POLITICAL PARTICIPATION OF WOMEN FROM ETHNIC COMMUNITIES

PARLIAMENTARY ELECTIONS 2024

CONTENTS

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This analysis was conducted to examine the participation of ethnic community women in the 2024 parliamentary elections and to understand the specific challenges they faced in political and electoral activities. The 2024 elections in North Macedonia marked several significant milestones, including the election of the first female President. Despite women from ethnic communities making up over 20% of the population, their representation on candidate lists and in Parliament is below 9.5%.

While many ethnic community women are active in community-based politics, they are not a uniform group. Women from smaller ethnic communities struggle to assert their relevance within both their parties and communities. In contrast, Albanian women politicians, through their involvement in larger political parties, have attained positions across various levels of governance and have occasionally held leadership roles. Women from smaller ethnic communities continue to face social, economic, and political exclusion.

In the closed-list proportional representation system, securing election largely depends on being placed high on the candidate lists. The legal gender quota sets a 40% threshold with placement rules, but it does not guarantee gender parity. Women are often placed lower on these lists, and political fragmentation forces smaller parties into coalitions, further pushing women candidates down after male leaders.

Two aspects of the electoral system have particularly hindered the representation of ethnic community women from the smaller political parties: the public funding formula, which restricts smaller parties' ability to grow their political influence, and the seat allocation method, which favors larger parties in the distribution of remaining votes.

The new Parliament now has fewer women and is lower ethnic diversity. Although women are surpassing the limitations of the current legal framework, male dominance in politics continues to present barriers. Without specific measures, the political participation of ethnic community women may remain severely restricted. Electoral reform could address this through tailored affirmative actions. Smaller parties should adopt gender mainstreaming policies, address gendered disinformation and hate speech, and support the participation of ethnic community women through targeted, needs-based initiatives.

INTRODUCTION

In 1995, the World Conference for Women, held in Beijing, drew attention to the fact that age, disability, social and economic status, ethnicity and race can create barriers for women. Intersectionality recognises that people's lives are shaped by their identities, relationships and social factors. These combine to create intersecting forms of privilege and oppression depending on a person's context and existing power structures such as patriarchy, ableism, colonialism, imperialism, homophobia and racism[1].

North Macedonia is a multiethnic and multicultural society; therefore, adopting a community-based lens[2] to assess women political participation is relevant to explore the way this intersection impacts political representation. The purpose of this analysis is to explore barriers faced by women from ethnic communities when engaging into politics and based on gained understanding provide recommendations for further improvement of the representation of women from ethnic communities.

The present analysis builds upon the findings and recommendations drawn from the two previous analyses conducted in the field of gender participation under the Electoral Support Programme in North Macedonia, financed by the Government of Switzerland and implemented by the International Foundation for Electoral Systems (IFES).

[1] "Intersectionality,Resource Guide And Toolkit" An Intersectional Approach to Leave No One Behind. UNWOMEN & UNPRPD https://www.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/2022-01/Intersectionality-resource-guide-and-toolkit-en.pdf
[2] "Transformative Research Methods to Increase Social Impact for Vulnerable Groups and Cultural Minorities" Donna M Mertens in International Journal of Qualitative Methods 2021.
[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. Women's Representation in Elections and Political Processes in North Macedonia - Lessons Learned and Recommendations for 2024 Parliamentary Elections, IFES North Macedonia, 2023.

CONTEXT

Women's representation in multiethnic and multicultural society is not only about gender equality but also about reflecting the full spectrum of the nation's cultural and ethnic diversity. In a country with a rich blend of ethnic communities—Macedonian, Albanian, Roma, Turkish, Vlach, Bosniak, and Serbian—ensuring the inclusion of women from all these groups is crucial for fostering a more equitable and representative political landscape.

The 2021 Population Census revealed that around 9 percent of the resident population identified as belonging to an ethnic background other than Macedonian or Albanian[1]. In the context where ethnic composition is a major sociopolitical issue and the governance is driven by the principle of equitable representation, women politicians from ethnic communities have reached different levels of penetration in the political field. Their presence on the parliamentary candidate lists and as a member of the parliament is much lower than their actual numbers and place in society.

Social Inclusion[3] of women from smaller ethic communities varies and is result of the country's historical, socioeconomic and political development. For women in general, and women of smaller ethnic communities in particular cumulation of a solid "social capital" from their community and their constituents is a precondition for engagement in politics. This proves to be even more relevant in the context of women politicians active in patriarchal environment and in ethnic communities with more conservative views.

While the country's institutional and legal framework aims to ensure representation of the ethnic communities in public administration both the institutions and the legal framework are gender-blind, as they fail to consider gender and do not address the differing needs of women and men.

Affirmative actions for ethnic communities have been implemented in election administration, but not in the electoral system, and certainly not for women from smaller ethnic groups. In the political sphere, smaller ethnic communities often rely on the dominant political parties, particularly during coalition-building ahead of elections. Women within these communities who aspire to run for office face dual challenges: first, overcoming patriarchal structures within their own parties, and then competing with candidates, both men and women, from larger coalition parties that have more resources at disposal.

Within the above-described context, on May 8, 2024, the North Macedonia held presidential and parliamentary elections. Only six of the 62 political parties (10 per cent) that participated in the parliamentary elections, individually or as part of coalitions, had women leaders. The presidential elections resulted, for the first time since the country's independence, in a woman acceding to the highest state function-the President of the country. This victory marks a significant milestone towards gender equality. However, the 2024 parliamentary elections were not different/better than previous parliamentary elections and they were marked with absence of gender equality issues from campaign discourse.

Despite existence of the quota for less represented sex since 2006, women were often placed in the lowest positions on the candidate lists permitted by law. This approach to the placement of women candidates resulted in a slight decrease in the number of women elected to Parliament. No woman from smaller ethnic communities is elected to parliament, and for the first time no elected representative from the Roma community.

METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH

The analysis was based on several sources of primary and secondary data. A thorough desk review of the electoral legislation, reports and studies by international organizations, academics and civil society organizations[5] was conducted, which laid the groundwork for tailoring a specific questionnaire for semi-guided interviews. Also, in-depth interviews were conducted with eighteen women candidates for parliamentary elections 2024, former Members of Parliament from ethnic communities, as well as members of civil society organizations and representatives of public institutions, in June 2024

To complement the qualitative data from the interviews, an anonymous online questionnaire was shared with female candidates and female party members from ethnic communities. 42 answers were received and analyzed. While number of respondents is not the representative sample, the received answers help understanding the profile of the women from ethnic communities engaged in politics and to analyze the trends and patterns of their activities within and outside political parties.

In addition, data from the Candidate List Registration and Processing Application[6] of the State Election Commission (SEC) were also analyzed and utilized of.

For the purpose of this analysis, the following terminology is used:

≫ Smaller ethnic communities include all ethnic communities in North Macedonia besides the Macedonian and the Albanian community.

≫ Smaller political parties includes all active political parties that have not more than two members of the parliament. Smaller political parties include a wide spectrum of parties with membership from different ethnic backgrounds. These parties may be predominantly Macedonian or Albanian, or they may be organized around issues specific to particular ethnic communities, such as Roma, Turks, Vlachs, Bosniaks, and Serbian.

[6] Including International observers statements, EU screening and country reports.
[7] Available at candidatelist.sec.mk

WOMEN FROM ETHNIC COMMUNITIES AND POLITICAL REPRESENTATION-PROFILE AND TRAJECTORIES

Women active in politics from ethnic communities represent a diverse group and due to this their profiling is challenging. For this analysis and generally speaking, a woman politician from a non-Macedonian ethnic community is a married middle-aged woman with children[8]. They are active citizens and are employed. This is another indicator that employment is the main driver of political engagement for women from ethnic communities.
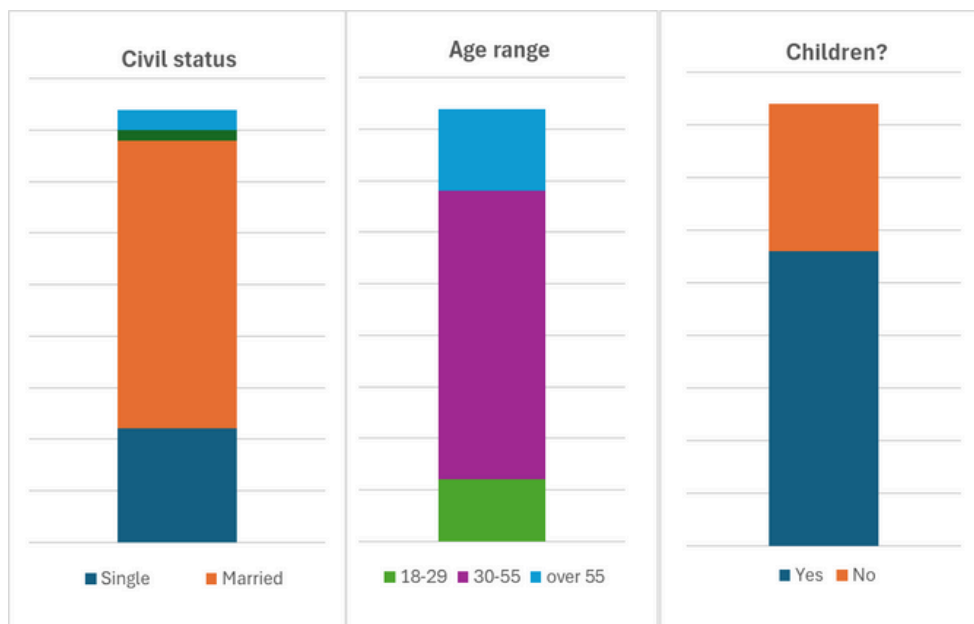

Table 1 - Profiling of the woman politician from a non-Macedonian ethnic community

A woman from a smaller ethnic community who is willing to get involved into politics can pursue various options such as:

> **To engage in a majority**[9] **political party,**
> **To engage in an ethnic community based**[10] **political party,**
> **Create new political party, or**
> **Run as an independent candidate.**

Each of the options have certain specifics which are summarized below

> **Engage in a majority political party**

Not many women from smaller ethnic communities opt to engage in a majority political party. Their choice is rooted in the search for greater impact and the rejection of community-based politics seen as a factor of increased political clientelism. In line with its strong integrational paradigm, later developed into the National Strategy for the development of "One Society for All Concept and Interculturalism", the Social Democratic Union of Macedonia (SDSM) appear to have opened a wider door to women from ethnic-communities than the Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization - Democratic Party of Macedonian National Unity (VMRO-DPMNE) and BDI/DUI. Women from the Roma and Bosniak communities were elected member of parliament as being a candidate of SDSM for the parliamentary elections 2020.

Engage in an ethnic community based political party

This seems to be the most frequently used option as the political engagement takes place within the framework of a political party based on ethnic identity. Such parties tend to advocate for better inclusion and representation of the particular ethnic group for certain rights and or public policies and services. Most women from ethnic communities have never considered to engage with a party which is not (their) ethnic-community based. This common path is nevertheless marked by different levels of penetration into the political sphere.

When talking about this option it is necessary to make a distinction between the size of the political party since it determines the number of seats in the parliament and ultimately the resources provided according to the Electoral Code. Driven by their larger community and by well-established and organized political parties, women politicians from the Albanian community have been the more successful (than other non-Macedonian- smaller- ethnic communities) in achieving effective political representation at mayorship, local government councils, parliamentary and governmental level.

Women representatives of smaller ethnic communities, members of ethnic based political parties, were not very successful in penetrating political filed neither at the parliament nor at the local councils. Key reasons are related to:

Systemic disadvantage created by the Electoral Code, which affects smaller political parties—many of which represent ethnic communities

Most of these parties do not implement internal gender quotas to ensure a fixed percentage of women in leadership roles

Women's sections within these smaller political parties lack the influence needed to participate meaningfully in the party decision-making processes

Historically, members of the Turkish community have not been active participants in national politics, despite being represented by four political parties. The Roma population, still one of the most vulnerable groups, continues to face institutional discrimination and social prejudice. They are represented by 15 political parties. The Serb, Bosniak, and Vlach communities are each represented by three and two political parties, respectively. However, none of these parties have successfully elected a woman to parliament as a member of their candidate list.

▶ Creating new political party

Historically, this option has been rarely utilized in the democratic and independent Republic of North Macedonia. However, in the lead-up to the 2024 parliamentary elections, the Roma community has experienced some recent changes in its political representation with the formation of two new parties: the Roma Union, led by women, and Avaja, which included many women on its candidate list. Although neither party succeeded in securing parliamentary representation, these developments are noteworthy and may yield positive results with regards to women representation in the upcoming local elections in 2025.

▶ Run as an independent candidate

Following the success of independent candidates during the last local elections, this last option has been recently hardened by parliamentary parties who decided to significantly raise the threshold of support signatures in an untransparent, restricted and fast-track procedure.[11] The procedure to collect signatures is cumbersome and requires time, transport facility and money for notary certification; all commodities that women possess less than men.

It can be concluded that political representation of women from ethnic communities is characterized by community-based politics, numerical fragmentation and a significant gap in the permeation into the political field between the women from the larger ethnic group and the smaller communities.

[11] The amendments were adopted by Parliament on 7th March 2024, and will be enforced at the next electoral cycle. To participate in parliamentary elections, independent candidate lists were previously required to collect at least 1,000 civil signatures from registered voters in the electoral roll in the specific electoral unit. With the 7th March 2024 amendments, independent candidates now need to secure at least one percent of the total number of enrolled voters in the electoral unit where they are running, which represent roughly a 300% increase.

WOMEN FROM NON-MAJORITY COMMUNITY AND PARLIAMENTARY REPRESENTATION

North Macedonia is a parliamentary democracy where Legislative power rests in a 120-123[11] seats unicameral parliament elected for a four-year term. In each of the six in-country electoral districts twenty MPs are directly elected for a four-year term through a proportional representation system using closed lists with seats allocated to candidate lists according to the D'Hondt method of the highest average[12]. Women from ethnic communities[13] account for more than 20% of the total resident population however their presence on the parliamentary candidates lists and as a member of the parliament is much lower than their actual place in society.

The unfavorable effects of the electoral system

The principle of adequate and equitable representation of all ethnic communities has been incorporated in the electoral administration. In municipalities where at least 20% of citizens belong to ethnic communities, the principle of adequate and equitable representation of all ethnic communities shall be respected when selecting the members of the electoral boards from among public employees.[14] In local self-government units where at least 20% of citizens speak an official language other than Macedonian, the Municipal Election Commissions (MEC) and the Electoral Boards (EB) must use, in addition to the Macedonian language and the Cyrillic alphabet, the language and the alphabet used by that ethnic community.

Besides membership in electoral management bodies and language use, the implementation of the principle of equitable representation is enshrined in the decision-making process of the State Election Commission (SEC). In a case when the draft-decision refers to the interests of a non-majority community, prior to putting the draft-decision forward for vote, any member of the SEC who belongs to the non-majority community has a right to request that the SEC decide upon such draft-decision by consensus[15]. This, almost veto power, mirrors the double Badinter rule in Parliament.

With regards to gender representation, the Electoral Code includes several provisions
- 30% gender quota for the election management bodies[16]
- Retainer provisions for female MPs[17] to be replaced by female member of the candidate list
- -40% gender quota for the candidate list with two placement criterions: 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.[18].

[12] Three seats are reserved for the out of country representation but have so far never been attributed due to electoral formula chosen.
[13] 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. While the formula has proven effective in facilitating majority formation and thus securing parliamentary operability, it disadvantages smaller political parties
[14] According to the results of population census 2022 and this percentage includes all non-Macedonian ethnic communities
[15]Article 21 of the Electoral Code.
25 Article 31, indent 34.d of the Electoral Code
[16] In its outgoing composition, the SEC had only 2 women commissioners and did not respect the legal quota of gender representation.
[17] Article 153-a of the Electoral Code further provides that "if the Member of Parliament whose term of office has been terminated on one of the following grounds – resignation, criminal condemnation, loss of capacity to contract, death and incompatibility - is female, then the next female candidate on the list shall become a Member of Parliament for the remaining duration of the term of office." The same rule applies to local self-government bodies.
[18] Electoral Code, Article 64(5).

In a closed-list proportional representation system, candidates higher on the list have a better chance of being elected. While political parties and coalitions formally comply with gender quota requirements, they often do so in ways that disadvantage women, typically placing female candidates in lower, less favorable positions. In the worst-case scenario, women are placed in positions such as third, sixth, ninth, tenth, or even lower in the case of a coalition. This practice doubly compromises their electability, as seat allocation tends to favor lists that receive the most votes, disadvantaging those with fewer. Consequently, women from smaller ethnic communities, positioned unfavorably on the list, are particularly disadvantaged by this remainder reallocation formula.

Furthermore, placement of women in less favorable positions on candidate lists means that the 40% gender quota does not guarantee that 40% of parliament members will be women. This was evident in the 2024 parliamentary elections, where immediately after the elections, only 35% of the members of parliament were women. By September 2024, this number had increased to 38.33%, largely due to elected MPs being appointed to executive positions in the government. In such cases, the next candidate on the list assumes the vacant parliamentary seat, and in most instances, these replacements were women. For women from a smaller ethnic community active in a smaller political party, 2024 parliamentary election resulted with none of them being elected member of parliament.

Mandates – Initial Results of 9th of May 2024			
Per Party/Coalition	Total MP	Female MP	% of Female MP
VMRO–DPMNE[20]	58	23	39.66
SDSM[21]	18	7	38.89
BDI/DUI[22]	19	5	26.32
VLEN/VREDI	13	4	30.77
Levica	6	1	16.67
ZNAM[23]	6	2	33.33

Table 2 - Mandates - Initial Results of 9th of May 2024

[20] VMRO - DPMNE - led coalition (Your Macedonia Coalition);
[21] SDSM - led coalition (Coalition for a European Future)
[22] BDI/DUI - led coalition (European Front)
[23] I KNOW - Movement for Our Macedonia

	MP	Female MP	% of Female MP
Total	120	42	35

Table 3 - Total number of female MPs and percentage

Mandates – as of 3rd of September 2024			
Per Party/Coalition	Total MP	Female MP	% of Female MP
VMRO–DPMNE	58	26	44.83
SDSM	18	7	38.89
BDI/DUI	18	4	22.22
VLEN/VREDI	14	6	42.86
Levica	6	1	16.67
ZNAM	6	2	33.33

Table 4 - Mandates - as of 3rd of September 2024

	MP	Female MP	% of Female MP
Total	120	46	38.33

Table 5 - Total number of female MPs and percentage

The unfavorable effect of the law on financing of political parties

The Law on Financing of Political Parties allocates annual state funding from the national budget based on two criteria: 30% of the total amount is distributed equally among all political parties that secured at least 1% of the votes in the most recent parliamentary or local elections in a self-government unit. The remaining 70% is distributed proportionally based on the number of elected representatives in the Assembly and Municipal Councils. In a closed-list proportional representation system, this method of fund allocation tends to disadvantage smaller political parties[24]. In the context of North Macedonia, the less funding a party receives, the less likely it is that these funds will be used to empower women and promote equal opportunities within and beyond the party. To create a more level playing field, revising the public funding allocation criteria could be considered, ensuring that smaller parties and their women candidates have a fairer opportunity to compete in the next parliamentary election campaign.

The unfavorable effects of the law for political finance of the political parties coupled significant fragmentation in political representation among smaller communities, and an electoral system that favors bigger parties, is pushing smaller parties into pre-election coalitions. In this context, the general struggle women face in accessing leadership positions within their political parties becomes a major disadvantage, especially for women from smaller communities. Male party leaders typically secure the highest eligible positions on the coalition list, effectively sidelining women. This dynamic applies both in coalitions with larger parties and among smaller political parties. A clear example is the BDI/DUI led coalition, where the male leaders of the four smaller coalition members were the only representatives elected from their respective parties.[26]

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[25] For the last legislature, 51 out of 120 seats of the Assembly were held by women, which brought the overall gender ratio to 42.5%. A total of 43 women parliamentarians won their seat during the last parliamentary elections (hence 36%), while eight occupied a seat vacated by the preceding male candidate on the list who had joined the executive structures.

[26] "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 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". Cfr. Ingrid VAN BIEZEN, Financing Political Parties and Election Campaigns – Guidelines, Integrated project "Making Democratic Institutions Work", Council or 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.

[27] Turks Movement for Rights and Democracy north Macedonia; People's Movement, Democratic Party of Turks and Turks Movement for Rights and Democracy.

Candidate selection and political campaign

For the 2024 parliamentary elections, 1,770 candidates were nominated by 10 political parties and 6 coalitions, as well as by one group of voters. 42 per cent of candidates were women and out of these 8.2 % (or 167) were women candidates from the ethnic communities.

The analysis of the last two parliamentary elections candidates' lists confirms that political parties have mainly maintained a numerical approach to gender participation as none of them introduce more women than the minimum legal requirement and nominated only a steady 25% of women in the position of the head of the candidate list. It is significant that the two coalitions VLEN/VREDI and BDI/DUI, which are composed exclusively of non-Macedonian political parties, did not nominate a single woman as header of their candidate. This demonstrates the enduring male domination in party leadership and how it affects the constitution of the candidates lists.

In an effort to gain better insight into the activities surrounding the preparation of candidate lists and the execution of election campaigns, an online questionnaire revealed the following information.

All political parties affiliated with the respondents have a women's section, yet only 58% of respondents reported that their parties implement internal gender representation quotas. A significant number of respondents were first-time political candidates, which may explain their relatively low familiarity with gender quota regulations and their party's internal candidate selection process. While the process of preparing candidate lists was generally described as fair, transparent, gender-balanced, and merit-based, however one-third of respondents characterized it as unclear, driven by favoritism, and predominantly male-dominated.
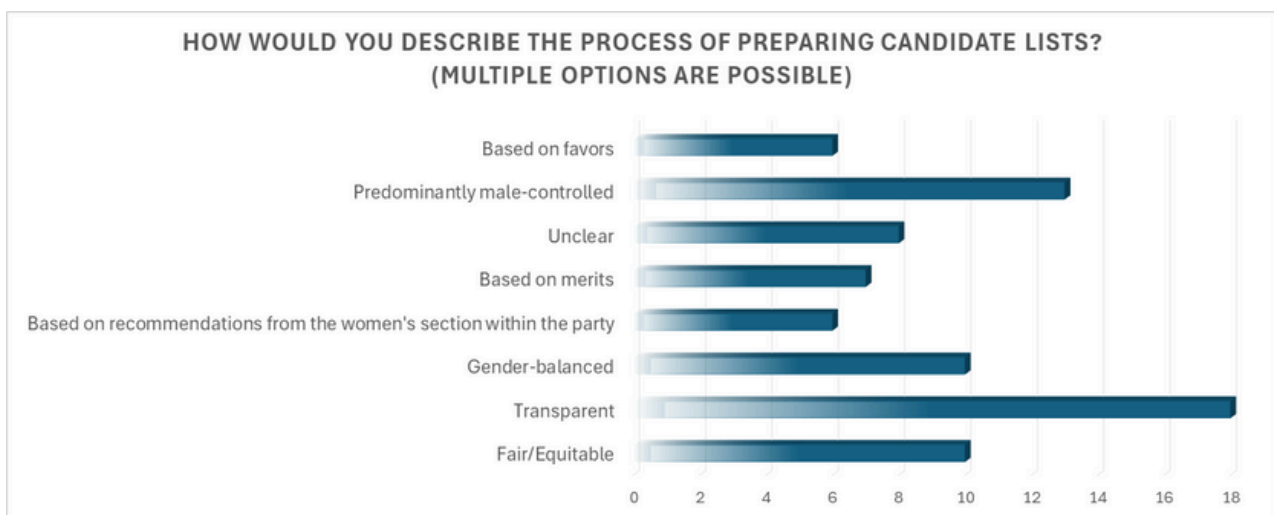

Table 6 - Process of preparing candidate list

Women shared that they have not experienced instances of violence and of discrimination, both within their party and within their coalition. They undertook various type of campaign activities and generally they did not felt treated and supported in a different manner than their male counterparts. However, few instances of being sidelined during the political campaign were reported. In smaller settlements, activities and meetings would be mostly conducted by men, which confirms that more conservative dynamics are at play in rural areas than in urban settings.

The self-assessment of the relationships with the members and supporters of the party underlines how some smaller political parties have not yet overcome the side-lining effect of the woman section and do not seek their full cooperation.

54,8% declared active participation in strategic meetings where their opinion is sought; 38,8% were only invited to attend some meetings and provide certain names and 6,4% did not met with their male counterparts and party supporters.

Table 7 - Relation between candidates and members of Political Parties

Interactions within the coalition partners paint again a very mixed picture with 33% who never met with members and supporters of another party from the coalition. Out of the two thirds who cooperated with other members and supporters from within the coalition, half describe a limited cooperation and the remaining half full cooperation. There is room for greater involvement of women from smaller communities, both within the parties and within the coalitions they belong to.

Only 19% of the women who answered the online questionnaire had interactions with media representatives during the political campaign and in almost all cases those interactions were at the initiative of the media. Both traditional and online media have previously been found to convey and amplify gender stereotypes in their depiction and interaction with female candidates. On the other hand, the dread to speak in public and the fear of online abuse as a consequence of an increased public visibility are powerful deterrents.

Paradoxically, the recommendations from respondents to future women candidates all conveyed the same message: trust yourself, speak up, and go for it! However, the clear hesitation among women politicians from smaller communities to actively engage with journalists in order to amplify their campaign efforts and personal visibility needs to be better understood and addressed. This is essential for enabling women candidates from ethnic communities to fully occupy the media space.
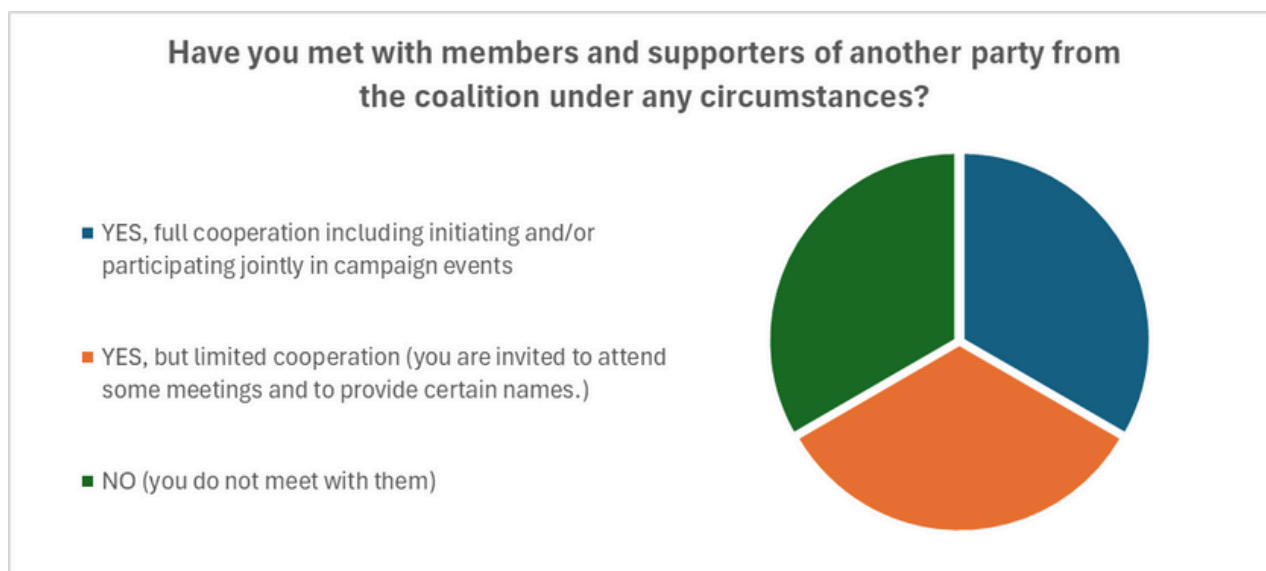

Have you met with members and supporters of another party from the coalition under any circumstances?

- YES, full cooperation including initiating and/or participating jointly in campaign events
- YES, but limited cooperation (you are invited to attend some meetings and to provide certain names.)
- NO (you do not meet with them)

Table 8 - Cooperation with members of the coalition and another political party

CONCLUSIONS

Following the 2024 parliamentary elections, out of 120 newly elected members of parliament, only 11 are women from ethnic communities (10%), with 10 being of Albanian ethnicity. For the first time, there is no Roma representative in parliament, reflecting a decrease in both the number and diversity of women MPs. Women politicians from smaller communities face significant challenges, including restrictive gender quotas, the coalition effect, leadership gender bias, and unfavorable seat and resource distribution.

These factors result in their underrepresentation in both candidate lists and parliamentary seats. Without targeted measures, the political participation of women from non-majority communities could be severely limited. Despite their guaranteed rights to participation, smaller communities face unequal opportunities in political engagement, and women from these communities do not have the same access as other women politicians. These issues should be carefully considered in the ongoing discussions about electoral reform.

Macedonian and Albanian women in politics appear to be one step ahead compared to women from smaller communities. Existing legal and institutional mechanisms designed to guarantee the rights and societal inclusion of smaller communities—those that do not meet the 20% representation threshold—lack criteria to ensure equitable representation of both women and men.

The political participation of smaller ethnic communities is hindered by certain aspects of the electoral system, which favor political parties representing larger communities. These include the unequal distribution of public funding and the seat allocation formula, both of which disproportionately benefit larger groups.

While all women politicians face some degree of direct and structural discrimination rooted in the electoral system and their political party structures, they do not form a homogeneous group. In society, power dynamics prioritize party affiliation first, ethnicity second, and gender third.

Women from smaller ethnic communities not only face the same challenges as other women politicians, but also encounter additional disadvantages based on their ethnicity. These challenges affect their acceptance within both their community and broader society, limit their access to higher education and public employment, and negatively impact their standing within their party. As a result, these factors significantly reduce their chances of being elected and contribute to the persistent underrepresentation of women from smaller communities in leadership and elected positions.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Affirmative actions and electoral reform: making informed choices

Affirmative action in electoral rules is one approach to ensuring the effective participation of women and individuals from national minorities. In addition to constitutionally guaranteed representation of minorities in Parliament and/or special parliamentary committees, the Venice Commission's "Code of Good Practice in Electoral Matters" outlines key principles for developing affirmative action rules that align with European electoral traditions. These principles include:

⟫ political parties representing national minorities should be guaranteed reserved seats,

⟫ electoral thresholds should not hinder the representation of national minorities,

and

⟫ the design of electoral districts (in terms of number, size, shape, and magnitude) may be tailored to promote minority participation in decision-making processes.

Regarding political representation, while international norms continue to encourage the formation of community-based political parties, the risks of political fragmentation and marginalization are recognized. It is emphasized that the participation of national minorities in politics should not be limited to ethnic-based parties. Within larger political parties, provisions that mandate minority representation on internal party committees and candidate lists are considered good electoral practice.[26]

Provisions for reserved seats that are separately allocated to national minorities are quite common in the region (e.g. in Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Kosovo, Montenegro, Slovenia, Romania). While reserved seats might be a short-term mechanism to secure the representation of minorities in a transitional period, in the long term the interest of the minorities and the country itself might be better served by representation through the "ordinary" electoral system[27].

It is often considered that "the more proportional an electoral system, the more it allows minorities, even dispersed ones, to be represented in the elected body[28]". Therefore, a new seat allocation key which allocates the "remainder seats" on an equal basis to all parties that pass the threshold to enter Parliament rather than on a highest average formula could result in the possible distribution of a greater number of seats to small parties and with this increase the chances of women from these parties placed on the lowest possible positions on the candidate lists to be elected on the parliament .

[26] Venice Commission: Participation of minorities in public life ("Science and technique of democracy" series, N° 45).
[27] In " Compilation of Venice Commission opinions and reports on the protection of national minorities (updated)1", December 2022, CDL-PI(2022)049.
[28] CDL-INF(2000)4, Electoral law and national minorities, III.B.1

The Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe recommends that member states should "consider the introduction of "zipper systems", alternating both sexes,."[29] This would result in more favorable placement of women on the candidate lists (e.g. instead as it is currently every third, sixth, etc it will be every second, fourth etc) and would increase their chance of being elected.

Introduction of gender-targeted public funding in electoral legislation to promote women's participation could be considered[30]. Systems that blend financial rewards or penalties to motivate political parties to prioritize gender balance, would make it easier for women, especially from underrepresented groups, to access eligible positions on the candidates lists.

Women from ethnic communities should be fully informed of the pros, cons and possible effects of the different proportional representation options (eg: Open lists versus closed lists; single nationwide constituency versus multiple districts) in order to have a meaningful contribution in the electoral reform debate and to advocate for increased political space.

Increasing the admissibility of woman politicians from smaller political parties

To enhance the acceptance of women politicians from smaller communities, it's essential to raise their public profile in addition to strengthening social connections and economic empowerment. Political change alone is insufficient without a corresponding shift in societal attitudes towards women. By increasing visibility of women leaders, traditional gender stereotypes can be challenged. However, it's crucial to highlight the achievements of these women in ways that benefit the entire community, while carefully managing the risks associated with public exposure.

To effectively implement activities aimed at raising the public profile and acceptance of women politicians from smaller communities, it is important to first create a supportive environment across traditional media, online platforms, and social networks.

[29] 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;
[30] https://commission.europa.eu/strategy-and-policy/policies/justice-and-fundamental-rights/gender-equality/gender-equality-strategy_en

Contrasting gendered disinformation and hate speech

Hate speech and gendered disinformation are a threat to the very fabric of society and should not be allowed to shape the socio-political landscape. The EU screening report proposes different measures to address this challenge including the enhancement of capacities of law enforcement and criminal justice officials on recording and reporting the cases of hate crime and hate speech.

Regarding the rise of hate speech during election times, as previously noted[31], 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 traditional media should address their role with regards to perpetuating and amplifying by introducing gendered editorial policy, gender-balanced editorial boards, identification and recognition of gender discriminatory speech and raise the awareness of the journalists for gender-balanced reporting.

The Civil Society Organizations that compose the gender movement and women politicians from across the whole political spectrum should rise to the occasion of fighting back with coordinated speedy reactions of support by public figures and by organising the dissemination of targeted empathy based messages to victims of cyber hate and shaming perpetrators.

Finally, and in line with the European Commission against Racism and Intolerance (ECRI) General Policy Recommendation No. 15, activities aiming at raising awareness of the dangerous consequences of hate speech among the general public and particularly the younger generation could be conducted for the whole society benefit.

Gender equality versus equal opportunities

The Parliamentary Committee on Equal Opportunities for Women and Men and Women Parliamentarians' Club have 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. These their efforts should continue and further enhance including initiatives that fight negative perception attached to gender initiatives.

The EU Gender Equality Strategy 2020-2025[32] sets out a vision, policy objectives and actions to make concrete progress on gender equality in Europe. Given that the EU accession negotiations started in July 2022 these efforts provide the bases for incorporation of this Strategy and the EU gender acquis into relevant national legislation.

Political parties and gender mainstreaming

The political field remains generally male dominated and political parties have mostly embraced a restrictive numerical approach to gender mainstreaming which has failed so far to produce significant changes. While this general assessment remains valid, it is clear that political parties representing ethnic communities have reached a different level of advancement on the gender mainstreaming path. The bigger Albanian parties appear more advanced with increased leadership penetration and stronger women section and membership.

Contrary to the only numerical approach substantive equality[33] , equality of opportunities between women and men can be further enhanced through the functions of redistribution, recognition, participation and transformation. With this in mind, political parties representing ethnic communities could foster gender mainstreaming efforts by implementing following measures:

⟫ Redressing disadvantage (the redistributive dimension): Larger Albanian political parties, which are more advanced in promoting gender equality, could introduce self-imposed quotas, such as the "zipper system," for parliamentary and local council candidate lists. They could also invest in women mayoral candidates by providing targeted training through their party academies. Meanwhile, smaller parties could focus on placing more women at the top of their candidate lists in eligible positions.

⟫ Addressing stigma, prejudice, stereotyping and violence (the recognition dimension): in practice, all instances of violence should be dealt with and sanctioned by the party, regardless of eventual further litigation in court. Out of 62 active political parties, 17 have signed the Code of Conduct aiming at Combating violence against women in politics and in electoral processes[29]. Political parties should signed the Code and implement the recommendations therein.

⟫ Enabling participation and giving a voice to those disadvantaged (the participative dimension): women section should be empowered within the party with increased importance in decision-making, notably regarding the constitution and arbitration of the candidates lists within the party and within the coalition.

⟫ Accommodating difference through structural change (the transformative dimension): This could lead to initiatives such as setting internal gender quotas for all positions within the party structure, creating opportunities for women to access leadership roles. It could also include appointing the head of the party's women's section to the leadership committee at both national and local levels and considering a woman as vice-president for smaller parties that haven't yet done so.

[33] This Code is part of the technical support provided by the Electoral Support Programme, a project of the Swiss Cooperation in North Macedonia, implemented by the International Foundation for Electoral Systems. https://electoralsupportprogramme.mk/wp-content/uploads/2024/04/ENG-Code-of-Conduct-Combating-violence-against-women-in-politics-and-in-the-electoral-process.pdf

Recommendations ahead of local elections 2025

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.

Women from smaller political parties and from ethnic communities should advocate for dedicated (earmarked) budget, out of the political party budget for 2025, that will be under the financial autonomy of the women section. This budget could be used for the activities aimed to increase women on the party candidate list and support their campaign activities by making them more efficient, visible, and less dependable on party leadership.

Political parties should initiate development efforts directed to capacity building of women party members in general, and candidates for upcoming local elections in particular. These efforts could be in various areas such as public expression skills (speeches, interviews, online posts and threads), local government public policies and services, understanding of the election campaign funds including the outreach to media with regards to paid political advertisement, and similar.

Development efforts could take place through mentorship programs structured around meetings, email exchanges, trainings, joint participation in political events or by simply pairing new women candidate with more experienced women or male colleagues.

For women politicians from ethnic communities, strong and lasting family support is the bedrock of their political engagement. Hence, building family resilience in front of abuse and slander that sometimes come with increased public exposure could help navigating hard times and securing enduring support.