unheard by the public.

<sup>42</sup> Report of the government of the Republic of North Macedonia on the application of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action (1995) and the results of the Second Special Session of the UN General Assembly (2000) – Beijing +25. 2019.

<sup>43</sup> The AVMS commissioned the Societas Civilis Institute for Democracy from Skopje to conduct an analysis of gender issues and the manner of depicting and presenting women and men in the news aired by the national television services during the election campaign.

<sup>41</sup> Articles 75 and 76 of the Electoral Code.

Extracts from the Law on Audio- and Audio-Visual Media Services

**Article 48 (paragraph 1)** includes sex, sexual orientation and gender identity as forbidden grounds for discrimination in radio and TV programs.

**Article 53 (paragraph 4, line 2)** forbids discrimination based on sex and sexual orientation in the commercials.

**Article 61 (paragraph 1, line 2)** requires that all broadcasters respect the equality of liberties and rights regardless of the sex of the person (among other things).

**Article 110 (paragraph 1, line 6)** prescribes that the Public Service Broadcaster produce programs that respect and promote equality among sexes.

**Article 116 (paragraph 4)** stipulates that the membership of the Macedonian Radio and Television Program Council should reflect the diversity of Macedonian society with adequate representation of both sexes.

In media reports on the 2020 parliamentary election campaign, 128 of the 134 political party representatives mentioned or interviewed by journalists were men, as opposed to only six women. In daily news programmes dedicated to election topics, 86 percent of those who appeared as primary subjects of these programmes were men and only 14 percent were women. Qualitative analysis of the content of such daily news programmes showed that women were sexually objectified in a total of nine news items, while six reports perpetuated stereotypes about women still prevalent in society.<sup>44</sup> No gender analysis of the political campaigns of the 2017 and 2021 local elections was available.

During the 2021 political campaigns, the challenges of implementing gender-responsive budgeting at local level, could have provided a strong basis for generating fruitful discussions on gender and local governance. As pointed out by the report of the OSCE/ODIHR Election Observation Mission, however, “women were under-represented in parties’ campaigns and topics relating to gender equality and women’s rights were largely absent from contestants’ platforms and speeches, notwithstanding limited attempts by a few parties to present such policies to voters”.

<sup>44</sup> Analysis of gender during the election campaign for the 2020 Early Parliamentary Elections. Aleksandra Jovevska Gjorgjevic – Societas Civis Institute for Democracy.

## 6.2. Unfair access and unequal portrayals in the media of women candidates during the 2021 local elections

Only a third of the citizens surveyed for the current study were of the opinion that women and men are equally present in public debates, with ethnic Albanian citizens and respondents in rural areas being least likely to share this opinion. A slight difference in perceptions was evident when respondents were specifically asked if both genders were equally present in public debates during the last local elections, though six out of 10 respondents remained of the opinion that these debates had not been balanced in terms of gender.

The survey data collected for this study further reveals a notably greater level of reluctance among men than women to acknowledge that higher expectations are placed on women when they are public figures. Again, an almost 20 percent difference between male and female respondents is evident regarding this issue, which is also the approximate difference in this regard between respondents with only primary education versus those with higher education diplomas. Whereas 67.7 percent of female respondents agreed that women in public life face higher expectations, 52.6 percent of male respondents either disagreed, did not know, or declined to answer.

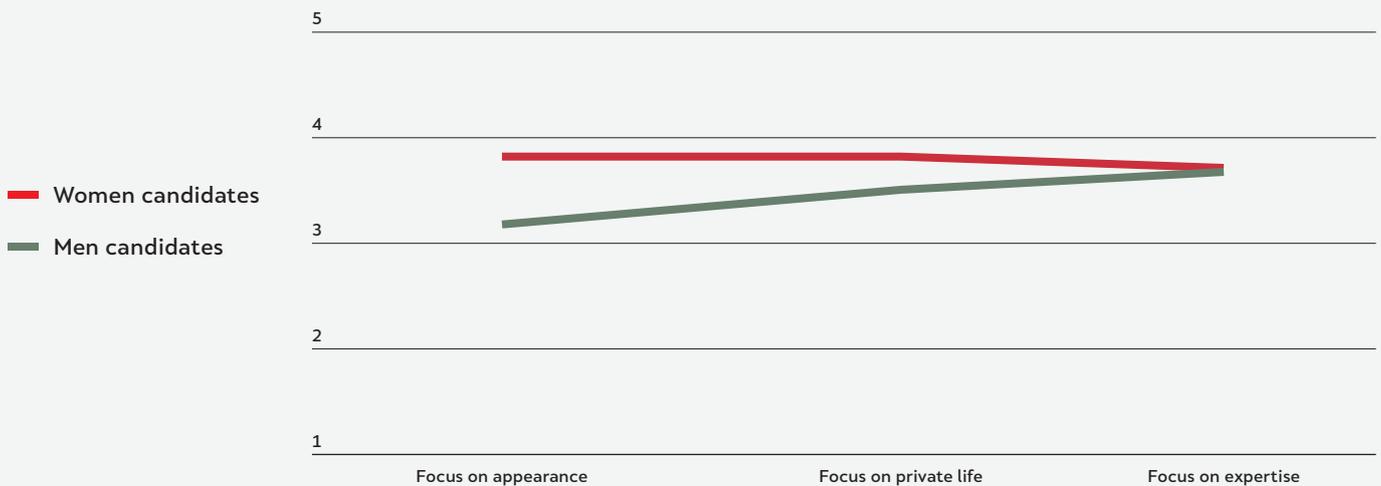
The research data further confirms gender bias in media portrayals of women candidates in their much greater focus on the appearance and private lives of women candidates.

This bias was further acknowledged by the participants in the focus group of journalists, media representatives and representatives of the Council of Media Ethics. These participants not only confirmed the lack of equality and fairness in the way men and women are portrayed as political candidates but also recognized that women are very frequently objectified and sexualized in media portrayals. Some of the focus group participants referred to previous analyses undertaken by their organizations to substantiate their assessment that women in the media are often portrayed in the media as vulnerable victims and as individuals without decision-making power, especially during the Covid-19 pandemic.

The selection of candidates for televised debates

**Figure 9**

Focus of media on different aspects of women and men candidates



and talk-shows in private media mostly remains a matter of editorial discretion. The journalists in the focus groups organized for this study emphasized the difficulties involved in motivating women to attend broadcast public debates. According to these media practitioners, the three most common reasons for resistance among women to participate in public debates were as follows: (i) embarrassment, feeling uncomfortable in front of cameras; (ii) fear of hate speech related to their physical appearance rather than their expertise and what they actually say, especially on social media; and (iii) insufficient support from the political parties they represent. Disparities in participation of women in political debates and their invitation to such debates is a direct consequence of gender-biased portrayals of women politicians.

### 6.3. Supporting women's participation: Moving from the perpetuation of gender stereotypes to the active promotion of gender equality

In the focus group discussions held with media practitioners, the participants suggested a number of ways to help overcome barriers to women's

participation and portrayal in the media. The two main proposals were as follows: i) to empower and/or establish human resources departments in each media to adopt clearly defined regulations and procedures for ensuring staff gender equality; and ii) to mainstream gender equality in the editorial policy of all media outlets. The need for such regulations is evident from the fact that although the journalists and media representatives tended to offer positive assessments of the level of gender sensitivity in their respective media, underlying adherence to their own internal rules and guidelines, they also acknowledged that most matters relating to gender in the media were left to the journalists' discretion and the media's self-regulation mechanism without any further control or coherent strategy. These matters of discretion relate to the inclusion of female speakers and experts and the portrayal of women, as well as to any initiatives aimed at promoting women leaders or exposing gender stereotypes in the media.

Therefore, a gendered editorial policy, implemented by gender-balanced editorial boards, could facilitate the mainstreaming of gender awareness-raising, including the recognition of gender discriminatory speech and the need for gender-balanced reporting to increase sensitivity among media practitioners. As suggested by the journalists and media representatives who



participated in the focus group, editorial offices could introduce the practice of self-analysis and reflection on the portrayal of women and gender issues in the media as an ongoing “conversation” with the journalists. To inform and enhance such ongoing discussions, journalists and editors should further be incentivized to undertake training to develop their gender-sensitivity skills. Such trainings could have a positive impact in facilitating effective media products that expose stereotypes, prejudices, discrimination and hate speech against women in general and particularly against women in politics, as well as in media products promoting gender equality and women’s participation in electoral and political processes. They would form the framework to enable the media to start addressing the gender-biased coverage and portrayal of women candidates identified in this and other research.

The media practitioners in the focus group also recommended the enforcement of stricter controls on the operation of online media and the rhetoric of social networks. In addition, they emphasized the need for capacity-building for women candidates to help women gain public-speaking skills and strengthen their self-confidence. According to these participants, such capacity-building should be undertaken by political parties, since parties have a duty to provide all necessary support to women candidates to em-

power them to participate in the media and in politics on an equal basis with men candidates.

# 7. Main findings, conclusions and recommendations

This study finds that women continue to be under-represented in politics in the country in spite of numerous efforts to close the gender gap, and that women continue to face significant challenges in exerting any substantive political influence.

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**41 percent of male respondents and 61.1 percent of female respondents perceive women running for office as a positive and necessary development.**

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While the survey results indicate that general interest in local politics is relatively low, especially among younger generations, the level of specific interest in women and their political participation in local and parliamentary elections among the respondents was much higher due to the marked opinion of women respondents. However, the clear evidence of support among women for the participation of women in local politics identified in this study did not translate into a preferential vote for women in elections. In general, the survey results indicate that although most of the public have a balanced and quite accurate perception of women's lack of access to leadership positions, there is also clear evidence of men resistance to the imposition of gender quota formulas.

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**56.6 percent of male respondents and 78.9 percent of female respondents**

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**expressed support for increasing the space for women in politics at local level.**

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There is a notable 22.3 percentage point difference that can be explained by the fact that a third of the male respondents evinced views reflecting traditional stereotypes of gender characteristics and roles. Interestingly, the view that a “change of mentality” is what is most needed to achieve a higher quality of representation for women in local politics was shared almost equally by male and female respondents. The influence of gender stereotypes on the respondents' choice of women or men candidates reflects the unfair portrayal of women politicians in the media, especially in the media focus on the marital status and physical appearance of women candidates rather than their views and proposals regarding political issues.

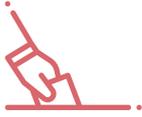
## 7.1. Electoral Reform and the Legal Framework

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**67% of all respondents support increasing the space for women in local politics**

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This study finds evidence of a level of support and demand for women's representation in politics that has not been satisfied by political parties and significantly exceeds current levels of repre-



sentation. This finding should serve as an incentive to develop a more inclusive model of electoral competition in majoritarian single-member constituencies elections, demonstrating that political parties take into account that voters support increasing space for women in local politics.

**“Where electoral systems are shown to have a negative impact on the political representation of women in elected bodies, adjust or reform those systems to promote gender-balanced representation”**

Appendix of the Recommendation Rec(2003)3 of the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe to Member States on Balanced Participation of Women and Men in Political and Public Decision-Making.

**In view of the low level of women elected as mayors, there is a need to initiate a discussion on ways to improve the inclusivity of the electoral system.**

Recognizing that electoral reform is gendered, it follows that all discussions and options on such reform should be assessed in terms of their impact on gender representation. Such considerations should apply, for example, in any discussion on proposals to move towards an open list system for MP and councillor elections. In the case of closed lists, as currently apply in North Macedonian elections, it is the political parties who determine the ranking order of candidates on the electoral ballot, while the voter endorses the entire list without any possibility of changing the order in which the seats are allocated to candidates. With open or free lists, by contrast, voters can alter the ranking order of the candidates on the lists. Where preference voting or

**“The Committee of Ministers recommends that the COE member states should consider adopting legislative reforms to introduce parity thresholds for candidates in elections at all levels. Where proportional lists are applied, the introduction of “zipper systems”, alternating both sexes, should be considered (Rec(2003)3, Appendix A, 3).”**

cross-voting is possible, however, voters will not necessarily choose candidates from both sexes: open lists may work to the advantage of well-known men candidates.

The impacts of open lists on gender representation varies according to national experience and context. In the UK, for example, a study from 2017 reached the following conclusion:

The openness of electoral rules does influence support for female candidates overall. The data provide clear evidence that open electoral systems are associated with more votes for women and that the panachage system brings about the most votes for women.<sup>45</sup>

In elections held in Bosnia and Herzegovina since its introduction of gender quotas and open lists in 2002, there has been a dramatic reduction in the number of women elected as compared to the elections of 1998 when quotas were applied together with closed lists. Research from the European Parliament and from the Venice Commission has emphasized the potential negative impacts of open list on gender representation but assessed differently the capacity of preferential votes to counterbalance these impacts. According to the European Parliament’s report on the “differential impact of electoral systems on female political representation”:

**While other factors such as the socio-political context of each country must be taken into account, it can be said that preferential systems, where the electorate is left to choose, are a potential barrier to female political representation. However, it also implies that political parties themselves have a vital role to play in terms of putting female candidates forward in eligible positions; this is especially the case with electoral systems of closed lists.<sup>46</sup>**

According to the Venice Commission’s report on the “impact of electoral systems on women’s representation in politics:

45 Golder, S., Stephenson, L., Van der Straeten, K., Blais, A., Bol, D., Harfst, P., & Laslier, J. (2017). Votes for Women: Electoral Systems and Support for Female Candidates. *Politics & Gender*, 13(1), 107–131.

46 European Parliament, “Differential impact of electoral systems on female political representation”, Directorate-General for Research, Working document WOMEN’S RIGHTS SERIES - W-10. Available at [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/workingpapers/femm/w10/1\\_en.htm](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/workingpapers/femm/w10/1_en.htm)



Open lists may work to the advantage of well-known male candidates. Thus, there is an inherent danger that the introduction of open lists may result in the election of fewer women...

However, open lists need not hamper women's representation. To the degree that women organize themselves and actively campaign for voting female candidates, preference voting may not work against women but may result in stronger women's representation.<sup>47</sup>

Although the research conducted for the current study confirms there is still a solid 36 percent of women in North Macedonia who are either not much or not at all interested in women's participation in politics, analysis of the survey results reveals that the very high level of support among women for the genderization of political and electoral processes does not translate into an automatic preferential vote of women for women candidates. For this reason, it appears that the best way **to consolidate and increase the number of women in elected positions is to introduce the "zipper system"** recommended by the Council of Europe.<sup>48</sup> Further **provisions to ensure balanced representation among the lists' bearers could also be introduced in the Electoral Code.**

Prior research has found ample evidence that

47 Venice Commission's report on the "impact of electoral systems on women's representation in politics, CDL-AD(2009)029, 2009, available at [https://www.venice.coe.int/webforms/documents/default.aspx?pdf=CDL-AD\(2009\)029-e](https://www.venice.coe.int/webforms/documents/default.aspx?pdf=CDL-AD(2009)029-e)

48 Recommendation Rec (2003)3 of the Committee of Ministers to member states on balanced participation of women and men in political and public decision-making

the lack of regulation of political communications and accountability for hate speech and/or discriminatory language on social networks, particularly during political campaigns, translates directly into greater vulnerability for women candidates to negative public exposure. In a joint report,<sup>49</sup> the Venice Commission noted that:

If on the one hand the use of digital technologies may make democratic processes more accessible to all citizens, it may also bring about obstacles to the exercise and development of electoral democracy, entailing new forms of undue interference with the right to vote and the right to stand for election... the right to freedom of expression... and the right to respect for private life.

The filtering, blocking and take-down of illegal content on the internet in order to combat notably hate crimes and national security, as well as to protect intellectual property and privacy or defamation rights are a necessary but delicate exercise which however may be abused and result in censorship and in illegitimate silencing of political opponents. Any such measures must be in accordance with the law... The criteria of necessity in a democratic society and proportionality must always be respected

49 Joint Report of the Venice Commission and of the Directorate of Information Society and Action against Crime of the Directorate General of Human Rights and Rule of Law (DGI), on Digital Technologies and Elections, adopted by the Council of Democratic Elections at its 65th meeting (Venice, 20 June 2019) and by the Venice Commission at its 119th Plenary Session (Venice, 21-22 June 2019). Available at [https://www.venice.coe.int/webforms/documents/?pdf=CDL-AD\(2019\)016-e](https://www.venice.coe.int/webforms/documents/?pdf=CDL-AD(2019)016-e)

and effective judicial review by independent and impartial courts must be guaranteed.

On the basis of these research findings, North Macedonia should consider ways to improve the regulation of online political activities, and sanctioning defamation and hate speech during electoral campaigns.

## 7.2. Political Parties

While political parties are prone to making “soft” political commitments to good behaviour through the signing of codes of conduct ahead of political campaigns, these actors are often absent when the time comes to put the party’s words into action by regulating their digital presence through the moderation of comments of the party and party candidates’ digital communication outlets on social networks. **Political parties in North Macedonia that have not yet adopted formal codes of conduct regulating their members’ behaviour should adopt such codes as a matter of urgency, including details of applicable procedures and sanctions for non-compliance with the party’s code.**

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**61 percent of respondents think it is more difficult for women to access higher political positions.**

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The data collected and analyzed for the current study indicate that the majority of citizens share the view that women politicians do not have sufficient support from their political parties. While meaningful efforts are needed to achieve a real gender equality in political parties, it is recommended that advocacy efforts to improve the representation of women in decision-making party structures should shift to a strategy of focusing on men in leadership positions to achieve equal opportunities within political parties.

Sex cross-tabulation of the survey data indicates a clear disparity between public support for increasing the political space for women politicians and positive perceptions of women candidates. When asked which factors prevented qualified women from advancing to management positions within organizations and political parties, the survey respondents cited “insufficient support from men in leadership” and internal party rules, practices and competition as the second main factor after the “dual burden of family ob-

ligations and work”. The data further provide evidence of a gender-based bias in perceptions of the level of expectations placed on women when they become public figures. However, gender was not significant in the respondents’ assessments of the factors that make it most difficult for women to access higher political positions.

Political parties in North Macedonia should reconsider and revise their political offer in terms of candidates in light of the evidence provided by this study of widespread negative assessments of their commitment to gender equality. In undertaking such a review, parties should also take note of the survey data showing that 67 percent of citizens are in favour of increasing political space for women. The need for parties to change is further underlined by the evidence this study provides that interest in politics is significantly lower among voters under thirty years of age:

Notwithstanding the desirability of including a gender quota in party structures, this proposal is likely to face a lot of opposition and women in politics will need to convince not only their electorate but also their fellow male party members and the party leadership. Given past experiences of such resistance, as well as the documented persistence and prevalence of gender stereotypes combined with negative perceptions of electoral gender quotas among the public, political parties will need support to increase their capacity for monitoring gender balance, to conduct gender audits and use gender-mainstreaming tools. Such efforts are justified given the evidence that the inclusion of women in managerial positions within party structures translates into more nominations and greater party support for women candidates.

**Political parties should open their leadership structures to women and should consider refocusing their manifesto on gender issues.**

The quantitative and qualitative data collected for this study from survey respondents and focus group participants confirm a widespread perception, confirmed by the personal experiences of many women candidates, that lack of party support can leave women candidates insufficiently prepared for success in their campaigns. Efforts need to be undertaken both by women politicians and by political parties to ensure women gain, retain and expand political capital, including through specific skills in public speaking and techniques for effective digital communication.

In sum, political parties in North Macedonia should provide all necessary support and encouragement for women candidates to speak in public debates, including through training for women candidates and elected representatives in the use of information and communication technologies.

### 7.3. Electoral Administration

This study finds that the State Election Commission, as the body with responsibility for the overall conduct of elections, should increase its institutional commitment to mainstreaming gender in all of its activities. This conclusion is based on the non-compliance with gender equality provisions in the nomination process of the SEC Commissioners and the insufficiency of sex-disaggregated data related to women's participation in political and electoral processes. Analysis further suggests that the aforementioned challenge stems from a lack of vision for the governance of the SEC on the part of Parliament, as evidenced by the numerous changes to the SEC's composition and the length of tenure of State Election Commissioners since 2015.

**The SEC could revise the guidelines on the methods and procedures for submission, receipt and confirmation of candidate lists for local elections, to suppress the inherent gender bias that highlight the less possible ranking scenario for women candidates in the making of the candidates' lists.**

Building institutional commitment to gender equality entails strategic and long-term planning. Although the SEC has partly achieved this with its production of a strategic plan and a gender action plan, greater encouragement is needed to ensure the **full implementation of the activities foreseen in the gender action plan. These activities include the elaboration and delivery of targeted training for management and staff and the production of sex-disaggregated electoral data.**

To facilitate the collection of gender data and the disaggregation of these data, the SEC should further undertake a review of electoral forms and databases, including those which it has subcontracted to external private parties. The SEC should be supported in establishing guidelines and procedures for data collection as well as the improvement of candidate application procedures. The SEC should also consider engaging in

strategies and partnerships to improve the dissemination of sex disaggregated electoral data beyond the mere publication of such data on its website.

### 7.4. Media

Overall, as the study indicates, women are engaged in an ongoing and uneven struggle for equal opportunities and enhanced participation in political and electoral processes. Their position is further aggravated by the amplification of gender stereotypes and often demeaning portrayals in the traditional and online media, which directly undermine the goal of gender equality and women's greater participation in politics.

The Agency for Audio and Audiovisual Media Services, as the main media regulatory body in North Macedonia, is committed to documenting and confronting patterns and instances of stereotypical portrayals of women in the media environment and is engaged in a constant dialogue with broadcasters and media outlets. **Fairness of portrayal and access to the media, particularly at local level, could benefit from reinforcement of the capacity of the AVMS to monitor local election campaigns and from the provision of additional targeted training for journalists.**

Support should also be provided for the proposals of the media practitioners interviewed for this study to shift away from the perpetuation of gender stereotypes towards the active promotion of gender equality. In particular, **efforts should be made to support the proposals of media practitioners reported in this study for mainstreaming gender equality in editorial policies and for establishing human resource mechanisms to monitor and promote the advancement of women in politics in the media.**

Finally, to help address the vulnerability to online abuse as one of the key barriers to women's effective participation in political and electoral processes, **greater efforts should be made by all responsible state bodies to monitor online media more effectively, both in general and specifically with regard to online media campaigns during national and local elections.**



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