

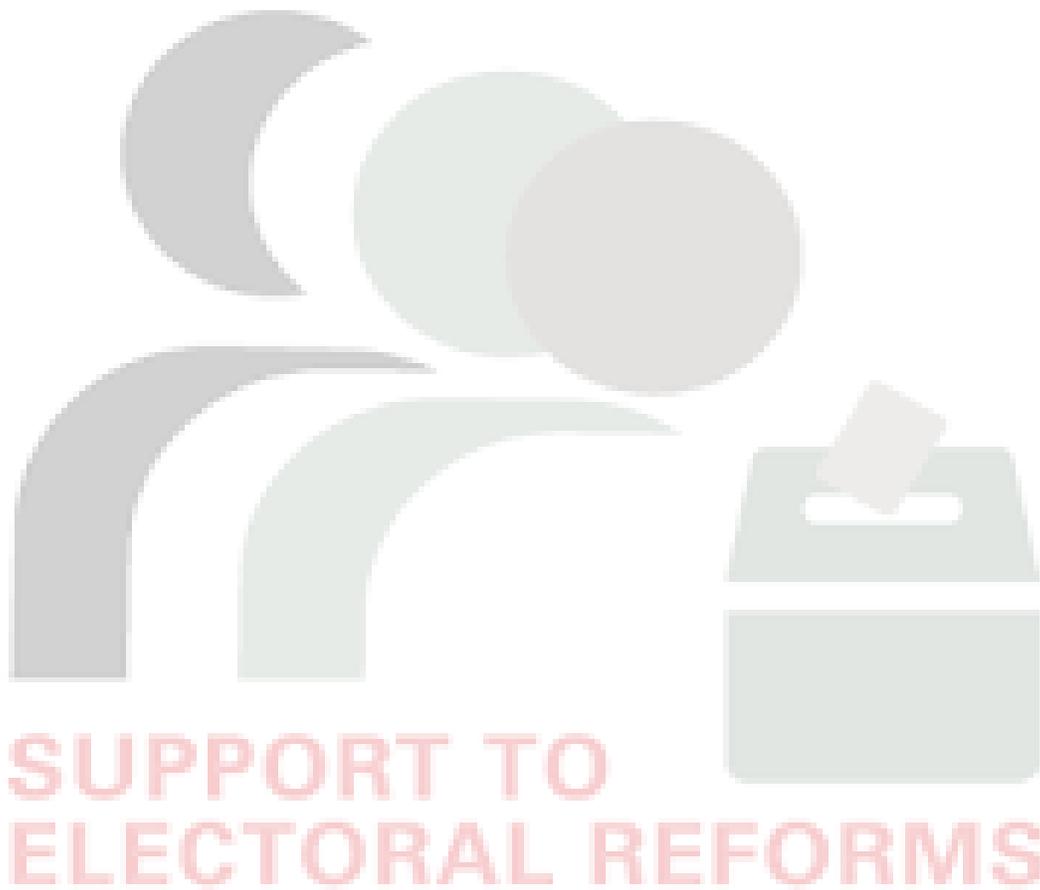


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*Women's
Representation in
Elections and Political
Processes in North
Macedonia
- Lessons Learned and
Recommendations for 2024
Parliamentary Elections*



ПОДДРШКА НА ИЗБОРНИ РЕФОРМИ
MBËSHTETJE E REFORMAVE ZGJEDHORE

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Executive summary

- *The strategic objective of this analysis is to explore the factors hindering the meaningful engagement of women parliamentarians in the decision-making process and internal party-political activities as well as with the electorate, and to present related findings and recommendations to concerned stakeholders.*

- *The applied methodology included a root cause analysis of the existing norms and exemplary practices, factorization of the key findings and recommendations of the 2021 research on gender participation and a series of face-to-face semi-structured interviews. Based on this methodology, a guide/questionnaire was developed to structure a series of 17 in-depth interviews with women parliamentarians and other important stakeholders of various profiles, which were conducted in September 2023¹.*



- *Political parties have generally engaged in limited gender mainstreaming² of their structures stemming from the general political context, including international and regional commitments, and the EU integration process. However, proper gender mainstreaming requires strong political will to effectively share decision-making powers within the party, serious commitment and dedicated means and resources to monitor and adjust all aspects of party-political life to gender equality standards, and full empowerment of the women's section.*

¹ In order to gauge a wide variety of experiences, the interviewee pool comprised of members of the government, members of Parliament, members of party women's sections, senior party leadership responsible for compiling candidate lists, and party leaders and/or independent candidates from larger and smaller political parties.

² Gender mainstreaming 'involves the integration of a gender perspective into the preparation, design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of policies, regulatory measures and spending programs, with a view to promoting equality between women and men, and combating discrimination' - European Institute for Gender Equality.

- *Political parties should: increase gender mainstreaming efforts; consider strengthening the financial independence of the women's sections; resort to introduction of progressive internal voluntary quotas; and promote more women in leadership positions within the party, the Government and the public administration.*
- *Visibility, most notably in leadership positions, is an important factor for the level of acceptance of women candidates. An indicator of the degree of the party's openness towards women leaders would be the percentage of women ranked first and second on the party closed candidate lists. Increased visibility and public exposure in the political field come at an especially high price for women politicians. Maintaining the law and order in the political speech, particularly during the campaign period, requires a clearer legal framework, strong and diligent prosecution and sanctions, and serious commitment by the party leadership and its campaign offices. By taking united actions in a broad empathy-based counterstrategy, women parliamentarians could lead by example.*

Introduction

Political parties are holding back the door to women's representation. The male political domination, in particular in party politics, has a significant influence on the process of candidate selection and is a major obstacle for female politicians in terms of access to leadership positions³. The 2022 Gender Equality Index for North Macedonia confirmed that *“the absence of quotas for participation in all structures of power results in drastically lower participation of women in executive and local government [structures] and a disproportionate distribution of political power in favour of men. Although there has been an increase in the representation of women at the various levels of government, it is still below the 50:50 strategic commitment for equal political participation of women and men at any level of political power (as per the Strategy for Gender Equality 2022 – 2027, Official Gazette of North Macedonia, No. 170/2022). Therefore, gender inequalities remain high and indicate the need for a strong commitment to overcoming the inequality in representation in the executive, legislative, and local government structures and the overall impact of women in the political life”*.⁴

This analysis has been conducted within the framework of the project Support to Electoral Reforms in North Macedonia, financed by the Government of Switzerland and 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.

³ “Women's participation in political processes in North Macedonia: A mixed picture for gender equality in the context of the 2021 local elections”, IFES North Macedonia, 2022; The research found that “most citizens share the view that women politicians do not have sufficient support from their political parties. 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 obligations”.

⁴ Gender Equality Index for North Macedonia 2022, p.22, Section 7, Domain of Power; The National Gender Equality Index for North Macedonia was developed by the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy and the State Statistical Office of the Republic of North Macedonia in cooperation with the European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE) under EIGE's cooperation with the Western Balkans and Türkiye within the Instrument of Pre-Accession Assistance (IPA) of the European Union, funded by the European Commission.

Ahead of the 2024 parliamentary elections, the objective of this analysis is to explore the factors hindering the meaningful engagement of women parliamentarians in the decision-making process, and internal party-political activities as well as with the electorate. The analysis also aimed at identifying good practices and positive experiences that will be further shared with the concerned stakeholders, along with specific recommendations for further improvements.



Based on the agreed methodology designed to provide a better overview of the achievements and challenges faced by women parliamentarians, 17 in-depth structured interviews were conducted from 18 to 22 September, 2023. The interviewee pool comprised a cross-section of the following profiles: women parliamentarians⁵ affiliated with eight political parties, members of the Parliament's Committee on Equal Opportunities for Women and Men, party leaders (both female and male), presidents of parties' women sections/forums and representatives of party leadership structures responsible for the compilation of party candidate lists. The analysis presents the main findings and provides respective recommendations for the concerned stakeholders, ahead of the upcoming 2024 parliamentary elections.

1) Women and political parties

There are three main strategies for promotion of women's political participation: introduction of quotas in the electoral system, creation of women's sections, and establishment of control commissions to ensure gender equality within the party.⁶

Out of 63 registered political parties in North Macedonia, 22 are represented in the National Assembly, following the 2020 parliamentary elections. All nine political parties included in the analysis⁷ have long-established women's sections⁸ in their party structures, in charge of

⁵ All women parliamentarians are members of the Women Parliamentarians' Club.

⁶ Venice Commission, Code of Good Practice in the Field of Political Parties, cdl- ad (2009) 021;

⁷ SDSM, VMRO-DPMNE, DUI, Alliance for Albanians, Alternativa, NSDP, LDP, DOM, Party for the Movement of the Turks in Macedonia.

⁸ There are different names each party uses for structures within the party that gathers women members. Also there are variations how these structures operate and where are they placed in party hierarchy. For the purpose of this document women section is used as a general term.

mobilizing the female electorate of the party as well as proposing and supporting party's women candidates. Many interlocutors noted that in terms of candidate selection, the proposals of the women's section are not systematically considered, rendering the women's section a mere bargaining chip in negotiations between the central leadership and the presidents of the local party branches. Some interlocutors questioned the efficiency of the women's section, arguing that it serves more to promote the party-political agenda, rather than gender equality. However, while many political parties of the countries with traditional democracies within the Council of Europe acknowledged the negative potential of sidelining women candidates and issues⁹ and consequently abandoned the women's section approach, most interlocutors have opined that this approach is still relevant in North Macedonia as it provides an entry point for women in politics.



All interlocutors agreed that the impact of the women's section is marginalized by the lack of financial autonomy and the conditioned approval of its activities by a male-dominated party leadership.

Therefore, political parties should consider entrusting an extended budget control to the women's sections by introducing a dedicated budget line. This increased independence would help streamline the women's section work and activities, making them more efficient, visible, and less dependable on party leadership.

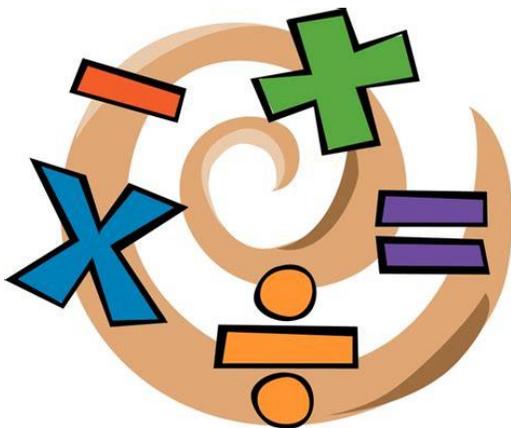
Most parliamentary political parties in the country have taken concrete steps towards ensuring gender mainstreaming in their internal party structures. Some have introduced internal quota regulations that mandate a 30% to 50% gender representation at each level of the party structures. Although to different degrees, the scope of this intervention has thus far been mainly reduced to achieving representative numbers of women and men; therefore it has to be further reflected in both central and local party structures.



⁹ See CDL-PI(2016)003 "Compilation of Venice Commission opinions and reports concerning political parties» paragraph 2. Participation of women in political parties, p.23;

As a result of the efforts to increase women representation in internal party structures, almost all political parties currently have a female vice president. However, interlocutors opined that women remain generally underrepresented within the executive structures with an average ratio rarely exceeding 30%¹⁰. The same view was shared concerning the heads of the party branches at local level. Regardless of the internal structure of the political party, these positions always play a decisive role in the nomination of candidates and their ranking on candidate lists. **Political parties without internal quotas should consider their introduction to increase the number of women in executive positions at all levels of the party structure. Furthermore, gender mainstreaming in all aspects of the party work, including internal mechanisms to monitor the internal placement of women as members and leaders, should be strengthened. A strong political will is necessary to break the glass-ceiling access to leadership positions.**

While some women parliamentarians acknowledged gender-based internal party struggles, women from smaller political parties¹¹ indicated unfair repartition of resources in terms of public funding, time, access, and opportunities compared to larger parties. The Law on Financing of Political Parties allocates the annual state funding from the national budget based on two criteria: 30% of the envelope is distributed equally to all political parties that have won at least 1% of the votes of the turnout at the last elections for representatives in the



Assembly of the Republic of North Macedonia, at national level, or at the last held local elections in the self-government unit; the remaining 70% is distributed proportionally to the number of elected representatives (in the National Assembly and in Municipal Councils).

“Taking into account that almost all electoral systems tend to have a concentrating effect in favour of larger parties when translating votes into parliamentary

seats and popular support being the main criterion for distribution, it would seem more appropriate to consider the number of votes (like in Armenia, Estonia, Norway and, as

¹⁰ SDSM has introduced a 50% voluntary quota throughout the party structure.

¹¹ Smaller political parties are considered those that do not have the required minimum number of Members in Parliament (MP) to form a parliamentary group (at least five MPs).

complementary criterion, in Romania) or an alternative direct measure of popular support such as party membership, rather than an indirect measure which automatically incorporates the distorting effect of the electoral system".¹² In a closed party list proportional representation system, technical electoral thresholds prompted by the delimitation and number of electoral districts, as well as the highest average seat allocation key, are not favorable to smaller political parties. This discrepancy is exacerbated by the distribution of public funding based on the number of seats won. Women parliamentarians from smaller parties felt unfairly disadvantaged and therefore less empowered. Several potential electoral reforms have been noted by all interlocutors. Awaiting a potentially new proportional representation system formula, **a modification of the public funding repartition key could be considered to further level the playing field between political parties, so that smaller parties and their women candidates with fewer funds at their disposal have a meaningful chance to be part of the political landscape during the next parliamentary elections campaign.**

Another measure to foster women's participation and encourage political parties to recruit a higher number of women candidates could be the introduction of an additional criteria for party funding which refers to women representation on the list and elected in the National Assembly and in Municipal Councils.¹³

Recounting their personal experiences, the interviewed women parliamentarians noted that within the political parties, men have easier access to party support and are the main "facilitators" and "go-to" persons in solving a grievance or advancing an issue. A collective impression is that women need to make additional efforts and undergo significant individual struggles to grow influence within the party and secure party support as compared to men. Some interlocutors noted that they have to constantly provide reassurances about their availability and commitment while coping with the dual burden of family and professional

¹² Cfr. Ingrid VAN BIEZEN, Financing Political Parties and Election Campaigns – Guidelines, Integrated project "Making Democratic Institutions Work", Council of Europe Publishing, 2003, pp. 45 and 46. Cited in Venice Commission, Code of Good Practice in the Field of Political Parties, cdl- ad (2009) 021, paragraph 163.

¹³ In the Republic of Moldova, since 2016, the legislative framework offers an optional incentive to promote women as candidates: the political parties that have at least 40% women candidates proposed for constituencies will receive a 10% increase of the state budgetary allocation for the election year, as well as 5% increase for every woman elected as MP in a constituency.

obligations. However, despite the general consent among the interlocutors that they feel empowered and supported by their party, a generational distinction should be drawn between the political parties established earlier and those established more recently. While women had to progressively fight for their space within the larger traditional parties, the path seems easier in the more recently created parties¹⁴ structured in a time when gender equality was higher in the political agenda.

2) Women and parliamentary elections

All interlocutors acknowledged that the identification and recruitment of women candidates can prove challenging. Women who have become successful in the private sector would rather stay where they acquired peer recognition than embrace a new career in politics, a sector with poor reputation and high level of public exposure. In addition, in rural areas with deeply rooted traditional values, women are even more reluctant to engage in politics. Political parties have developed different strategies to attract and identify women candidates. Some resort to public calls, others rely on their women's section as well as on inputs from local branches or their central body. **Political parties should develop outreach strategies with the view of increasing the level of acceptability and recruitment of women candidates in rural and remote/isolated areas. Non-governmental organizations should keep on raising public awareness regarding women's participation into political life with a focus on these rural and remote/isolated areas. In addition, various development efforts should include independent women candidates and support their capacity building for the next parliamentary elections. Independent women candidates due to lack of party structure and funding are not beneficiary of development initiatives.**



In the closed list system of proportional representation, the higher the position on the list, the higher the chance of being elected. During the 2020 early parliamentary elections, out of

¹⁴ Established after 2015;

1,598 candidates on 78 lists, 675 were women, and women headed 19 out of 78 lists. The highest number of lists led by women – four out of six – was registered by “Voice for Macedonia”. The SDSM lists for each electoral district featured a woman and a man as the first two candidates, but woman was placed on the first position only in one case. VMRO-DPMNE’s lists were led by women in two electoral districts.¹⁵

The male-dominated decision-making process within the parties tends to show a clear reluctance to nominating women as leaders of the candidate lists which in turn diminishes women’s visibility in the political field.

With the support of international partners, many political parties have set up party academies/capacity building programmes for their candidates. In addition to specific trainings for candidates, political academies are offering an entry door as well as a path within the party. This approach seemed to have been successful in identifying and training women candidates.

On the other hand, some women candidates are disadvantaged on the campaign trail by an unbalanced access to internal party resources and funds, while other face a general poor access to public funding due to a repartition key unfavorable to smaller parties. **The parties**



should establish or strengthen the internal monitoring mechanisms to track and analyze gender participation and gender equality. One such example would be to include gender-sensitive analysis of the distribution of funds to the party’s candidates in order to redress any evidenced gender-based discrepancy in the allocation of party resources. This should be an area of further

development for political parties as it requires solid internal capacities for gender responsive budgeting within parties.

While some interlocutors have experienced instances of being sidelined, hindered, or mansplained during their political life, the majority agreed that such treatment subsides once elected. These findings are in line with the monitoring report on the quality of debate in the

¹⁵ OSCE/ODHIR 15 July 2020 Early Parliamentary Elections Final Report, <https://www.osce.org/odihr/elections/north-macedonia>

National Assembly for the first semester of 2023 of the Parliament Watch project¹⁶ and are welcomed particularly to improve the reputation the national politics has acquired in the context of the 2015 wiretapping scandal and the 2017 storming of the assembly premises. Courtesy in expressing dissenting views is fundamental to a peaceful political climate and in this regard the National Assembly should aim to be exemplary.

3) Increasing gender representation through electoral reform

The number of women parliamentarians has been continually on the rise since the first introduction of gender quotas in the Electoral Code in 2001. As of today, 51 out of 120 seats of the National Assembly are held by women, bringing the overall gender ratio to 42.5%. A total of 43 women parliamentarians won their seat during the last parliamentary elections, while eight occupied a seat vacated by the preceding male candidate on the list who had joined the executive structures. Under the current representation formula¹⁷, the persisting challenge in terms of gender equality is the nomination of women candidates as heads of lists by the predominantly male political party leadership.

Proposed electoral reform options by the interviewed interlocutors included reducing the number of the country's six electoral districts to one, or replacing the closed list system with an open list system. Without an additional placement order regarding the first and second positions on the candidate lists to complement the existing formula, the advantage of the single electoral unit in terms of gender representation needs to be demonstrated.

Regarding the open lists option, the Venice Commission's Report on the Impact of Electoral Systems on Women's Representation in Politics highlights that *"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*

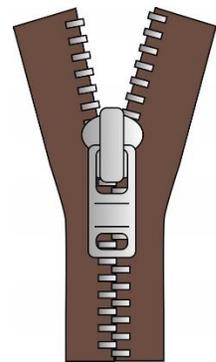
¹⁶ Parliament Watch: Monitoring Report on the Debate Quality in the Parliament (January-June 2023), August 2023.

¹⁷ 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."

and actively campaign for voting female candidates, preference voting may not work against women but may result in stronger women's representation”¹⁸.

However, the strong support among women for the genderization of political and electoral processes does not translate into an automatic preferential vote of women for women candidates¹⁹. Furthermore, party influence, support, and resources are not equally shared among candidates and the impact of the women's section is hampered by a lack of financial autonomy. **Considering the above, this analysis reiterates the proposal to introduce the “zipper system” or “vertical parity” approach in the candidate lists. This system requires parties to alternate between women and men on their candidate lists, thereby achieving fairer and more proportional representation, in line with the country's national²⁰ and international political commitments.**

In this regard, the Committee of Ministers recommends that the Council of Europe member states should consider adopting legislative reforms to introduce parity thresholds for candidates in elections at all levels. It specifies that where proportional lists are applied, the introduction of “zipper systems”, alternating both sexes, should be considered.²¹ One of the latest introductions of vertical parity in subnational elections demonstrated that while the parity and gender alternation regulations were applied, the heads of lists continue to be predominantly male.²² **Therefore, the “zipper system” should be complemented by an additional criterion regulating the percentage of women leading the candidates lists.**



¹⁸ 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?pdffile=CDL-AD\(2009\)029-e](https://www.venice.coe.int/webforms/documents/default.aspx?pdffile=CDL-AD(2009)029-e)

¹⁹ Idem footnote n^o1.

²⁰ Strategy for Gender Equality 2022 – 2027, Official Gazette of North Macedonia, No. 170/2022

²¹ Idem note X, Rec (2003)3: Appendix A, 3).

²² On October 2, 2022, Peruvians voted for regional and municipal officials including governors, vice governors, district and provincial mayors, and city councilors. The election marked the first implementation at the subnational level of Law No. 31030, which raised the requirement for women candidates on party lists from at least 30% to 50%, with alternations of male and female candidates on each party list.

4) Women and access to leadership positions²³

As of today, there has never been a woman President of North Macedonia, nor speaker of the Parliament. Historically, Radmila Shekerinska Jankovska has been the first and only acting Prime Minister for two short periods in 2004²⁴. Under the current structure of the Government, the Prime Minister has four deputies, one of whom is a woman in charge of good governance policies. Among the 15 ministers, only four are women. The Government has instituted three basic and four special commissions, one of which is headed by a woman. The Secretary-General of the Government and his deputy are both men. The Government has entrusted specific tasks and mandates to several national coordinating bodies, of which only a fourth are led by women. Among the 40 bodies operating within the various ministries, only seven are headed by women. The recommendations of the Women Parliamentarians' Club call for a 40% gender quota in Government and a 30% gender quota for mayoral positions²⁵. **Political parties have to demonstrate commitment and political will to redress the severe deficit of women in government and in high level appointed positions.**

Even though the Secretary-General of the National Assembly is a woman, the lack of gender equality in the Government is generally mirrored within the National Assembly at the leadership level. As of September 2023, the parliamentary groups tasked to negotiate priorities for the parliamentary sessions' agenda are exclusively led by men. According to project interlocutors, a project for genderization of the National Assembly's internal rules of procedure is underway, aimed at improving women's accessibility to leadership positions. Any decision in this respect should as well touch upon the secretariat and the professional services of the National Assembly. In addition to aligning the structure of the National Assembly with international norms (see below), the new gender-sensitive rules and regulations would be a commendable achievement and could as well have the double silver lining effect of bolstering inter-party dialogue for nominated positions within the institution and contribute to reducing political polarization.

²³ Under the Beijing Platform for Action, governments and political parties are encouraged to consider a set of specific measures to ensure women's equal access to and full participation in power structures and decision-making. Governments should *"take measures, including where appropriate, in electoral systems that encourage political parties to integrate women in elective and non-elective public positions in the same proportion and levels as men"*.

²⁴ From 12 May to 12 June 2004 and from 3 November to 15 December 2004

²⁵ Only one woman was elected mayor among the 81 municipalities during the 2020 local elections.

Twenty years ago, the Council of Europe was already advocating for gender-balanced representation in all appointments made by a minister or government to public committees; in posts or functions whose holders are nominated by the government and other public authorities; in selection, recruitment, and appointment processes for leading positions; transparent and gender-sensitive public decision-making; and for an exemplary public administration, both in terms of gender-balanced distribution of decision-making positions and equal career development for women and men²⁶. As welcomed then and since, the authorities in North Macedonia should consider adopting appropriate legislative and/or administrative measures to ensure effective implementation.

5) Women and public exposure

All interviewed interlocutors agreed that public coverage and potential exposure to hate speech and derogatory comments, particularly on social media, is the main deterrent for women's engagement in politics. Based on personal experience, some interlocutors noted the negative impact of hate speech on their self-image, as well as on their family members, and the perceived complete impunity enjoyed by the perpetrators.



The national legal framework targeting hate speech is laid out in different laws. Article 3 of the Law on Political Parties stipulates that the program, statute, and activities of political parties may not be aimed at: violent overthrow of the constitutional order of the Republic of Macedonia; incitement or calling to military aggression and incitement to national, racial, or religious hatred or intolerance. The Law prescribes sanctions both, for the party and for the party member who violated the requirements set out in Article 3.²⁷ Furthermore, the Criminal Code prohibits and sanctions hate speech and dissemination of material through the internet that promotes or incites hatred,

²⁶ Council of Europe Committee of Ministers Recommendation Rec (2003)3 on Balanced Participation of Women and Men in Political and Public Decision-Making

²⁷ Article 40 of the Law on Political Parties stipulates a misdemeanor fine of 800 to 4,800 EUR in MKD equivalent, if a political party is organized and acts contrary to Article 3 of this Law. In addition, the responsible person of the concerned political party will be sanctioned with a misdemeanor fine of 160 to 800 EUR in MKD equivalent.

discrimination, or violence against any person or group, on any discriminatory basis²⁸. While there seems to be a relevant legal framework in place, prosecution of cases brought to the attention of the cyber-crime unit of the Ministry of Interior is not forthcoming, leaving victims unprotected and perpetrators unsanctioned. **Both the Ministry of Interior and the Public Prosecution Office should analyze the reasons for the lack of enforcement and take decisive steps to redress the situation.**

All political parties operate based on principles enshrined in their Statute and some have adopted an internal code of conduct. Ahead of the election campaign, codes of conduct are usually signed. However, these pledges, given the absence of sanctions, go unheeded as the political players widely recourse to negative campaigning despite the public funding of the electoral campaign. Furthermore, political parties are prone to leave their digital presence unmoderated and fail to take actions to control and restrain supporters who spread insults and hate speech on social networks. **Political parties should demonstrate a real commitment to their pledge and abstain from engaging into negative campaign technics. Political parties must also moderate the content of their social networks' pages and feeds. The regulators and relevant judicial authorities should be empowered to better monitor and sanction infractions to the existing legal framework.**

Almost all interlocutors expressed willingness to publicly support, on social networks and beyond party lines, a fellow woman politician under attack. This shared willingness to counter mistreatments and abuse of women in politics could be streamlined into action with empathy-based counter-speech strategies. While it is difficult to build a women's network with a gender equality agenda that goes beyond and across the political party spectrum, this mutual support allows a limited sphere of action in favor of targeted women, particularly in view of the lack of legal enforcement and political will of party leaderships. Extreme dominance of the political parties in all fields of the society makes it difficult to find consensus to move across and beyond party lines. As a result of representative quotas, women parliamentarians have reached a critical mass within the National Assembly. United in the Women Parliamentarians' Club they could lead by example and test the power of their collective response that could have positive political and societal impact. **Women**

²⁸ Articles 394-g of the Criminal Code of North Macedonia.

politicians (across the political spectrum), with support from civil society networks, may consider crafting a counter speech-strategy to water down the insults and hate speech on social networks by stepping up positive and supportive messaging.