

VOTING WITHOUT BARRIERS: ANALYSIS OF THE BLIND PEOPLE'S PARTICIPATION IN ELECTIONS



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VOTING WITHOUT BARRIERS: ANALYSIS OF THE BLIND PEOPLE'S PARTICIPATION IN ELECTIONS is an analysis in the frame of Swiss project Electoral Support Programme implemented by the International Foundation for Electoral Systems (IFES).

The content/opinions/ can in no way be considered to reflect the views of the Government of Switzerland and the International Foundation for Electoral Systems (IFES)



INTRODUCTION

In the eve of the upcoming 2025 local elections, it is particularly important to ensure timely the conditions for equal participation of all citizens. This also includes undertaking specific measures for persons with disabilities, as part of the overall commitment to a fair and inclusive electoral process.

In North Macedonia, persons with disabilities have limited access to political life as a consequence of the long-term medical approach[1] that treats them as subjects of care, rather than as equal citizens. Participation in elections is a key opportunity for their political inclusion and exercising of their civil rights. Although the process has many challenges, the elections offer opportunities to overcome barriers and strengthen democracy to the benefit of all citizens.

According to the results of the 2021 Population Census in the Republic of North Macedonia, 94,412 persons with disabilities live in the country. Of these, 12,371 persons are with visual impairment. These figures clearly indicate the significant representation of this group of people in society and the necessity for their needs to be taken into account when organising elections.

These two factors, the upcoming local elections in 2025 and the official statistical data about persons with disabilities that are available for the first time were the reasons to do this Analysis.

The analysis is based on the responses of blind persons and their personal assistants, who shared their experiences from the 2024 parliamentary elections and the second round of the presidential elections in May 2024. These experiences provide direct insight into the real barriers these people face, but at the same time they also shed light on positive practices that can be further developed. Such insight is a valuable source of information that helps identify the priorities for improving the electoral process, especially in the run-up to the 2025 local elections.

Taking into account the noted limitations in regard to the methodology and the scope, the analysis nevertheless represents a solid basis for further development. It reflects a dual reality: the need for a more systematic and comprehensive approach to obtain detailed and consistent data, and, at the same time, the clear potential to use the results as a catalyst for positive change. The findings go beyond academic relevance; they hold clear practical value. They provide a well-substantiated starting point for institutions, policymakers, civil society organizations, and the community of persons with disabilities. Drawing on these findings, all stakeholders gain a solid foundation for advocating and developing policies and practices that promote fairer, more inclusive, and more democratic elections.

[1] The medical approach sees disability as a health issue that requires diagnosis and therapy. The modern approach is inclusive, aimed at removing barriers and full inclusion in society, including the electoral process.

ABOUT THE ORGANISERS

The analysis is the result of the joint efforts of the ESI NELIS Association and the Electoral Support Programme, which is a project of the Government of Switzerland implemented by the International Foundation for Electoral Systems (IFES).

The ESI NELIS Association from Skopje has been active since 2020 striving to improve the quality of life of blind persons and persons with disabilities in the Republic of North Macedonia. The organisation has been implementing various projects, but its main focus is supporting persons with disabilities by providing educational courses and trainings for blind persons and for their personal assistants, as well as for personal assistants of persons with disabilities and special needs. The main goals of the association are as follows: respect of human rights of persons with disabilities, initiating improved legal solutions for more effective protection, encouraging persons with disabilities to rely on their own strengths and abilities, promoting their autonomy as users of services, as well as providing economic, social, health and legal protection, social justice and security.

The Electoral Support Programme is a project of the Government of Switzerland implemented by the International Foundation for Electoral Systems (IFES). The programme aims to contribute to the improvement of electoral processes by strengthening the institutions responsible for conducting elections, supporting transparency and accountability, and increasing citizen participation in the electoral process. Particular attention is paid to issues related to equality, inclusiveness and respect for international standards for democratic elections, in order to ensure fair and credible elections in the country.

LEGAL FRAMEWORK

The rights of persons with disabilities and their participation in electoral processes are regulated in several important legal acts:

oThe Constitution of the Republic of North Macedonia, which ensures the equality of all citizens before the law and prohibits discrimination based on disability, with the right to vote being a constitutionally guaranteed right for all adult citizens.

o oThe Electoral Code is the main law regulating the electoral process.[2] It provides for the following aspects relevant to persons with disabilities:

- The right of persons with disabilities to participate in elections under equal conditions as all other citizens.
- The possibility to vote with the assistance of another person chosen by the voter, if they cannot cast their vote independently.
- The obligation of election boards to ensure conditions for unhindered exercise of the right to vote by persons with disabilities.
- The obligation to adapt the polling stations in accordance with the principles of accessibility and non-discrimination.

The above stated obligations and rights are regulated in greater details in various articles of the Electoral Code shown in the table below:

[2] https://drive.google.com/file/d/1yOTG7wVUyNoUk1_AkIYrNbD4gHQWzS5y/view

EC Article	Content	Right/Obligation
Article 75	The public broadcasting service and the national TV stations have an obligation to broadcast elections related contents in a manner accessible to people with disabilities (sign language, subtitles, audio description).	Obligation for equal access to information
Article 75-a	Elections reporting must be balanced and accessible in a format and language understandable to all, including persons with disabilities.	Guarantee of equal treatment and non-discrimination
Article 111	Voting is secret, personal and conducted under proper conditions that guarantee accessibility and equality for all voters.	A fundamental right to equal participation of all voters, including people with disabilities.
Article 112	A voter who is not able to vote independently has the right to request assistance from a person of their choice; if they do not bring their own assistant, the Election Board shall appoint another person from among the voters.	Right to vote with assistance
Article 112-a	The Election Board is required to provide conditions for voting to any disabled voter who cannot enter the polling station, in accordance with the Guidelines issued by the State Election Commission.	Obligation of the Election Board to ensure conditions
Article 164	When arranging and equipping the polling stations, the conditions must ensure functionality, safety and accessibility, especially for persons with disabilities.	Obligation for accessibility and appropriate organisation of polling stations
Article 173-a	The institutions and bodies that own the facilities where the polling stations are located must adapt them in order to be accessible to all categories of persons with disabilities.	Obligation to adapt the polling stations

Table 1: Provisions of the Electoral Code related to persons with disabilities

In addition to the Electoral Code, the State Election Commission (SEC) also regulates the voting process for persons with disabilities by providing detailed guidelines:

1. The Guidelines^[3] for the implementation of Article 112-a of the Electoral Code regulate the voting procedure for persons with disabilities who are not able to enter the polling station independently. In such cases, the Election Board must provide appropriate conditions for access and for exercising their right to vote. According to these Guidelines, voters are allowed to vote with the help of a companion. In addition, the voter has the right to choose a person who will assist them. If the voter comes without a companion, the Election Board appoints a person from among the present voters to take on this role.

2. Guidelines for voting by blind persons and persons with impaired vision,^[4] which, among other things, regulate the use of a Braille template for voting, in order for the blind person to vote independently and secretly. These Guidelines are also available as an audio recording^[5] available on SEC's website.

3. According to the Guidelines for registration of ill and incapacitated persons who want to vote,^[6] persons with disabilities, including blind and persons with visual impairment, have the opportunity to exercise their right to vote at home. Although this is a facilitating measure for those who cannot vote at a polling station, they are formally registered as "feeble and ill persons", and not as voters with disabilities.

o The Law on Social Protection^[7] defines personal assistants as a support service that provides access to services and rights. In the context of elections, the role of the personal assistant is indirectly recognised in the provision that a voter with a disability can be accompanied by another person of one's choice. In practice, this is often the personal assistant. Hence, the personal assistants are the ones that represent the bridge between the legal guarantee of the right to vote and its practical application.

o The Law on Prevention and Protection against Discrimination,^[1] whereby this law guarantees equality and prohibits discrimination based on disability in all spheres of social life, including electoral processes.

o On 5 December 2011, the Republic of North Macedonia ratified the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, including Article 29 on the participation in political and public life. Since, our country has undertaken to implement the provisions of the Convention that bind the states:

- To ensure participation of persons with disabilities in the political and public life effectively and fully.
- To guarantee secret voting, access to polling stations and the possibility of using personal assistants or aids such as a Braille template.
- To adopt legal and practical measures that will ensure the independence of persons with disabilities in voting.

[3] [2.-Упатство-за-примена-на-член-112-а-од-Изборниот-законик-за-лица-со-попеченост.pdf](#)

[4] https://drive.google.com/file/d/1VHcN-trOh925Anc_n_M1PN4tCoCNl4HJ/view

[5] <https://www.sec.mk/upatstvo-za-glasanje-na-slepi-lica-i-lica-so-oshteten-vid-2/>

[6] [7.-Упатство-за-пријавување-и-гласање-на-немоќно-или-болно-лице.pdf](#)

[7] https://www.mtsp.gov.mk/content/pdf/zakoni/2019/28.5_zakon_SZ.pdf

[8] <https://mtsp.gov.mk/content/>

[Закон%20за%20спречување%20и%20заштита%20од%20дискриминација.pdf](#)

METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH

The analysis is based on quantitative and qualitative data collected through structured questionnaires. The survey aims to provide a systematic insight into the experiences of blind persons and their personal assistants when exercising their right to vote and the provision of appropriate support in the electoral process.

The survey covers two target groups:

- Completely blind persons (hereinafter referred to as “blind persons”), i.e. respondents who are registered voters, meet the eligibility criteria to use personal assistance services.
- Personal assistants: people who provide support to blind people in their daily functioning, including during the electoral process.

The responses received from 252 respondents who are blind and 225 respondents who are personal assistant were analysed.

The survey covered a total of 32 municipalities, part of the following election units:

Election Unit	No. of municipalities	Municipalities
EU 1	6	Aerodrom, Karpos, Kisela Voda, Saraj, Centar, Studenici
EU 2	6	Butel, Cair, Gjorce Petrov, Gazi Baba, Aracinovo, Kumanovo
EU 3	5	Sveti Nikole, Zrnovci, Kocani, Chesinovo-Oblesevo, Stip
EU 4	7	Bogdanci, Gevgelija, Dojran, Kavadarci, Krivogastani, Negotino, Prilep
EU 5	5	Bitola, Kicevo, Krusevo, Ohrid, Struga
EU 6	3	Brvenica, Tearce, Tetovo

Table 2: Municipalities included in the analysis by Electoral Units

In terms of the instruments and data used for this analysis, two survey questionnaires were applied.

A survey questionnaire for blind people, which was used to collect:

- demographic data (sex, age, municipality, ethnic background).
- knowledge of Braille and use of alternative forms of voting.
- questions about participation in elections, place of voting, need of support and services received.

A survey questionnaire for personal assistants. It was used to collect the following data:

- demographic data (sex, age, municipality, ethnic background).
- questions about formal education and training for the electoral process.
- questions about their experience with accompanying blind people during elections.

The data were collected during May 2025 through field activities. The questionnaire dedicated to blind persons was completed with the support of their personal assistants. The questionnaire dedicated to personal assistants was filled in directly by the personal assistants themselves. The survey was voluntary and anonymous, with the consent of the respondents. Furthermore, the principle of confidentiality and protection of personal data was duly respected.

The processing and analysis of the data was done so that the data from the questionnaires were entered and processed in MS Excel. For this purpose, descriptive statistics were used to elaborate the responses. For easier observing of the findings, bar graphs were created to visualise the results. In addition, topical analysis of open-ended responses was performed to identify specific challenges and suggestions for improvement.

The limitations of this methodological approach relate to the sample of 252[9] blind persons out of the 12,371 blind persons registered at state level,[10] which carries a margin of error of approximately $\pm 6.1\%$ (with a 95% confidence interval). The survey covered only 32 municipalities, which is less than half of the total number of municipalities in the country, so the results do not reflect the situation in the remaining 48 municipalities. This scope limits the possibility for deeper analysis by age, sex, ethnicity and other factors, and the small number per municipality does not allow familiarisation with the overall local particularities.

[9] Some of the respondents did not give answer to all the questions.

[10] State Statistical Office – 2021 Population Census https://www.stat.gov.mk/Aktivnosti_en.aspx?rbra=320

ANALYSIS – BLIND PERSONS

DEMOGRAPHIC AND GEOGRAPHIC DATA

The analysis is based on the responses of 252 blind persons, with a clearly expressed gender and age profile. The share of female respondents is 103, and of male is 149. Most of the respondents belong to the age group over 50 (67%), which indicates a higher representation of the older generations, while young people of up to 29 were represented with only 6%. The ethnic composition also reflects the diversity in the country: most of the respondents were Macedonians (180), followed by Albanians (42) and Roma (17).

Representation by sex

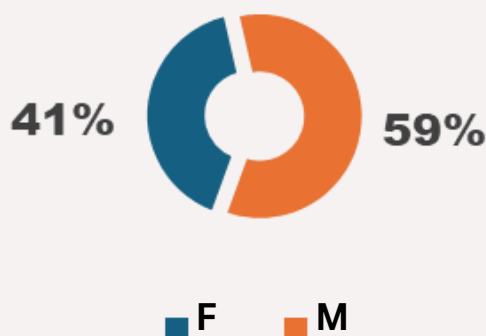


Chart 1: Representation of participants by gender

Representation by age

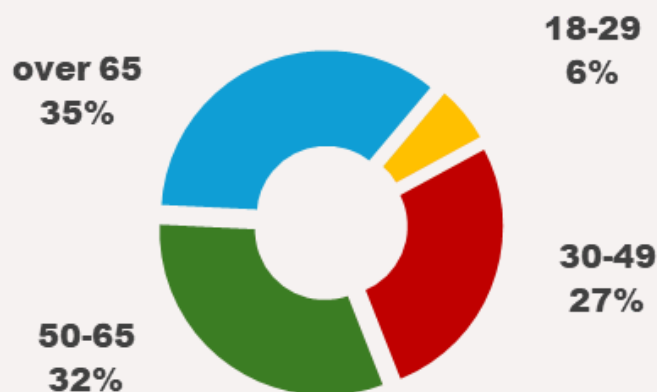


Chart 2: Representation of participants by age

Representation by ethnic background

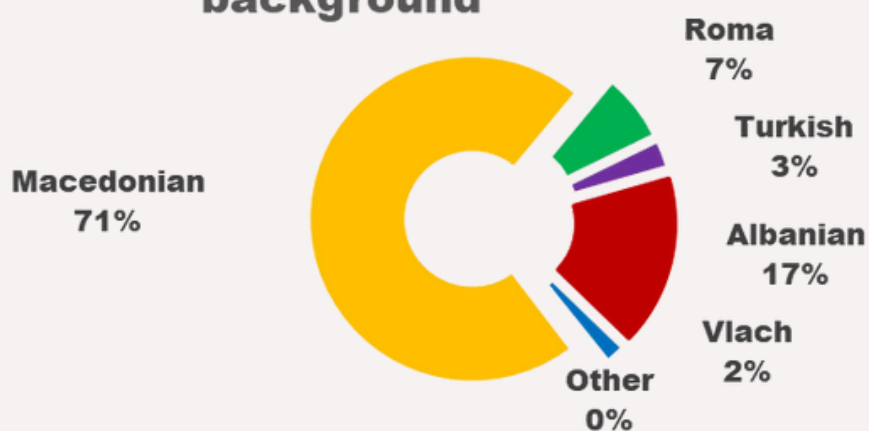


Chart 3: Representation of participants by ethnicity

The geographical distribution of respondents covers 32 municipalities, with the highest representation in Kicevo, Kocani and Prilep.

Participation by municipality

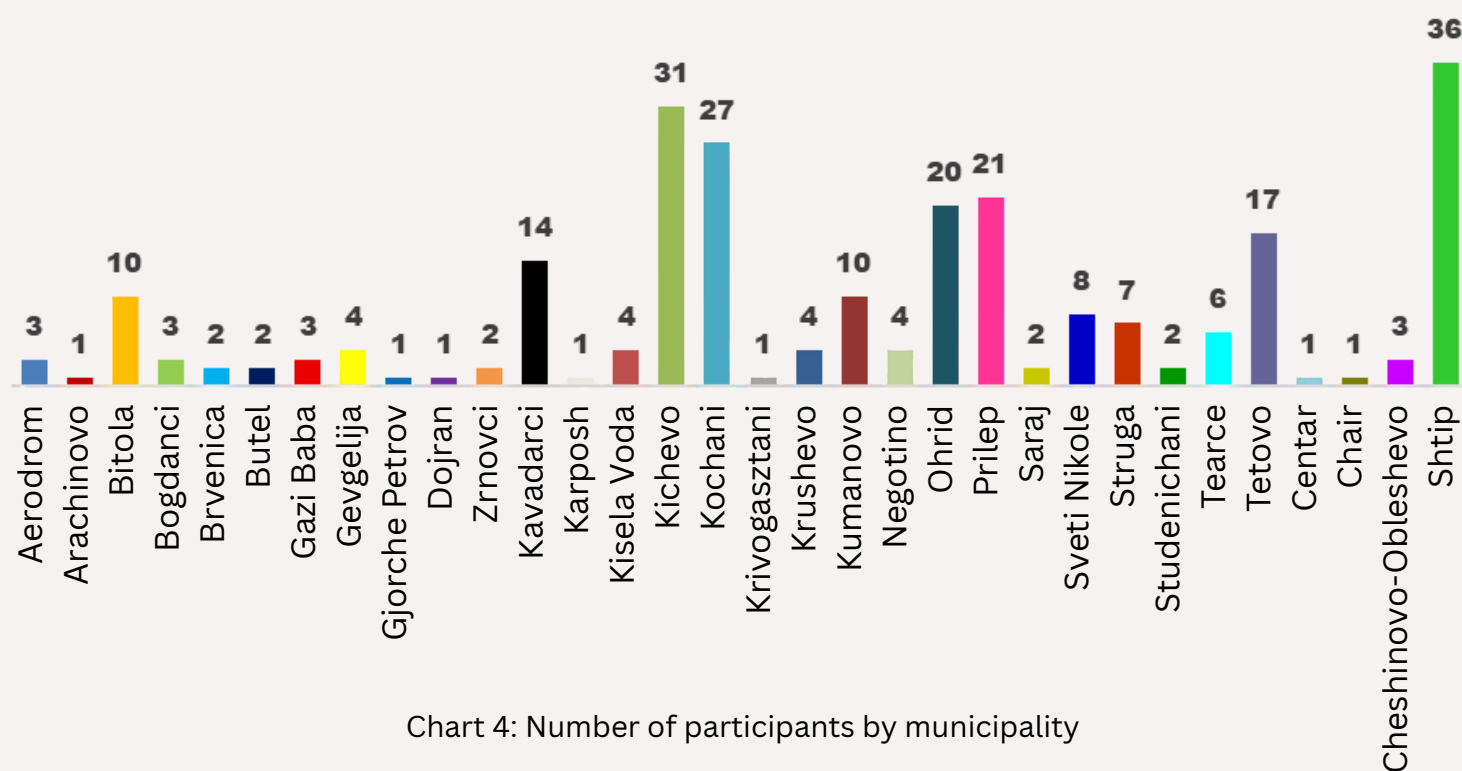


Chart 4: Number of participants by municipality

Geographical representation



The data shows that as many as 92% of respondents live in municipalities outside Skopje, indicating that the Analysis addresses experiences shaped by conditions in smaller and rural areas. This result highlights the need for special attention to accessibility and services outside the capital, where barriers are often more prominent.

Chart 5: percentage of participants from Skopje and outside Skopje

FINDINGS FROM THE SURVEY CARRIED OUT AMONG RESPONDENTS WHO ARE BLIND

How familiar are they with the Braille script?

Braille script is a tool for written communication and access to information for people with visual impairment. Its use is closely linked to education and employment opportunities and active participation in social and political life, including the electoral process.

Although the education system offers opportunities for learning Braille script at specialised institutions and at the Centre for Education and Rehabilitation of People with Visual Impairment, only a part of this population has actively mastered it and uses it in everyday life.

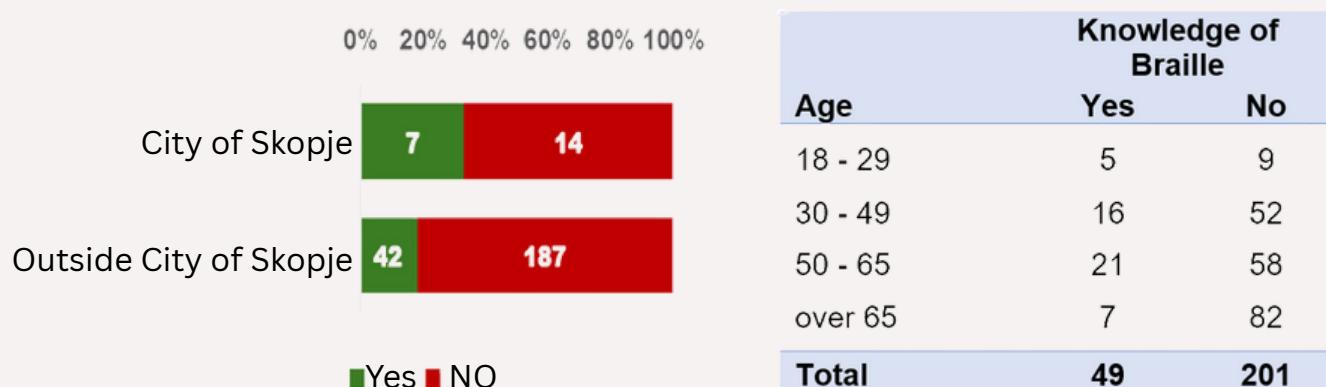
With the development of new technologies such as audio books, screen readers and mobile applications and other tools, there is a trend towards a reduced daily use of Braille script, although its role remains irreplaceable in certain segments. Its contribution to the electoral process is particularly significant: since 2017 SEC has been providing Braille templates for ballots, in order to guarantee the secrecy of the vote and equality of participation.

Knowledge of Braille



Graph 6/7: Number of participants who know the Braille alphabet and the breakdown by ethnicity

The blind respondents confirm the worrying perception of insufficient mastery of Braille. Almost 80% of them have not learned the Braille at all, a fact that indicates that most visually impaired persons are deprived of the basic tool for literacy, independence and access to information. This situation is particularly evident among respondents from the Macedonian and Turkish ethnic communities, which raises questions about the uneven access to education and resources. This is not only an educational challenge, but also a serious democratic problem: without active knowledge of Braille script, a large part of the community is limited in its ability to participate equally in society and in the electoral process.



Graph 8/Table 3: number of participants who know the Braille alphabet in Skopje and outside Skopje and breakdown by age

The analysis shows clear differences in knowledge of Braille script by place of residence and age. Respondents from the city of Skopje have a 30% higher level of knowledge compared to those from other municipalities, which indicates that the urban environment provides greater access to education and resources. There is also generation gap in regard to the use of Braille: people younger than 29 use Braille to a greater extent, while people over 65 the least.

Out of a total of 252 respondents, only 12 stated that they had attended training on voting for blind persons, with all of these trainings being organised by non-governmental organisations. This data indicates that the efforts so far for education are sporadic, do not cover the wider community and largely depend on the initiatives of the civil society sector. The lack of institutional support creates a risk that a large part of blind persons will remain without the necessary knowledge and practical skills for independent and secret voting. Therefore, it is necessary to establish a systematic approach. The SEC and the educational institutions, with the involvement of the civil society sector, should make additional efforts in developing and regularly implementing training programmes in general, but also with a focus on blind persons in rural areas and among the elderly population. Only through such institutionalised cooperation can continuity and wider coverage of blind persons in the electoral process be ensured.

The electoral process and the right to vote

The right to vote is the foundation of democracy, and the participation of blind persons in elections is crucial for their equal representation in society. By actively voting, they not only make sure for their voice to be heard, but also contribute to more inclusive and fairer electoral processes.

The strong awareness about the importance of active participation in elections is confirmed by the responses of blind persons, i.e. as many as 77% of respondents stated that they voted, without significant differences by sex or ethnic background.

Did they vote in the 2024 parliamentary elections?



Ethnic background	Did they vote in the 2024 parliamentary elections?	
	Yes	No
Macedonian	138	42
Albanian	34	8
Roma	13	4
Turkish	6	1
Vlach	3	2
Other	1	
Total	195	57

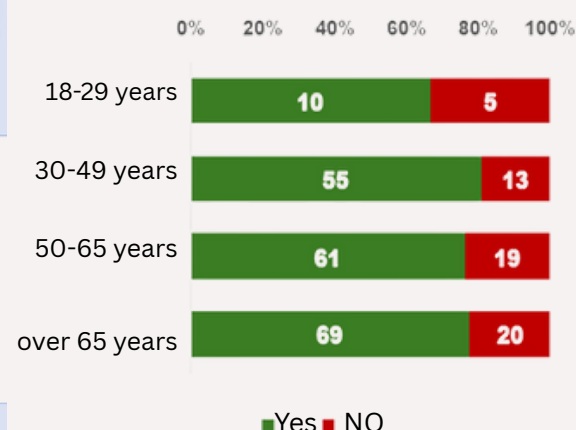


Chart 9/Table 4/Chart 10: number and percentage of participants who voted in the 2024 parliamentary elections, by ethnicity and age.

The highest turnout was observed among respondents aged 50 to 65 and older, which indicates that older generations have a greater habit and sense of responsibility when it comes to elections. This, in turn, opens the dilemma about the lower turnout among younger generations, which may signal the need for additional efforts to motivate and educate young blind persons in order to strengthen their active political participation.

The analysis of the data individually for each of the surveyed municipalities and for the city of Skopje reveals encouraging results. The turnout in the municipalities outside Skopje is somewhat higher compared to those that are part of the capital. This indicates that, despite the lesser availability of information and services in rural and smaller areas, awareness of the importance of voting and the sense of civic duty are remarkably strong. At the same time, the lower turnout in Skopje makes one wonder whether the urban environment, with more alternatives and different lifestyles, creates a certain level of apathy or reduced motivation for active participation in the electoral process.

Did they vote in the 2024 parliamentary elections?

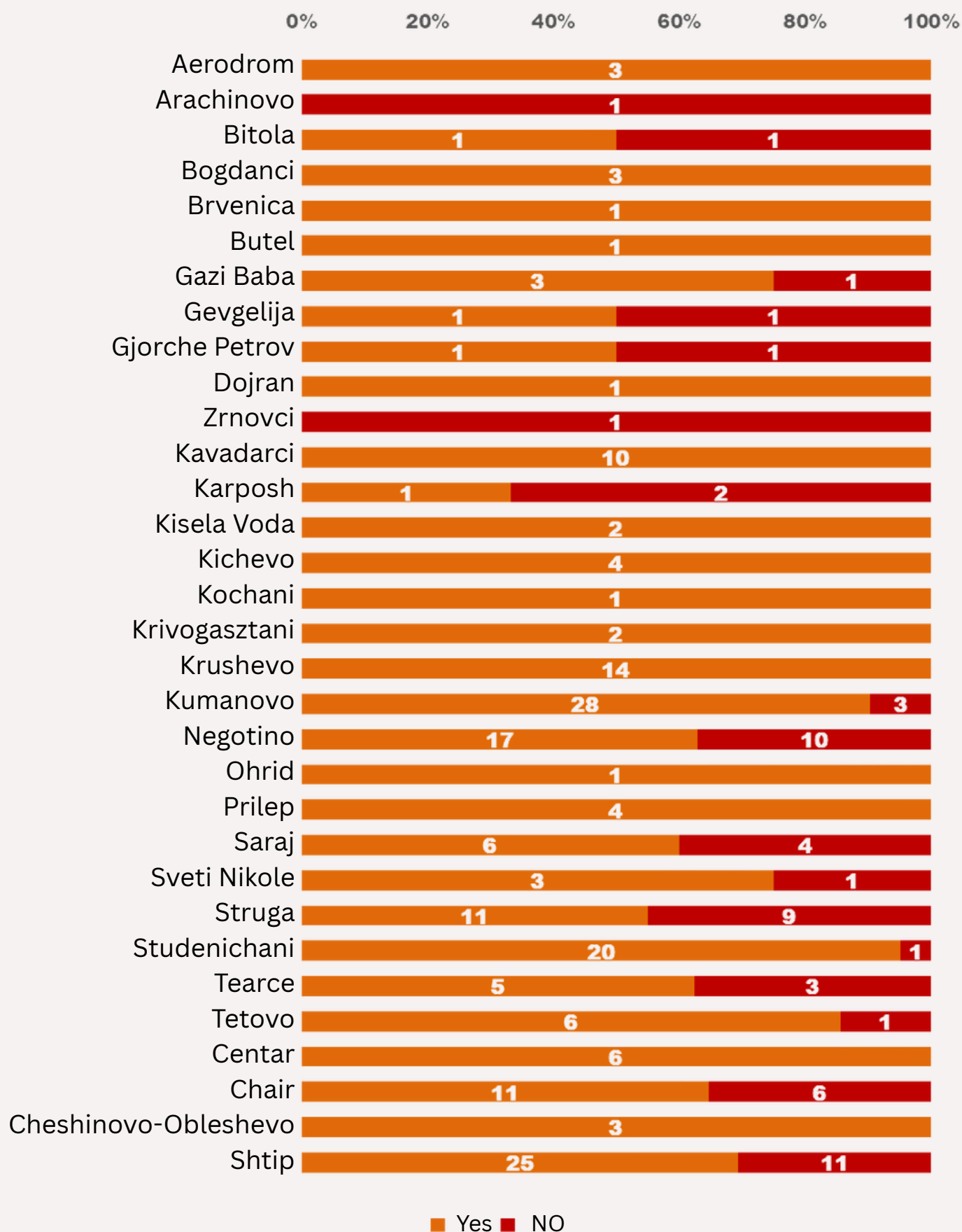


Chart 11: Number of participants who voted in the 2024 parliamentary elections by municipality

When asked why they did not exercise their right to vote, respondents usually cite their own disability, disappointment in the system and distrust in political parties as reasons. These answers indicate a double barrier: on the one hand, there are physical and logistical obstacles that make voting difficult, and on the other hand, the lack of trust in institutions and political entities creates a feeling of exclusion and demotivation. This result highlights the need for a dual approach: improving accessibility and practical support for persons with disabilities when voting, but also building trust through transparency, inclusive policies and open dialogue with the community. Only a concerted response to these challenges can reduce the number of those who choose not to exercise their right to vote.

Where do the blind vote?

As stated in the analysis of the legal framework, the Electoral Code allows for the voting by persons with disabilities to be carried out both at a polling station and at home, a procedure that is primarily intended for ill and incapacitated persons. In addition, electoral authorities do not keep records of blind persons as a separate category, but they are incorporated in the total number of ill and incapacitated persons. This method of registration makes it impossible to monitor their actual turnout and participation in the elections, which is crucial for developing appropriate policies and measures. Providing accurate statistics on the number of blind voters would be a significant step forward towards greater transparency and enabling targeted activities to promote their electoral inclusion.

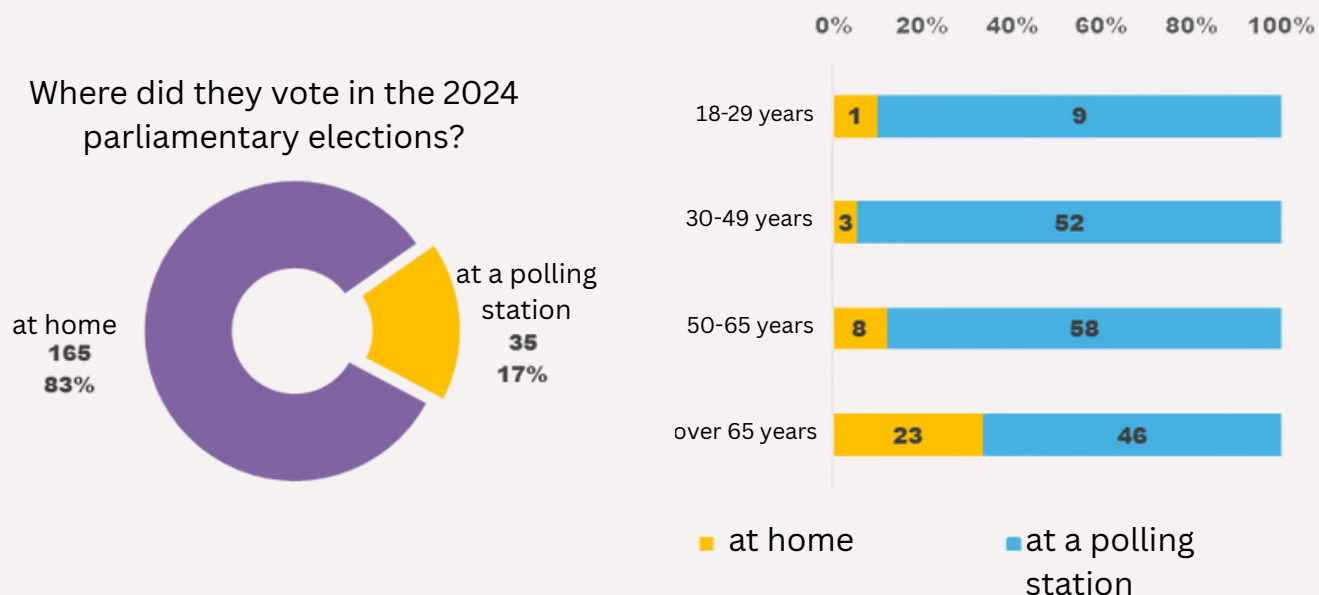


Chart 12/13: Percentage of participants who voted at a polling station or at home, breakdown by age

The data from the analysis show that as many as 83% of respondents voted at polling stations, with no notable differences by sex or ethnicity. The age aspect is particularly interesting: the fact that as many as two-thirds of people over 65 years old, managed to vote directly at the polling station is surprising. This data is important because it indicates that, despite the increased health and mobility challenges among older adults, they still show their determination and commitment to the electoral process. At the same time, this also raises questions about whether institutions are providing enough support to facilitate the participation of this age group and reduce potential barriers in the upcoming local elections in 2025.

If we analyse the voting locations of blind persons by municipality, the graph below shows that the majority of blind persons voted at polling stations in the 2024 parliamentary elections, especially in Skopje, where there is almost no voting at home. Outside the capital, however, some municipalities like Kicevo, Kavadarci, Prilep and Kocani have a significant number of voters who voted at home.

The main reasons for voting at home as cited by the respondents were health and age, the inability to vote with a companion, having greater privacy at home, as well as poor accessibility of the polling stations. These responses indicate that in addition to infrastructural obstacles, there are also barriers related to transportation or lack of personal support.

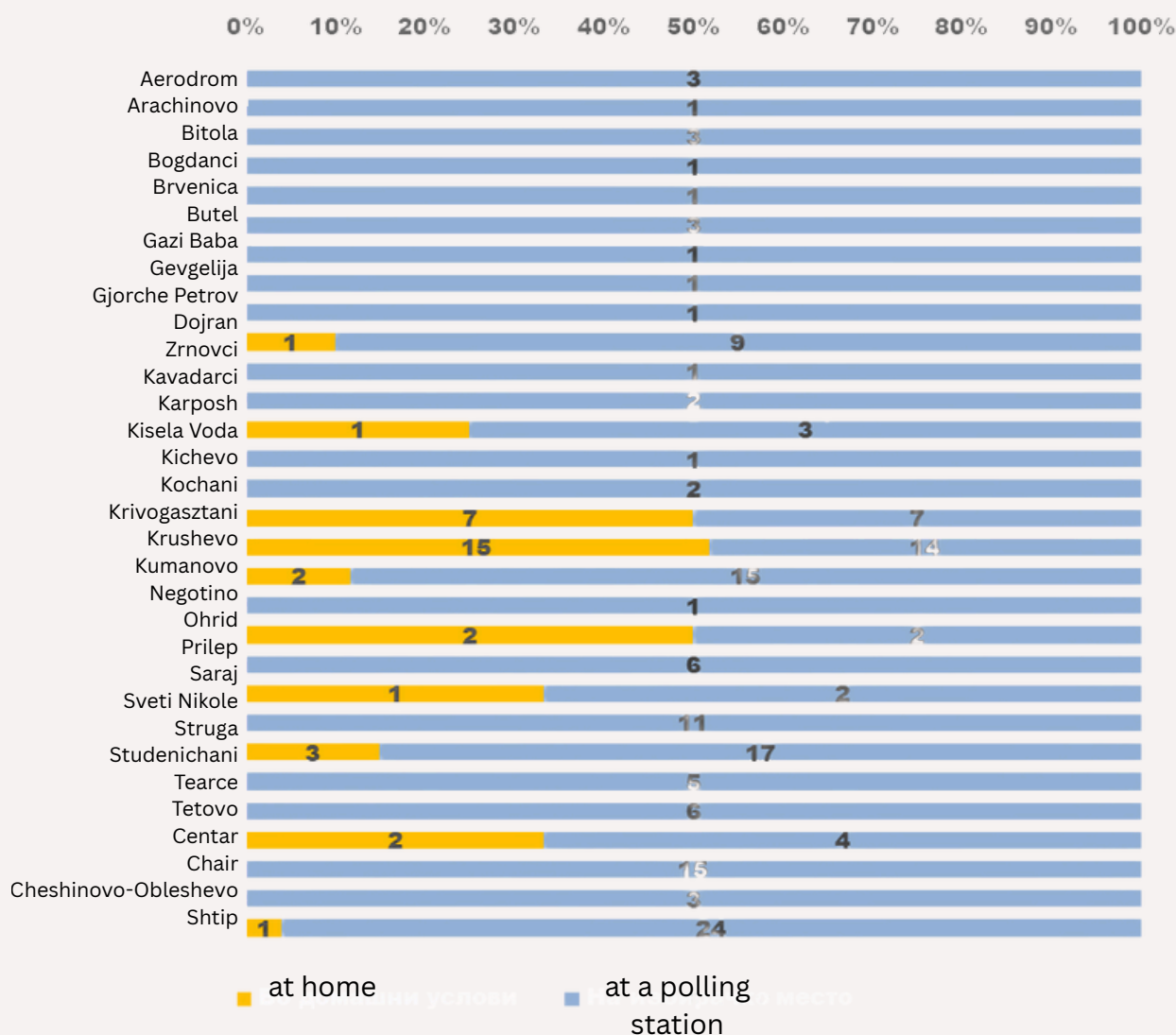


Chart 14: Participants who voted at a polling station or at home, breakdown by municipality

These data also show that urban areas provide better conditions for active participation at polling stations, while rural municipalities require additional logistical and institutional support. To improve the situation, systematic improvement of accessibility is required including the provision of assistants and transportation where necessary, as well as simplified procedures for voting at home. In this way, greater equality and independence in the exercise of the right to vote will be ensured.

How do blind persons vote at a polling station?

The analysis of the data shows that the vast majority of blind respondents who voted at a polling station did so with the help of another person (97%), while only 3% used a Braille template. This indicates that despite having a tool that enables independent and secret voting, it is rarely used.

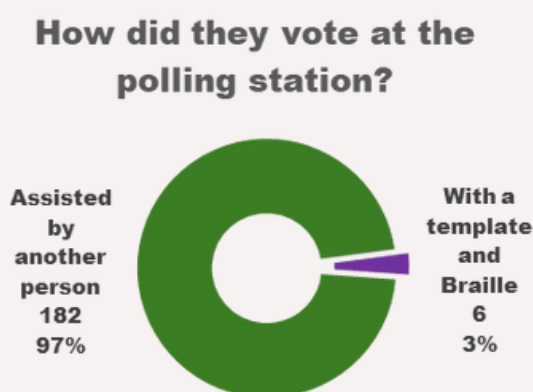


Chart 15: Participants who voted with the help of another person or using a template and Braille

In terms of sex, women use Braille somewhat more often (5 women) compared to men (1 man). This could be interpreted as a greater willingness or interest among women to use the independent voting tool, although the numbers are too small to generalise.

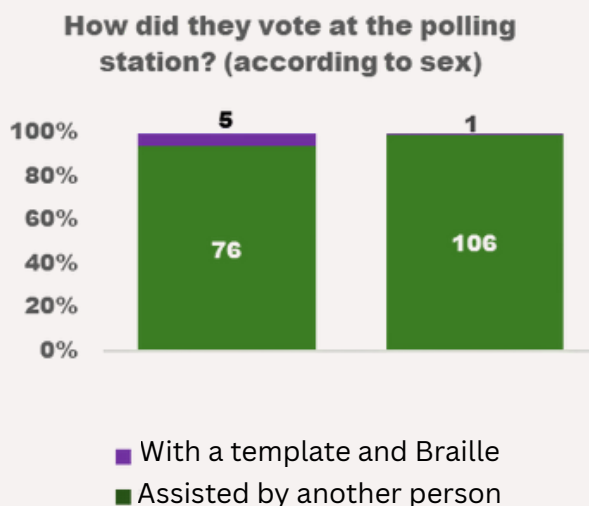


Chart 16: Participants who voted with the help of another person or using a template and Braille, breakdown by gender

By age, the highest prevalence of voting with Braille template is among young people aged 18-29, followed by those aged 30-49. Among people over 50, where the number of voters is significantly higher, almost all rely on the help of another person, which indicates that with age, dependence on companions increases, and the use of available technical solutions decreases.

Age	How did they vote at the polling station?	
	Assisted by another person	With a template and Braille
18 - 29	7	2
30 - 49	51	3
50 - 65	63	
over 65	61	1
Total	182	6

Table 5: Participants who voted with the help of another person or using a template and Braille, breakdown by age

From the above, one could conclude that although Braille script is a tool for greater independence and secrecy of the vote among blind persons, it is still marginally used in practice. It is important to emphasise that Braille is not a separate language, but a universal writing system that can be adapted to all languages, including Macedonian and Albanian, through special encodings for each alphabet. This means that with appropriate training and standards, anyone who knows Braille can read and write in different languages. With systematic education, institutional support and technical advancement, its implementation can be significantly increased and contribute to a higher level of electoral equality.

Who provides support during voting at polling stations?

If we analyse the respondents who voted at the polling station with the help of another person in terms of who appears in the role of the other person, the figures indicate the following:

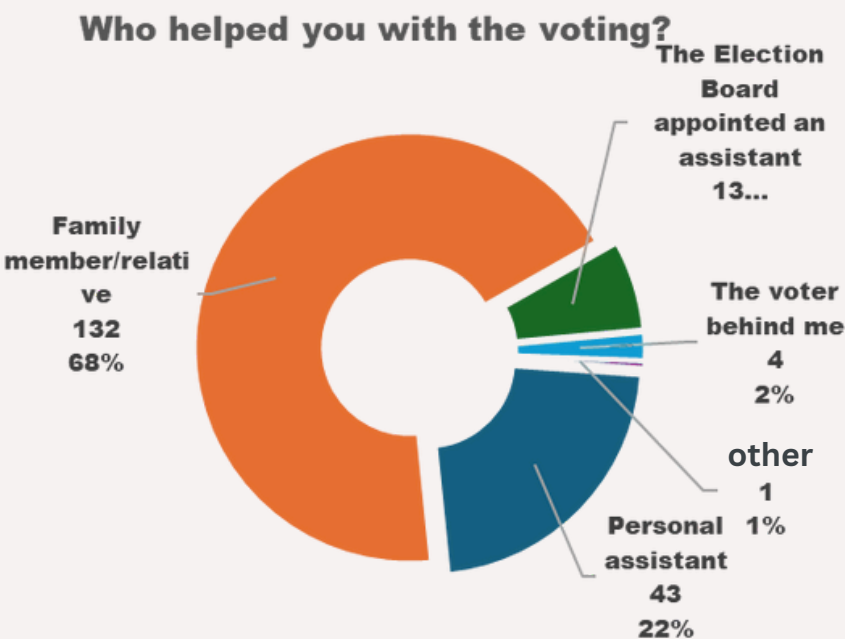


Chart 17: Who helped participants vote

Who helped you with the voting?(according to sex)

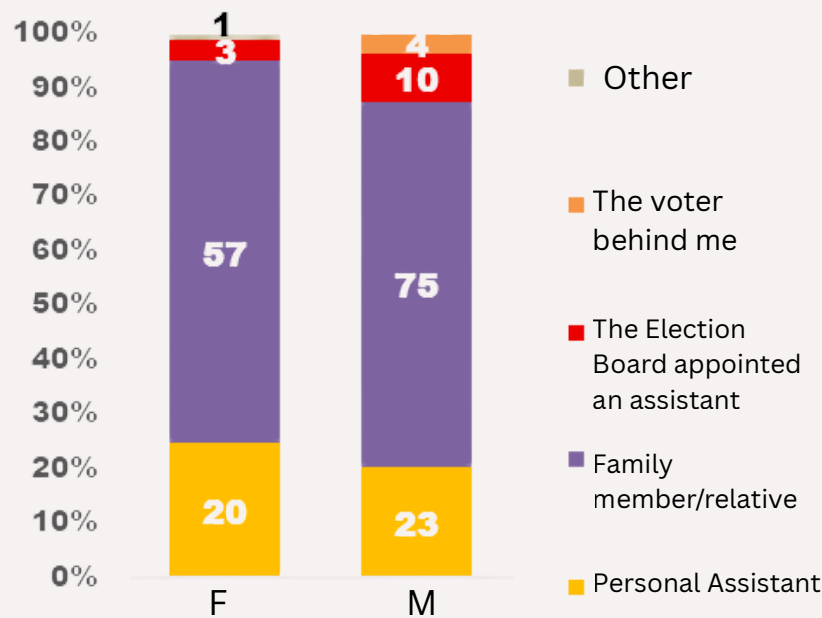


Chart 18: Who helped participants vote, breakdown by gender

When voting at polling stations, the majority of persons with visual impairment received support from family members or relatives (68%). This indicates that the family network remains the main source of support, which can be practical, but also risky in terms of ensuring full secrecy and independence of the vote. The second largest source of assistance is personal assistants (22%), which is a positive signal that the personal assistance service is becoming increasingly recognised and used. However, there are also situations where the election board designated a person (7%) to help or the assistance was provided by the next voter in line (2%), which raises questions about the appropriateness and secrecy of the vote when applying this practice despite this practice to be in line the SEC instruction.

In terms of sex, the figures are similar for both women and men: both groups rely mainly on family members, while personal assistants were used by 20 women and 23 men.

One could conclude that the current situation shows a high dependence on the family, but also the potential for greater use of personal assistants and technical solutions for independent voting. The improvement of these segments will contribute to a freer, more transparent and more dignified electoral process for the visually impaired.

How to improve the situation?

When asked how to address the existing challenges and obstacles, blind persons have a number of specific requests and suggestions for improving the electoral process and enabling equal access to voting. The most frequently mentioned is the need for better accessibility to polling stations, easier physical access, tactile paving, a separate entrance, etc. A large part of responses also indicate the importance of enabling voting with a personal assistant, so that persons can exercise their right to vote confidentially and with dignity.

In addition, several respondents believe that Braille templates are not useful enough, since a large part of blind persons are not familiar with the Braille. In this regard, instead of only improving the templates, they indicate the need for a dual approach: on the one hand, systematic education and training in the use of the Braille, and on the other hand, technical improvement of the templates - to be clearer, thicker and with clearly marked information.

Other prominent remarks refer to the need for more training and information for both members of the election boards and voters themselves, as well as providing legal solutions that will be beneficial to persons with disabilities. An increased role for institutions in creating conditions for accessible voting is also proposed, as well as ensuring more rights and care for this category of citizens. Some of the respondents also request the possibility of voting at home, as a solution that ensures privacy and easier exercise of the right to vote.

The conclusion from these responses is that in order to improve the electoral experience of blind persons, an integrated approach is needed that will combine infrastructure solutions (accessibility and templates), institutional measures (training, laws, support by personal assistants) and individual autonomy (the possibility of choosing between voting at a polling station or at home). In this way, the electoral process will be made more accessible, more dignified and truly equal for all.

ANALYSIS – PERSONAL ASSISTANTS

Personal assistants represent a type of support regulated in the Law on Social Protection and the by-laws related to services for persons with disabilities. In the Republic of North Macedonia, this service was first introduced with the reforms in the social protection system in 2019, when the state began to institutionally recognise the role of personal assistants as a means of increasing the independence and inclusion of persons with disabilities.

The function of a personal assistant is to provide practical assistance in everyday life, such as mobility, communication and access to public services, but always following the lead of their client and respecting their choices. In the context of the electoral process, personal assistants can play a particularly important role: they can accompany blind persons to the polling station, help them with spatial orientation, inform them about the technical appearance of the ballot and the Braille template, as well as provide discreet support so that the person can vote independently and secretly.

DEMOGRAPHIC AND GEOGRAPHIC DATA

The analysis is based on the responses of 225 personal assistants, out of whom 149 female respondents and 76 male respondents. The majority of the respondents belong to the age group of 30 to 49, while people younger than 29 and those aged 50 and over are represented almost equally (25% and 23% respectively). The ethnic composition reflects the diversity in the country: most of the respondents were Macedonians (75%), followed by Albanians (17%), Roma (4%) and others.

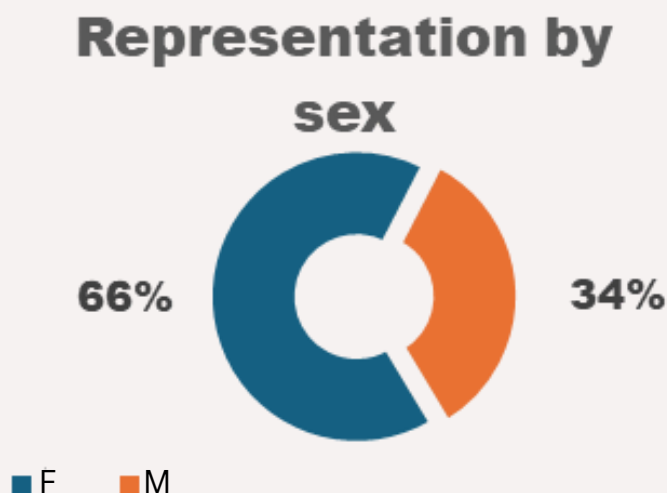


Chart 19: Representation of participants by gender

Representation by age



Chart 20: Representation of participants by age

Representation by ethnic background

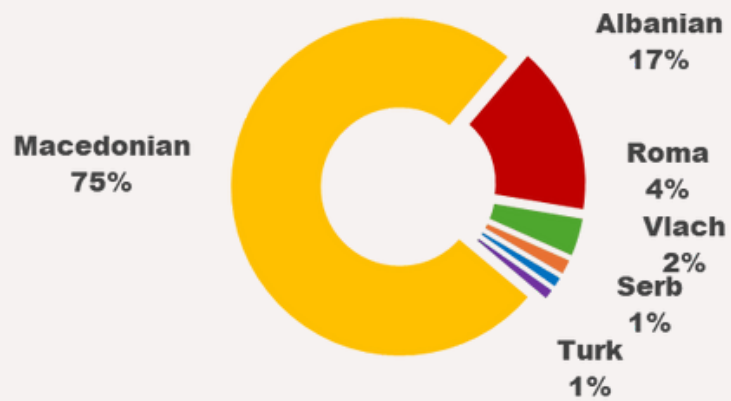


Chart 21: Representation of participants by ethnic background

The geographical distribution of the respondents covers 37 municipalities, with the highest representation in Kicevo, Stip and Kocani.

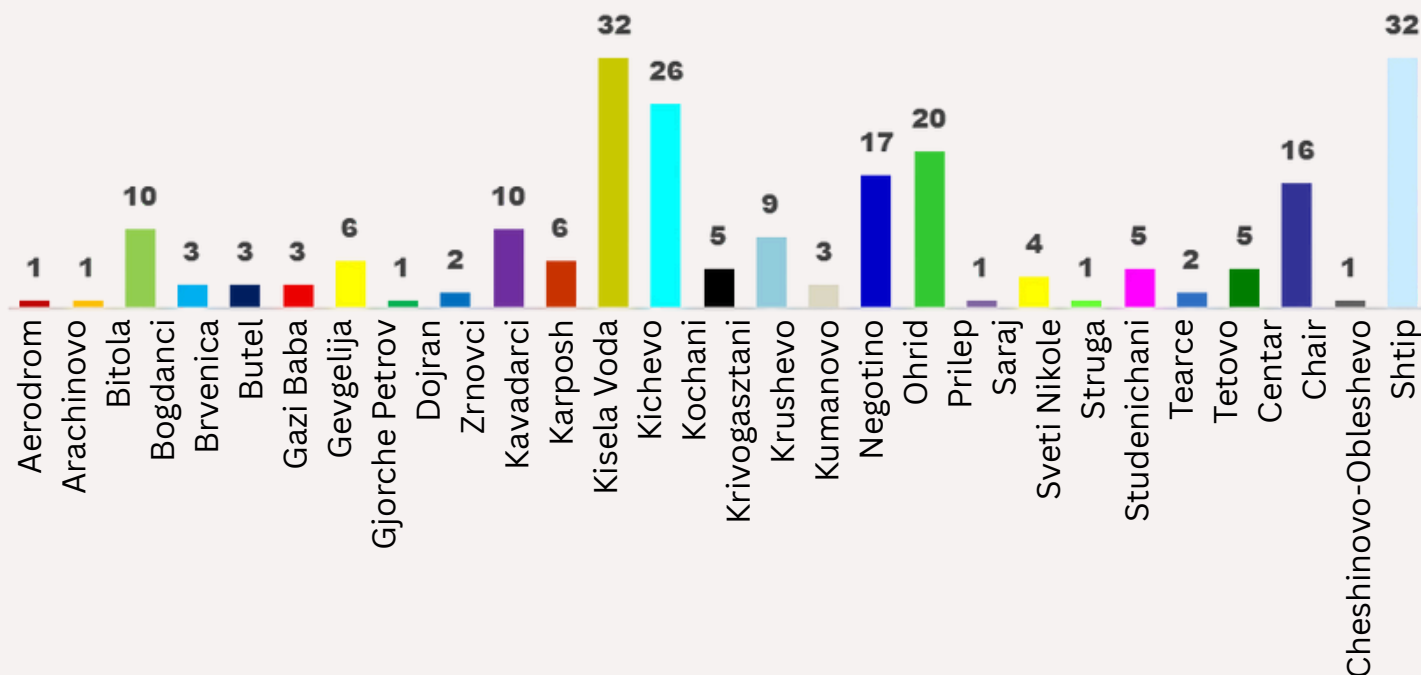
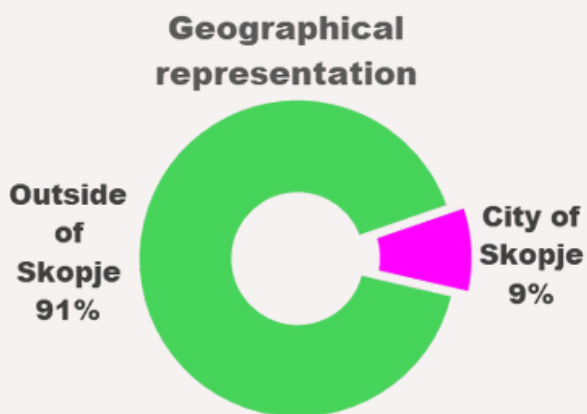


Chart 22: Number of participants by municipality



Only 9% of personal assistants for the blind are in Skopje, while 91% don't live in the capital. This indicates that most of the support is provided in the smaller municipalities and rural areas, where the lack of institutional services increases the need for personal assistants.

Chart 23: percentage of participants from Skopje and outside Skopje

Personal assistants as an integral part of electoral bodies

Out of a total of 225 surveyed personal assistants, 47 of them, or about 21%, stated that they had been members of electoral bodies. This data is important because it indicates that some of the assistants have direct experience with the electoral process and voting procedures, which can increase their competence and confidence in supporting blind persons. Such experience allows them to better inform and guide persons with disabilities, help them overcome potential barriers and not be anxious about the procedure itself. However, this also raises the question of the need for clear protocols that will guarantee impartiality and protect the secrecy of the vote, to avoid any influence on the electoral decision. In addition, the remaining 79% personal assistants who had no such experience with electoral processes need targeted training and guidance, in order to equalise the level of knowledge and enable everyone to provide appropriate, reliable and professional support to blind persons in exercising their right to vote.

Need for specialised training

Out of 225 personal assistants who were surveyed, as many as 92 believe that there is no need for training for the upcoming local elections in 2025, which indicates a misperception about their role and the complexity of the electoral process. Only 16 people have received formal training, and only from one organiser, which further underlines the limitations of the current offer and the dependence on a single source. Although 47 assistants have already accompanied a blind person to vote, their practical experience is often not supported by standardised knowledge and instructions, which creates a risk of inconsistent and inadequate support. The absence of awareness that training is required, which should not be optional, indicates the need for an institutionalised and systematic approach to capacity building.

In a situation where personal assistants play a key role in ensuring independent and secret voting, lack of sufficient training poses a serious challenge to the electoral process. To overcome this problem, it is necessary to increase and diversify the training offer, with the active involvement of the SEC, educational institutions and civil society organisations. By providing regular and standardised training, wider coverage throughout the country and an equal level of competence among all assistants can be ensured. In this way, both those who already have practical experience and those who are yet to face this role will have the appropriate knowledge and tools to professionally and impartially perform their duties, contributing to greater inclusion and equal participation of blind persons in the electoral process.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Many of these recommendations have already been started in the relevant sections of the text of the analysis, but for better clarity, we repeat them here, grouped according to the institutions they are intended for.

Electoral authorities

- should introduce special statistical records in Template 16 for summarising the results of voting, whereby records should also be kept about blind persons in the category of ill and incapacitated persons who voted at home, in order to plan support measures as well as monitor turnout. This could be done through phased approach and involve at the beginning only some electoral districts.
- should prescribe minimum binding standards: each polling station should have and clearly inform and keep records of Braille templates.
- should invest in technical improvement of the Braille templates, i.e. thicker lines, clearer symbols and bilingual support.
- should incorporate mandatory micro-trainings for the election boards on how to deal with blind persons and standardized assistance protocols (protection of confidentiality/impartiality; short and publicly available instructions, including audio ones, before elections).
- should introduce pre-election accessibility checks (checklist and records) with deadlines for corrections before the election day, as well as supervision and appropriate sanctions against the local authorities for non-compliance with the prescribed accessibility standards.

Ministry of Education and Science - Education and awareness raising

- should introduce systematic education on Braille script in regular and non-formal education, with a special focus on youth and rural areas.
- should combine Braille script education with digital technologies (screen readers, mobile applications) to increase motivation and access.
- should cooperate with the SEC to promote the use of Braille templates in public campaigns and practical demonstrations in the period between elections and immediately before elections.

Personal assistants and voting support

- there should be mandatory training on the electoral process for personal assistants, organised by the SEC in cooperation with educational institutions and civil society organisations.

- the offered trainings should be diversified (not to depend on a single organiser), with the aim of wider coverage across all regions.
- protocols should be developed for ensuring impartiality and protection of the secrecy of the vote when assisting the blind.
- a register of trained personal assistants who can be engaged during the elections should be created.

Involvement and trust in the electoral process - SEC and the civil sector

- targeted information campaigns for blind people (and their families) about their electoral rights and the available tools should be conducted.
- the young blind people should be stimulated to take part by implementing specialised programmes for civic education and inclusion in democratic processes.
- trust should be built through transparent and open communication with the community, regular consultations and feedback concerning the preparations for the elections.

