



INTERNATIONAL ELECTION OBSERVATION MISSION **Republic of North Macedonia – Presidential Election, 24 April 2024**

STATEMENT OF PRELIMINARY FINDINGS AND CONCLUSIONS

PRELIMINARY CONCLUSIONS

The first round of the presidential election was competitive and voters had the opportunity to make informed choices. The legal framework provides the basis for democratic elections but it does not sufficiently regulate some important elements of a presidential contest, and recent changes were introduced through a process that lacked transparency and public consultation. Fundamental freedoms were respected in the campaign but as election day approached, and the presidential and parliamentary races blurred, the rhetoric became increasingly negative and, in some cases, discriminatory, reflecting political fragmentation and ethnic divisions. The underrepresentation of women in the campaign and limited engagement with women voters demonstrated a need for greater commitment to ensuring their involvement in political life. The linking of the allocation of campaign funds and media opportunities to party affiliation disproportionately favoured candidates associated with major political parties. Despite limited human and technical resources, the election administration generally enjoyed public confidence in its technical capacity and managed the process efficiently overall. Election day was assessed overall positively, with voting procedures largely respected, while in some cases, during the counting, election boards did not fully complete prescribed procedures.

On 14 February 2024, the speaker of parliament announced that the regularly scheduled presidential election would be held on 24 April, with a potential second round on 8 May which would take place concurrently with the parliamentary elections. Prior to the election, most IEOM interlocutors described an atmosphere of disaffection with the political establishment, attributing it to perceived political influence in institutional appointments, long-standing inefficiencies within public administration, and recent high-profile corruption cases. Many IEOM interlocutors cited the need for comprehensive reforms to the public administration and the judiciary as well as for more concerted anti-corruption efforts, and noted a long-standing lack of political will within both government and opposition to address these issues.

The legal framework establishes the basis for holding democratic elections, however, key aspects of the presidential election, including some campaign rules, access to the media and the distribution of state funding are not regulated, undermining legal certainty. Such gaps led to state authorities applying rules for the regulation of political parties, which factor their representation in parliament, thereby advantaging the candidates affiliated with the main parliamentary parties. The Electoral Code was last amended after the elections had been announced. The changes incorporated some previous ODIHR recommendations and technical proposals from the State Election Commission (SEC) on voter registration, campaign finance, and election dispute resolution but recommendations made by the inter-agency working group tasked with electoral reform were largely disregarded and several ODIHR and the Council of Europe's Venice Commission recommendations were left unaddressed. Moreover, the amendments were adopted through expedited processes without public debate, which is not in line with international standards and OSCE commitments and.

Overall, the election administration met all legal deadlines and enjoyed public confidence in its technical capacity. However, mainly due to persistent staff shortages and reduced funding, the State Election Commission (SEC) was late with several elements of its preparations, such as appointing members of lower-level election bodies, issuing technical instructions, publishing session minutes and decisions, and launching its voter education campaign. Significant turnover in the membership of lower-level bodies affected the electoral preparations at these levels. The SEC held regular public

sessions in the pre-electoral period but did not consistently provide advance public notice of its sessions or convene them in timely manner. Despite the SEC taking notable steps to improve accessibility for persons with disabilities, concerns persisted that not all important information was available in accessible formats, and access to election offices remained insufficient.

The final voter register listed 1,814,317 citizens for the presidential election. In line with a previous ODIHR recommendation, recent legal amendments eliminated the requirement for citizens to possess a valid ID to be included in the voter register. Further, as a temporary measure to mitigate delays caused by the late issuance of new ID documents, voters with documents expired up to nine months before the election were allowed to use them for identification on election day. IEOM interlocutors generally did not raise concerns about the inclusiveness of the voter register. This notwithstanding, some highlighted ongoing shortcomings in the residential address system and civil registration, which diminished data accuracy. Previous recommendations by ODIHR to update and audit these databases were not implemented.

The law maintains residency criteria for presidential candidates, that appear to be overly restrictive, running counter to international commitments and standards. Seven candidates were registered by the SEC to compete in the presidential election through an inclusive process. Although six of the registered candidates were officially independent as per the law, all candidates were endorsed by political parties prior to registration, most used party symbols for identification on the ballot, and benefited from campaign funding on the basis of the parliamentary representation of their endorsing parties.

Despite legal provisions mandating equal gender representation at all levels of public administration and public life, women's participation remained low in certain elected and appointed positions, as efforts were insufficient to address enduring gender stereotypes that continue to obstruct their involvement in politics. Two of the seven presidential candidates were women. Women's presence as speakers and supporters at the campaign events observed by the ODIHR EOM was generally limited, and issues related to gender equality were largely absent from campaign discourse. While the gender quota in the election administration was met in most instances, the SEC and four of the 80 MECs did not have the mandated representation of women.

The presidential campaign was competitive, and fundamental freedoms were respected. However, despite their nominal independence, candidates affiliated with the four main parliamentary parties had distinct advantages in access to funded advertisements in the media and campaign spaces, impacting the equality of campaign opportunities. Campaign events frequently promoted presidential and parliamentary candidates simultaneously, enabling political parties to advance their party agendas ahead of the official parliamentary campaign. Key themes included the economy, anti-corruption efforts, and EU accession. As election day approached, the campaign discourse turned increasingly negative, including online, featuring *ad hominem* attacks and occasional threats. The ODIHR EOM observed that after the elections were called, several local public infrastructure projects were announced or inaugurated by mayors, government officials, and MP candidates, challenging legal provisions against the misuse of administrative resources and OSCE commitments.

Recent amendments to the Electoral Code improved some technical aspects of the campaign finance framework, but did not address and rectify systemic deficiencies previously identified by oversight institutions, and left a number of previous ODIHR and Venice Commission recommendations unaddressed. These shortcomings, combined with limited resources for the oversight bodies, and the occasional overly narrow interpretation of the law, significantly limited the effectiveness and timeliness of campaign finance oversight.

While the environment is generally conducive to media freedom, the quality of journalism is negatively affected by political fragmentation and ethnic divisions, intense competition among

numerous media outlets in a constrained market, and unfavourable working conditions of journalists. The ODIHR EOM media monitoring found that the public broadcaster covered all presidential candidates in line with the legal provisions establishing a framework for allocating time to political parties in elections, and private media presented adequate information on all candidates overall, with some channels showing bias towards specific candidates. There was one joint televised debate featuring all seven candidates. The March 2024 legal amendments introduced public subsidies to print media and lifted a ban on state-funded advertisements on private media, permitting information campaigns of public interest. While the stated aim of this change was to contribute to the media sector's financial sustainability, it was criticized as likely to result in political influence by the state over the media by most IEOM interlocutors, who also emphasized the need for further reforms in the media sector to enhance the viability of outlets, regulate online media, and further align the legal framework with the EU *acquis*.

The legal framework does not provide for full and effective legal redress in some areas. At odds with previous ODIHR recommendations and international good practice, the legal standing of voters to file complaints remains limited to cases regarding voter lists and their individual voting rights. The right to appeal election results is limited to the representatives of those that signed in support of the candidates. Positively, the March 2024 legal amendments clarified some appeal deadlines for election day. In the three complaints reviewed, the Administrative Court complied with the short deadlines but its decisions to either consider the matter on merits or return the case to the first instance body lacked consistency. Many IEOM interlocutors expressed minimal trust in the adjudication of their election-related complaints, citing inefficiency of the judiciary.

Election day was overall peaceful, with campaign silence regulations largely respected. IEOM observers positively assessed the voting in the vast majority of polling stations observed, noting that procedures were largely adhered to and the secrecy of the vote was generally maintained. However, some instances of group and family voting and the tracking of voters were observed. More than half of the polling stations observed were not independently accessible for persons with physical disabilities, and the layout was unsuitable for such voters in every fifth polling station. The counting process was assessed more negatively in ten per cent of polling stations observed, primarily due to election boards omitting important procedural steps or performing procedures concurrently. The tabulation was efficient and transparent, however, observers reported instances of corrections necessitated in results protocols and other indications of insufficient understanding of the counting procedures. The SEC posted preliminary results online per polling station shortly after the closing of the polls.

PRELIMINARY FINDINGS

Background and Political Context

North Macedonia is a parliamentary republic in which the president has limited executive power, and may serve for a maximum of two five-year terms. On 14 February 2024, the speaker of the parliament announced that the regularly scheduled presidential election would be held on 24 April, with a potential second round taking place on 8 May, concurrently with the parliamentary elections.¹

The political landscape is dominated by two parties, the Social Democratic Union of Macedonia (SDSM) and the Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization – Democratic Party for Macedonian National Unity (VMRO-DPMNE), which have led alternating governing coalitions since

¹ According to the Constitution, the presidential election must be conducted within the final 60 days of the incumbent president's term, while parliamentary elections must take place within the last 90 days of the parliament's term.

independence. The last presidential election was held on 21 April 2019 and, following a run-off on 5 May, was won by Stevo Pendarovski, endorsed by SDSM. The most recent parliamentary elections were held on 15 July 2020 before the official end of the sitting parliament's term and resulted in the formation of a coalition government led by SDSM and the Besa Movement.²

The pre-electoral political environment has been calm. However, entrenched political fragmentation and ethnic divisions have hindered the passage of reforms related to election legislation, necessary reforms in public administration and the judiciary, as well as the implementation of anti-corruption efforts also required by the European Union (EU) for accession. Most IEOM interlocutors referred to a generalized atmosphere of disaffection with the political establishment, due to perceptions of political influence in institutional appointments, long-standing inefficiencies within the public administration, and high-profile corruption cases.³

The Constitution provides for equality of men and women, and the 2012 Law on Equal Opportunities for Women and Men requires equal gender representation at all levels of public administration and public life. The outgoing parliament included 51 women (42.5 per cent).⁴ Women hold 4 of the 20 ministerial positions (20 per cent). Only 2 of the 80 municipal mayors (2.5 per cent) are women. This underrepresentation in various elected and appointed positions, coupled with instances of pressure and online attacks on female politicians, indicates that efforts by the authorities and political parties to address the enduring gender stereotypes impeding women's participation in politics have been insufficient.⁵ Roma constitute 2.53 and Turks 3.86 per cent of the population, however, they are underrepresented in some aspects of public life.⁶

Electoral System and Legal Framework

The president is directly elected for a five-year term from a single nationwide constituency. If no candidate receives more than half the votes of all registered voters, a second round is held two weeks later between the two top candidates. In the second round, the candidate with the highest tally is elected, unless the turnout falls below 40 percent, in which case the entire election process is repeated without a legally determined deadline. The turnout requirement in the second round could lead to

² SDSM and Besa jointly secured 46 seats, the Democratic Union for Integration (BDI/DUI) won 15 seats, and the coalition between the Alliance for Albanians and AlternativA obtained 12 seats, while VMRO-DPMNE won 44 seats, the *Left* (Levica) gained 2 seats, and the Democratic Party of the Albanians (DPA/PDSH) secured 1 seat. In January 2024, a caretaker government led by Talat Xhaferi, the country's first ethnic-Albanian prime minister, was established to organize the elections, in accordance with the law and the coalition agreement between SDSM and BDI/DUI.

³ See section 2.1.2 of the [North Macedonia 2023 Report](#) by the European Commission (EC), which states that, despite ongoing efforts, no legislation has been adopted to tackle "nepotism, cronyism and political influence in the recruitment of public sector employees and in the appointment of members of supervisory and management boards". Section 2.2.1 further states that "Corruption remains prevalent in many areas and is an issue of concern. Delays and reversals in trials of high-level corruption cases increased [...] The maximum legal penalties for specific corruption-related criminal offences were reduced, [...] halting or even terminating, a large number of high-level corruption cases".

⁴ The Electoral Code requires a 40 per cent gender quota for parliamentary candidate lists.

⁵ The [UN Women 2023 Country Gender Equality Profile](#) states that "There are numerous barriers for women who aspire to leadership positions in politics, stemming from prevailing patriarchal values and prejudice, as well as socio-cultural norms and gender stereotypes [...]. Political parties lack fundamental protections for their women members, activists, and political representatives."

⁶ See section 136 of the Council of Europe Advisory Committee on the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities [2022 Fifth Opinion on North Macedonia](#), which states "the socio-economic situation of Roma continues to be significantly worse than that of the population in general"; See section 2.2.1 of the [North Macedonia 2023 Report](#) EC stating that "Additional efforts and resources are required to speed up inclusion of Roma, to tackle anti-gypsyism, discrimination and educational and spatial segregation, and to reduce inequalities."

cycles of repeated elections, which was previously criticized by ODIHR and the Council of Europe's Commission for Democracy through Law (Venice Commission).⁷

The presidential election is regulated by the 1991 Constitution, the 2006 Electoral Code, the 2004 Law on Financing of Political Parties, the 2019 Law on Prevention of Corruption and Conflicts of Interest, the Criminal Code, and subsidiary acts by the State Election Commission (SEC).⁸

The Electoral Code was last amended on 7 March and 1 April 2024, after the elections had been announced, which undermines legal certainty.⁹ Contrary to OSCE commitments and international standards, the changes, which resulted from negotiations between the ruling parties and the opposition, were adopted through expedited process, without public debate.¹⁰ Although the changes incorporated some previous ODIHR recommendations and technical proposals from the SEC, they largely disregarded recommendations made by the inter-agency working group in November 2023, which had been driving electoral reform discussions since May of that year.¹¹ Many IEOM interlocutors, including those from state institutions and civil society organizations (CSOs), criticized the lack of transparency in the adoption process and its failure to address long-standing shortcomings of the election-related legislation.¹²

The amendments, *inter alia*, eliminate the requirement for citizens to possess a valid ID document in order to retain their inclusion in the voter register, revise certain campaign finance regulations, enhance data protection in relation to voter registration, specify deadlines for resolving election disputes and, for these elections, permit the use of certain expired identity documents for voter verification. Notwithstanding the amendments, a number of previous ODIHR and Venice Commission recommendations remain unaddressed, including that the Electoral Code be systematically revised to eliminate gaps and inconsistencies, ensure equal access to the media in election campaigns, increase the accountability and integrity of campaign financing, and enhance regulations on the misuse of administrative resources.

While the legal framework establishes the basis for holding democratic elections, key aspects of the presidential election, including some campaign rules, access to the media and the distribution of state

⁷ See the 2013 ODIHR and Venice Commission [Joint Opinion](#) of the Electoral Code.

⁸ The legal framework includes the 2004 Law on Political Parties, the 2013 Law on Media, and the 2013 Law on Audio and Audio-visual Media Services. North Macedonia has ratified key international and regional human rights instruments related to the holding of democratic elections.

⁹ Due to their late adoption, certain new provisions, such as the modified number of signatures required for nominating parliamentary candidates, were not implemented for these elections. See also paragraphs 58 and 60 of the 2016 Council of Europe's Venice Commission [Rule of Law Checklist](#) that states that "the law must, where possible, be proclaimed in advance of implementation and be foreseeable as to its effects".

¹⁰ The bill was submitted by three MPs from VMRO-DPMNE, SDSM, and BDI/DUI. On 7 March, out of 86 MPs present, 84 approved the bill, including 30 of the 40 VMRO-DPMNE MPs, 28 of the 33 SDSM MPs, 11 of the 13 BDI/DUI MPs, and 5 of the 8 Alliance for Albanians MPs. In paragraph 5.8 of the [1990 OSCE Copenhagen Document](#) participating States committed to adopt legislation "at the end of a public procedure". Paragraph 8 of the 1996 UN Human Rights Committee (HRC) [General Comment no 25](#) to Article 25 of the 1966 ICCPR states that "Citizens also take part in the conduct of public affairs by exerting influence through public debate [...] with their representatives". Paragraph 60 of the 2016 Venice Commission [Rule of Law Checklist](#) states that "[l]aw can be changed, but with public debate and notice, and without adversely affecting legitimate expectations".

¹¹ In May 2023, the Ministry of Justice initiated a working group (WG) comprising state institutions, political parties, and civil society organizations (CSOs) to amend the Electoral Code, with its work concluding in November 2023. Some parties, including the opposition VMRO-DPMNE, chose not to participate in the working group. Major parties conducted parallel negotiations on potential amendments.

¹² IEOM interlocutors from among the CSOs stated that the WG met the deadlines in preparing the amendments, based on ODIHR recommendations, whereas the government and political parties did not provide their draft proposals for public scrutiny and debate, and did not consider the WG's proposal in their bill.

funding are not regulated, undermining legal certainty.¹³ Gaps in these areas led to state authorities applying rules for the regulation of political parties, which factor their representation in parliament, thereby advantaging the candidates affiliated with the main parliamentary parties (see *Campaign, Campaign Finance and Media*).¹⁴ Many IEOM interlocutors emphasized the necessity for comprehensive legal reform, and raised concerns about a persistent lack of political will to address key problematic aspects of the electoral process and a repeated practice of late amendments to the legal framework.¹⁵

Election Administration

The election was administered by a three-level administration comprising the SEC, 80 Municipal Election Commissions (MECs), and 3,391 Election Boards (EBs). Out-of-country voting was conducted in 31 diplomatic and consular offices in 22 countries.¹⁶ Early voting was administered on 23 April for homebound voters, those in penal institutions, and institutional care facilities.¹⁷

The SEC consists of seven members, nominated by political parties and appointed by the parliament for a five-year mandate.¹⁸ It held regular public sessions in the pre-electoral period but did not consistently provide advance public notice of its sessions or convene them in timely manner. Moreover, not all session minutes and decisions were published online as legally required, which limited transparency. The SEC adopted or reinstated several instructions and guidelines on voter registration and identification, candidate registration, ballot validity, voting by persons with disabilities, and police conduct during the electoral process. However, many ODIHR EOM interlocutors, including some MEC members, noted that some decisions were adopted late, and the guidance provided on key issues such as election-day dispute resolution and voter identification was inadequate.

MECs are comprised of five members, appointed from state and municipal administration employees for five-year terms. EBs consist of three permanent members, appointed for four years from among state and municipal employees and public servants, as well as two temporary members nominated by political parties.¹⁹ Since the announcement of the elections, both MECs and EBs experienced significant turnover in membership, which hindered their operations, with personal reasons such as

¹³ The law does not foresee the nomination of presidential candidates by political parties, but prescribes independent registration with support from voters, or MPs. The election campaign rules designate political parties as recipients and managers of resources, advantaging those presidential candidates which are affiliated with political parties. The rules on distribution of state funding of political parties in relation to their representation in parliament benefit the major governing and opposition parties over independent candidates.

¹⁴ The legal interpretation by state authorities, including the SEC and the Agency for Audio and Audio-visual Media Services (AAVMS) allowed contractual agreements between candidates and political parties to regulate access to budget funds for campaigns, campaign space, and other resources, though such arrangements are not prescribed in the law.

¹⁵ The election-related legal framework was amended several weeks prior to scheduled elections including on 16 February 2020, and twice in 2021, on 2 April and 16 September.

¹⁶ For out-of-country voting, the SEC registered 2,569 voters out of 2,904 applications received that complied with the legal requirements. The required minimum of 10 registered voters to open a polling station was not reached in 20 diplomatic representations. Affected voters were not able to vote.

¹⁷ A total of 6,935 homebound voters, 2,147 voters in penal and pre-detention institutions, 2 internally displaced persons, as well as 534 individuals in healthcare and institutional care facilities registered for early voting.

¹⁸ Opposition parties may nominate candidates for SEC chairperson and two members, meanwhile, ruling parties may nominate the deputy chairperson and three members. The current tenure of the SEC began in January 2021. Between February 2023 until late February 2024, the SEC only had six members due to disagreements between the Albanian parliamentary parties, over how to implement the clauses of the Electoral Code entitling opposition parties to appoint a member to the Commission. The appointment took place upon the withdrawal of one of the nominees, which occurred after the nomination deadline.

¹⁹ MEC and non-partisan EB members were appointed in 2021.

retirement, and poor health commonly cited, and in some cases due to perceived political pressure.²⁰ Many replacements occurred after completion of the training. Positively, the SEC conducted an additional online training for newly appointed MEC members one week before election day.

The election administration met all legal deadlines and enjoyed public confidence in its technical capacity. However, persistent staff shortages in various SEC departments and the absence of a SEC secretary general since 2021, coupled with reduced funding, led to delays in several elements of the preparations.²¹ These included replacing MEC and EB members, providing instructions to lower-level election bodies, and launching the voter education campaign.²² ODIHR EOM observers also noted that some MECs displayed limited understanding of their responsibilities.²³ The composition of most MECs fulfils the legal criteria for gender and ethnic representation.²⁴ However, only two of the seven SEC members are women (29 per cent), falling short of the required quota. Women represent 49 per cent of the MEC.

The SEC developed and implemented a comprehensive training programme for lower-level election bodies and representatives from media, political parties, and CSOs. Most training sessions observed by the ODIHR EOM were well-organized and interactive. However, participation from EB members was generally low, and key topics such as new regulations for voter registration and identification, election-day dispute resolution, and the use of biometric voter identification devices were not uniformly addressed.

Due to administrative challenges in the procurement process and the delayed approval of educational materials by the commission, the SEC launched its broadcast media, leaflet, and online voter education campaign less than two weeks before election day. The education campaign was limited to generic messages inviting voters to vote, missing an opportunity to cover key issues, such as voting procedures, voter identification requirements, and arrangements for voters with disabilities. Voter education materials were primarily available in Macedonian and Albanian, with some materials also in Romani, Serbian, Turkish, and Vlach languages.

Positively, the SEC made various voter information materials available in accessible formats, published polling station accessibility data online, established a dedicated helpline for voters with hearing impairments, and provided assistive tools, such as ballot templates on election day. However, organizations representing persons with disabilities expressed concerns about the lack of training for EBs on how to use these assistive tools, as well as insufficient access to key information in accessible

²⁰ Since February 2024, 199 of the 800 MEC and 14 per cent of permanent EB members have been replaced, due mainly to personal reasons, such as retirement, health issues or relocation. However, some IEOM interlocutors, including from the election administration, expressed concerns about perceived pressure from political parties, adversely affecting their readiness to perform their duties effectively. In some municipalities, such as Bitola, Bogdanci, Negotino, Valandovo, Vasilevo, the overall turnover of EB membership was around 50 per cent. In this period, some MECs had difficulties to reach *quorum*, preventing them from convening sessions or making decisions. In some cases, when chairpersons were absent, MECs could not access financial resources, as these are deposited to chairpersons' personal accounts.

²¹ Shortcomings were most notable in the IT, budget, and legal departments. The SEC attributes the personnel shortage to unattractive salary conditions that fail to attract skilled professionals and administrative constraints in the recruitment process, which are contingent on budgetary approvals.

²² Several MECs reported that the SEC had not provided them with necessary instructions in a timely manner, hindering election preparations. Additionally, some MECs reported to the ODIHR EOM that they faced inadequate financial resources and delays in their allocation.

²³ Limited knowledge, among other issues, pertained to new provisions on ID documents for voter identification at polling stations, the eligibility of voters turning 18 between the two rounds of the presidential election, resolution of election-day complaints concerning violations of voting rights, registration of authorized candidate representatives, and providing authorizations to access to MEC sessions and relevant documents.

²⁴ By law, each gender must comprise at least 30 percent of the membership of every election body. In municipalities where ethnic minorities make up at least 20 percent of the population, these groups must be equitably represented. Out of 80 MECs, 4 did not comply with the gender representation requirement.

formats, including voter registration data. Additionally, the physical accessibility of electoral premises, including polling stations, remained inadequate (see *Election Day*).

Voter Rights and Registration

Citizens over the age of 18 years are eligible to vote. Inconsistent with international standards and despite previous ODIHR recommendations, persons deprived of legal capacity by a final court decision are disenfranchised.²⁵

The registration system for in-country voting is passive and continuous, based on data from the civil and population registers.²⁶ Although the law mandates the SEC to maintain and update the voter register, due to outdated IT technology and lack of qualified personnel, in practice, the State Statistical Office handles the processing and updating of most voter registration data.²⁷ In line with a previous ODIHR recommendation, the March 2024 legal amendments eliminated the requirement that voters possess a valid identification document to be registered as voters, thus removing an administrative obstacle that had previously limited the constitutional right of otherwise eligible voters.²⁸ As IDs are still necessary to vote, for these elections, as an additional temporary measure to diminish the negative effects of the delays in issuing ID documents invalidated due to the country's name change, voters with IDs that expired within nine months prior to the elections were allowed to use them for identification at the polling station.

Voters can verify the accuracy of their registration data and request corrections online or in person at SEC regional offices. In addition, voter registration data were available for public scrutiny at the SEC regional offices from 28 February to 18 March. The SEC received 143 requests from voters, based on which it made 70 corrections as well as added 53 and removed 20 voters. Eight political parties requested an electronic copy of the register for additional scrutiny; none of them requested any corrections.²⁹

The voter register includes 1,814,317 citizens eligible to vote in the presidential election, including 95,116 who temporarily reside abroad. The SEC only published updated data disaggregated by municipality and polling station the day before election day, impacting the accuracy and transparency of the data. The provisions of the Electoral Code do not ensure that citizens who turn 18 between the two potential rounds of the presidential election can participate in the second round. The 1,148 citizens concerned can however participate in the parliamentary elections.

IEOM interlocutors generally did not raise concerns about the inclusiveness of the voter register. However, some pointed to the significant number of citizens residing abroad who remain on

²⁵ Although the Electoral Code foresees a possibility to retain voting rights for individuals whose legal capacity was partially removed, the Constitution and other legislation retain a blanket restriction on voting rights for persons deprived of legal capacity. Article 29 of the 2006 UN [Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities](#) (CRPD) requires States to “guarantee to persons with disabilities political rights and the opportunity to enjoy them on an equal basis with others”. See also paragraph 9.4 of the 2013 [CRPD Committee’s Communication No. 4/2011](#), which states that “[...] an exclusion of the right to vote on the basis of a perceived or actual psychosocial or intellectual disability, including a restriction pursuant to an individualized assessment, constitutes discrimination on the basis of disability”.

²⁶ Voters resident in the country are automatically included on in-country voter lists. Citizens temporarily residing abroad may actively register to vote at diplomatic representations or vote in-country according to their last place of residence. In total, 2,569 voters abroad were able to vote in this presidential election.

²⁷ Prior to the elections, the SEC had not assumed responsibilities for processing voter registration data as planned since 2021, nor had it achieved integration of its systems with the population register.

²⁸ The Ministry of Internal Affairs informed the ODIHR EOM that, in practice, this change has not been implemented prior to the election.

²⁹ Pursuant to the March 2024 legal amendments, to enhance personal data protection, the SEC limited the information shared with parties to include only data indispensable for scrutiny, such as voters’ names, birth dates and addresses.

the register as they maintain an official residence in-country, which, should these voters choose not to participate in the election, may impact the threshold requirement of a possible presidential run-off. Moreover, persistent shortcomings in the residential address registration and civil registration systems continue to diminish data accuracy.³⁰ Previous ODIHR recommendations to ensure data accuracy, harmonize all relevant databases and to audit the voter register remained unaddressed ahead of the election.

Candidate Rights and Registration

Citizens who are registered voters and over the age of 40 by election day, with at least 10 years of residency in the country over the past 15 years, may stand for president. The residency requirement appears to be overly restrictive, at odds with the 1990 OSCE Copenhagen Document and other international standards.³¹

The nomination of a presidential candidate must be supported either by the signatures of 30 MPs or at least 10,000 voters. Nomination signatures had to be collected at the premises of 34 SEC regional offices and designated notaries between 28 February and 8 March. In line with the law, voters were permitted to sign in support of more than one candidate. Some contestants reported that voters residing in rural areas faced challenges accessing the SEC regional offices.³² Fifteen prospective presidential candidates officially notified the SEC of their intention to collect supporting signatures from voters, seven of whom received the required number of signatures.

Candidate nomination for the presidential election ended on 19 March. The SEC verified the registration documents against the established criteria within the legal deadline and provided contestants with a 48-hour window to address any identified omissions or shortcomings.³³ In an inclusive process, the SEC registered seven presidential candidates, including two women. Two candidates were ethnic Albanians. Six candidates were supported by groups of voters and one by members of parliament. According to the law, candidates supported by voters are officially independent. However, in practice, all presidential candidates were endorsed by political parties, most used party symbols on the ballot and, following their registration, were subjected by the SEC and other authorities to the same regulations that apply to political parties.³⁴

³⁰ The Ministry of Internal Affairs informed the ODIHR EOM that the enforcement of provisions mandating individuals to declare address changes is inconsistent. According to the 2023 amendments to the Law on Identification Documents, the records of citizens aged 65 and older are maintained permanently in the civil register unless a death is officially reported, a process that is not uniformly executed. Due to unreliable data, the civil registers include records of voters of unrealistically high age as well as those registered at non-existent addresses.

³¹ Paragraph 7.5 of the [1990 OSCE Copenhagen Document](#) states that the participating States should “respect the right of citizens to seek political or public office, individually or as representatives of political parties or organizations, without discrimination.” See also paragraph 15 of the [UN Human Rights Committee General Comment No. 25](#): “persons who are otherwise eligible to stand for election should not be excluded by unreasonable or discriminatory requirements such as education, residence or descent, or by reason of political affiliation.”

³² While the SEC certifies voters’ signatures for free, nominating entities may contract notaries to provide such services against a fee. Only 6 of the 15 prospective presidential contestants used notaries for signature collection, mainly in Skopje. For voters in rural areas, most candidates relied on the services of SEC regional offices.

³³ Two submitters were required to supplement their documentation with information regarding their tax number and campaign bank account; both complied within the prescribed deadline.

³⁴ The registered presidential candidates were Stevo Pendarovski, endorsed by SDSM-led coalition (Coalition for a European Future); Gordana Siljanovska Davkova endorsed by VMRO-DPMNE-led coalition (Your Macedonia Coalition); Stevco Jakimovski endorsed by GROM-led coalition (Coalition Brave for Macedonia); Bujar Osmani, endorsed by the BDI/DUI-led coalition (European Front); Biljana Vankovska-Cvetkovska endorsed by the Left; Arben Taravari, endorsed by VLEN/VREDI; Maksim Dimitrievski, endorsed by I KNOW – Movement for Our Macedonia (ZNAM).

For the parliamentary elections, by 12 April, the SEC also registered 84 parliamentary candidate lists with a total of 1,680 candidates nominated by 12 political parties and 5 coalitions.

Election Campaign

The official presidential campaign started on 4 April and concluded on 22 April, partially overlapping with the parliamentary campaign period, which began on 18 April and is scheduled to end on 6 May. The law does not regulate presidential candidates' access to budgetary funds for campaigning, airtime, and areas for billboards and posters. As such, state authorities applied the rules that relate to parties, which generally factor parties' representation in parliament, thereby disadvantaging those candidates not affiliated to the main political parties. By law, up to 90 per cent of the budgetary funds earmarked for campaigning, airtime, billboard and poster space was allocated to the candidates endorsed by the four major parliamentary parties, namely, SDSM, VMRO-DPMNE, BDI/DUI, and Besa. The legal framework lacks provisions on the application of campaign regulations in cases where presidential and parliamentary elections are held concurrently, leading to instances of appropriation of the presidential campaign period for promoting parliamentary candidates.

The law prohibits the use of campaign funds ahead of the official campaign period and forbids certain forms of early campaigning, including the publication of campaign advertisements in the media before the campaign period starts. However, pursuant to the March 2024 legal amendments, the law permits holding one campaign event between the registration of candidates and the start of the campaign period. Many IEOM interlocutors noted that the regulations on early campaigning are ambiguous which led to inconsistent application by candidates and reduced accountability. During this period, the ODIHR EOM observed some presidential candidates and their endorsing political parties holding multiple events featuring political messages.³⁵

The presidential campaign was competitive, and fundamental freedoms were respected. In the campaign there was significant overlap between presidential and parliamentary races, with candidates and their endorsing political parties holding large-scale rallies, canvassing door-to-door, and disseminating flyers, posters, billboards, and digital content, primarily in Macedonian and Albanian languages. Frequently, campaign events promoted both presidential and parliamentary candidates simultaneously, with political parties leveraging presidential events to support their broader party agendas. Prominent themes included the economy, countering corruption, EU accession, and the country's foreign policy. Campaign discourse became increasingly negative as election day approached, with *ad hominem* attacks and occasional threats.³⁶ Instances of discriminatory rhetoric

³⁵ For example, on 28 March, the presidential candidate endorsed by VMRO-DPMNE participated in a public debate in Skopje to discuss party policies; on 29 March, the same candidate addressed the audience in a rally in Skopje. On 30 March, the candidate endorsed by BDI/DUI-led coalition addressed the audience in a rally in Gostivar; on 2 April, the same candidate held a political speech during an Iftar dinner in Skopje. On 30 March, the candidate endorsed by the VLEN/VREDI addressed the audience during an inauguration of a party office in Struga; on 3 April, the same candidate addressed the audience promoting presidential programme in a rally in Skopje.

³⁶ For example, incidents during the campaign include a verbal attack on a TV crew by VMRO-DPMNE supporters at a rally on 4 April; a billboard featuring the presidential candidate endorsed by VLEN/VREDI in Skopje was set on fire on 7 April; on 9 April, the SDSM leader accused VMRO-DPMNE of using pressure tactics and threatening journalists; on 10 April, the Secretary General of VMRO-DPMNE called for an end to "SDSM's corruption" at an event in Krushevo; and on 11 April, at a rally in Bosilovo, the VMRO-DPMNE leader framed the election as a choice between a "proud Macedonia" and an SDSM that acts "as pawns to BDI/DUI". The office of a VMRO-DPMNE MP in Kochani was broken into on 22 April.

were observed during the campaign, including some cases conflating the perceived actions of political parties with ethnic communities.³⁷

The campaign featured few women political figures, with only the two women presidential candidates prominently appearing as speakers at presidential rallies observed by the ODIHR EOM.³⁸ Women comprised around 32 per cent of the speakers and 34 per cent of the attendees at these events. Issues related to gender equality were largely neglected in the campaign discourse, with the exception of the candidate endorsed by the VMRO-DPMNE. Issues concerning youth received little attention in the campaign.³⁹

The Electoral Code contains some regulations aimed at preventing the misuse of administrative resources prior to elections. The State Commission for Prevention of Corruption (SCPC) is responsible for overseeing compliance with the relevant provisions (see *Campaign Finance*). The law prohibits the launching of public development projects, extraordinary budgetary disbursements, and employment procedures using budgetary funds after the elections are called. The inauguration of public projects is prohibited starting 20 days before the campaign period. Despite these regulations, after the elections were called, the ODIHR EOM observed several local public infrastructure projects announced or inaugurated by mayors, government officials, and MP candidates, challenging the legal provisions and OSCE commitments.⁴⁰ In addition, some IEOM interlocutors claimed that many public employment and procurement procedures had been initiated shortly prior to the respective ban taking effect. Several IEOM interlocutors raised concerns about the potential for vote buying in vulnerable communities, including the Roma and Turks, as well as pressure on voters, mainly public sector employees.

Campaigning on social networks is not regulated. The ODIHR EOM followed the online activities of all presidential candidates, their endorsing parties and party leaders.⁴¹ Most campaign messages promoted candidates and programmes in a neutral tone, with the tone becoming increasingly negative as election day approached.⁴² Campaign content included videos, photographs, descriptions of meetings and speeches. Between 21 March and election day, the leader of VMRO-DPMNE had the

³⁷ For example, on 7 April, the *Left*'s Facebook account shared a message stating "it is time to put an end to the influence of the DUI-zation and the Albanization of Macedonia". During the campaign period, *the Left* made several derogatory comments against Bulgaria, Bulgarians and the EU. On 18 April, on the Facebook account of the leader of *the Left*, the following message was posted: "Bulgarians in the Constitution is a treason, today begins the Bulgarian fascist occupation of Macedonia". Politicians from BDI/DUI publicly voiced interpretations that VMRO-DPMNE's slogan "Make Macedonia Yours" is chauvinistic and anti-Albanian.

³⁸ ODIHR EOM LTOs observed 52 campaign events of 6 presidential candidates and their endorsing parties.

³⁹ In its campaign, candidates endorsed by both the SDSM and the VLEN/VREDI coalitions emphasized the importance of investing in youth; the candidate endorsed by BDI/DUI called for a youth quota in parliament.

⁴⁰ For example, on 20 and 26 March, the VMRO-DPMNE mayor of Kisela Voda announced street reconstruction works and the construction of a new fountain; on 21 March and 2 April, the mayor of Aerodrom district of Skopje and vice-president of VMRO-DPMNE launched the construction of a new park and inaugurated the reconstruction of a recreation complex; on 12 April, SDSM Minister of Agriculture and Forestry announced an agricultural project; on 12 April, the mayor of Tetovo and leader of Besa, part of the VLEN/VREDI coalition, launched a stadium reconstruction in Tetovo with the presence of the presidential candidate endorsed by the coalition; on 12 April, the mayor of Gazi Baba (VMRO-DPMNE) announced the redesign of 18 sports fields. On 28 March, the Mayor of Gevgelija, together with the VMRO-DPMNE leader, announced the reconstruction of a new road. The Mayor of Tetovo, leader of Besa, announced the rebuilding of the new road on 23 April. See Paragraph 5.4 of the 1990 OSCE [Copenhagen Document](#), which requires "a clear separation between the state and political parties".

⁴¹ The ODIHR EOM observed the Facebook accounts of presidential candidates, political parties and their leaders starting from 21 March.

⁴² For example, on 9 April, the leader of VMRO-DPMNE stated on Facebook that the ruling parties "are waiting for such a defeat that their ears will buzz from the slap that the people will deliver to them". On April 11, in a video published on the Facebook account of the VMRO-DPMNE leader, he stated: "Pendarovski's entire campaign consists of a Balkan macho with cheap primitive insults to a beautiful woman", referencing the opposition candidate. On 21 April, the leader of VMRO-DPMNE accused the government and the authorities, including the SEC, of planning to manipulate the votes in the upcoming elections.

highest level of online engagement (526,816 interactions), followed by the candidate endorsed by VLEN/VREDI (234,881 interactions), and the presidential candidate endorsed by SDSM (191,426 interactions). In the pre-electoral period, there were mutual allegations of using disinformation in the campaign between some of the main contenders. A number of CSOs provided election-related media literacy education and monitored for incidents of online misinformation, manipulative content and harmful narratives.⁴³

Campaign Finance

The March 2024 amendments to the Electoral Code narrowed the scope of interim campaign finance reporting, shortened the deadline for submitting the final financial report, and defined certain donation limits. While some of these amendments improved technical aspects of the campaign finance framework, they left a number of previous ODIHR and Venice Commission recommendations unaddressed, and did not rectify systemic deficiencies identified by the State Audit Office (SAO) and the State Commission for the Prevention of Corruption (SCPC).⁴⁴

The state reimburses media outlets registered with the SEC for campaign advertisements by political parties in relation to parties' representation in the parliament, favouring the two largest majority and minority parties. While the law lacks detail on how such funding should be applied to presidential elections, the SEC applied the same formula to presidential candidates who entered in contractual agreements with these parties.⁴⁵ Contrary to international standards and OSCE commitments, the application of this allocation formula resulted in unequal funding of presidential contestants.⁴⁶ Three presidential candidates publicly claimed that this provision is discriminatory (see also *Media*). Public funds received by political parties for their regular activities can also be utilized for the presidential campaign, without any legally specified limits.

Presidential campaigns may also be financed through monetary and in-kind donations, and loans. Individual citizens can donate up to EUR 3,000, while legal entities may contribute up to EUR 30,000 per candidate.⁴⁷ Donations can also be made even after the final results are announced, a practice that some IEOM interlocutors, including those from oversight institutions, considered as increasing the potential for clientelism. By law, the expenditure limit, set at MKD 110 per registered voter, is cumulative for the two electoral rounds.⁴⁸ There are no requirements for the accounting of expenses

⁴³ During the campaign, representatives of SDSM and VMRO-DPMNE mutually accused each other of spreading disinformation. In a high-visibility case, on 2 April, a journalist published an action plan of VMRO-DPMNE that allegedly involved the creation of fake opinion polls. VMRO-DPMNE reacted by stating that the action plan in question was a falsification by their political opponents. In 2019, North Macedonia adopted a plan for Resolute Action against the Spreading of Disinformation, yet the IEOM was not made aware of any government actions taken in relation to this electoral process.

⁴⁴ These recommendations include regulation of third-party financing of campaigns, reporting on in-kind contributions and loans, harmonizing timeframes and deadlines for the receipt and publication of reports, as well as providing adequate authority, resources, and sanctioning power to the oversight bodies. See also the SAO's [Annual Report for 2022](#).

⁴⁵ The fund allocated by the SEC for paid media advertisement for the presidential election was EUR 3,6 million, and in case of second round, additional EUR 1,8 million. The funds were allocated as following: candidates affiliated to two biggest parties in majority and minority respectively (Mr. Osmani, Mr. Pendarovski, Ms. Siljanovska-Davkova and Mr. Taravari) can use 90 per cent of these funds; seven per cent is shared among candidates who are endorsed by parties who do not have parliamentary group (Mr. Jakimovski and Ms. Vankovska); while the remaining 3 per cent is dedicated to the candidate endorsed by non-parliamentary parties, namely, Mr. Dimitrievski.

⁴⁶ Paragraph 7.5 of the [1990 OSCE Copenhagen Document](#) commits participating States to "respect the right of citizens to seek political or public office, individually or as representatives of political parties or organizations, without discrimination." See also paragraph 1.2.3.a.iii. of the [Code of Good Practice in Electoral Matters](#).

⁴⁷ Donations from foreign or anonymous sources, municipal governments, state-owned companies, religious and charitable organizations, and from the media, are prohibited.

⁴⁸ One euro equals MKD 62 (Macedonian denar). For this election, the expenditure limit is set at around EUR 3,2 million.

incurred by political parties endorsing presidential candidates, limiting transparency and accountability. Further, third-party campaigning and paid political advertisements on social networking platforms are not explicitly regulated.⁴⁹

Presidential candidates submit three interim campaign finance reports to the SAO, SCPC, and SEC, which then publish them on their respective websites.⁵⁰ Within 60 days following the announcement of the election results, contestants submit a final financial report to the SAO that then has 60 days to conduct an audit. Pursuant to the March 2024 legal amendments, interim reports are not required to include information on campaign expenditures. Updated instructions on interim reporting were made available only two days before the first submission deadline. Moreover, the instructions further narrowed the scope of reporting, reducing the transparency of campaign finance, contrary to international good practice.⁵¹ Despite previous ODIHR recommendations, interim reports cannot be submitted electronically and are not audited.

The SCPC can initiate investigations into alleged violations of campaign finance rules either *ex officio*, including based on unofficial reports, or upon receipt of a formal complaint, and must issue a resolution within five days. However, contrary to the law, the SCPC decided to apply a general deadline of 60 days for resolving most cases, and apply the five-day rule only when deciding upon formal complaints. Since the announcement of the elections, the SCPC initiated 31 cases based on unofficial reports, 3 *ex officio*, and 1 upon a formal complaint, applying the five-day resolution deadline only to this latter case.⁵² Due to financial constraints, and deviating from previous practice, the SCPC did not deploy field monitors to oversee the potential misuse of administrative resources and campaign spending, failing to cross-check reported campaign expenditures with actual spending.

Overall, deficiencies in the legal framework, limited resources for the oversight bodies, as well as the narrow interpretation of the law by the relevant institutions diminished the effectiveness of campaign finance oversight. The SCPC incorrectly applied deadlines when deciding on cases related to the misuse of administrative resources and failed to respond to potential legal violations or proactively check the bank accounts of contestants. Additionally, the Ministry of Finance issued overly narrow

⁴⁹ According to the [Meta Ad Library](#), between 4-20 April, six presidential candidates spent a total of EUR 20,300 on social media advertising, with the largest spenders being Mr. Pendarovski spending EUR 12,030 followed by Mr. Dimitrievski who spent EUR 3,816. Simultaneously, political parties, their leaders, and other prominent party-affiliated individuals incurred total advertising costs of approximately EUR 37,132. Of this expenditure, SDSM and its leader alone accounted for EUR 18,505, while VMRO-DPMNE and its leader accounted for EUR 3,869.

⁵⁰ Candidates must submit interim campaign finance reports on the 11th day of the campaign, the day before the election, and after closing their campaign bank accounts. An additional report is due the day before the potential presidential run-off. All seven candidates submitted their two interim reports within the deadlines, but the content and timing of publication of these reports varied. Of the total 14 reports submitted, 3 contained no information on donations, 4 contained expenditures as well, a requirement dropped pursuant to the latest legal amendments. Only five reports included information on funds transferred from political parties, and two reports contained information on in-kind donations, though not required by the instructions for reporting. The first reports were posted day after submission by the SAO, the SCPC and two candidates' websites, while second reports were posted on election day only by the SCPC and one candidate.

⁵¹ According to the instruction of the Ministry of Finance, interim reporting does not have to include information on in-kind contributions, loans, and funds transferred by political parties. The reporting templates were published on 12 April, while the first interim report was due on 14 April. Paragraph 261 of the 2020 [ODIHR and the Council of Europe's Venice Commission Joint Guidelines on Political Party Regulation](#) states that it is good practice to require reports providing oversight bodies and the public with preliminary information on campaign incomes and expenses several days before election day. Paragraph 258 states that digitalizing information and submitting it to the regulatory body in easily searchable and reusable form can facilitate oversight.

⁵² These cases related to violations of provisions that prohibit new investments and employments, as well as public promotion of state-funded projects after the election announcement. The complaint by the presidential candidate endorsed by VMRO-DPMNE claimed that the Academy for Judges and Public Prosecutors had not suspended new employments. The SCPC ruled in favour of the complainant, but the Academy appealed the SCPC decision to the Administrative Court, which then annulled the SCPC decision, and returned it back for decision to the SCPC. The SCPC granted the claim on the new examination.

instructions regarding interim campaign finance reports, resulting in numerous sources of income going unreported. Key election stakeholders, including from the oversight institutions, did not have full confidence in the effectiveness of campaign finance monitoring and accountability for the misuse of administrative resources in the campaign.

Media

The media landscape is diverse, with 40 television and 58 radio stations, 22 print media outlets, and over 200 online portals. Although television is the main source of information, online portals increasingly significantly influence the media environment, in particular during elections. While the environment is generally conducive to media freedom, the quality of journalism is negatively affected by political fragmentation and ethnic divisions, intense competition among numerous media outlets in a constrained market, and unfavourable working conditions of journalists. The November 2022 amendments to the Law on Civil Liability for Insult and Defamation, along with the February 2023 amendments to the Criminal Code, introduced additional safeguards for journalists. However, online attacks, including those against women, and isolated incidents of physical assault against journalists remain a concern.⁵³

In March 2024, amendments to the Law on Media and the Law on Audio and Audio-visual Media Services were adopted, introducing public subsidies to print media and lifting a ban on state funded advertisements on private media for information campaigns of public interest.⁵⁴ While the stated aim was to contribute to the sector's sustainability, this change was criticized by most IEOM interlocutors as likely to result in political influence over the media. Many interlocutors highlighted the need for further reforms in the media sector to enhance the viability of outlets, regulate online media, and further align the legal framework with the EU *acquis* with respect to strengthening the independence and capacity of the media regulator and the public broadcaster.

The Electoral Code requires all media outlets, including online news portals, to provide election coverage in a fair and balanced manner. The public broadcaster is obliged to air free political promotion, whereas other types of media are entitled to offer paid political advertisements. However, various provisions in the law refer only to the coverage of political parties and not to presidential candidates, and their application to presidential elections favoured the candidates endorsed by major political parties.⁵⁵ The legal provisions that allow funding for paid political advertising in the media directly from the state budget were criticized by many IEOM interlocutors for increasing media dependence on state funds. Moreover, most IEOM interlocutors claimed that a significant number of news portals, registered for campaign advertising, were created for the sole purpose of receiving state funds during election campaigns and, in some cases, channelling these funds to political parties (see also *Campaign Finance*).⁵⁶

⁵³ According to the Association of Journalists of Macedonia (AJM), in 2024, a journalist was physically attacked and injured during an interview in Kichevo and was later arrested following a physical incident. The journalist was subsequently released but faces criminal charges. Many IEOM interlocutors reported regular online attacks, with a growing number of cases against women journalists. Often, these cases are not reported or prosecuted.

⁵⁴ Pursuant to the amendments, a commission of state campaigns composed of representatives from the major political parties will select the projects presented through the campaigns of public interest, distributing 0.1 per cent of the state budget for this purpose.

⁵⁵ The rules on distribution of paid political advertising were contested by the *Left* and its endorsed presidential candidate at the Constitutional Court, citing disadvantage created by the unequal distribution. The case is currently pending examination.

⁵⁶ All interested private media had to announce their price lists for paid political advertisements, whereas online news portals were additionally required to register with the SEC. For the presidential and parliamentary elections, 39 TV stations, 37 radio stations, 11 print outlets, and 251 internet portals registered with the SEC. The State Public Prosecutor's office informed the ODIHR EOM that previous investigations into the legitimacy of some internet portals participating in election campaigns were terminated, as no elements of criminal activity could be determined.

Newscasts of the public broadcaster Macedonian Radio and Television (*MRT*) remain subject to stringent regulations in the campaign period.⁵⁷ This adversely affects editorial freedom and does not ensure equitable access and news coverage for presidential candidates endorsed by smaller political parties, despite previous ODIHR recommendations. Despite the July 2023 legal amendments that aimed at improving the funding of the public broadcaster, it still remains primarily financed from the state budget.⁵⁸ While its new management was to be elected in 2019, due to a lack of agreement in the parliament on the appointment of the new Programmatic Council members, the broadcaster operates under management with an expired mandate.

The Agency for Audio and Audio-visual Media Services (AAVMS) is responsible for regulating and overseeing broadcast media. In the campaign period, it submitted periodic reports to the SEC based on media monitoring, and also published its findings online. It adopted several election-related guidelines, including on the distribution of airtime among contestants, and campaign silence regulations in the media.⁵⁹ The AAVMS also developed a voluntary code of conduct in the online sphere.⁶⁰ It issued a statement regarding political advertising paid for by SDSM and BDI/DUI, which included the participation of minors. Although online media is largely unregulated, a coordination body consisting of representatives of the AAVMS and CSOs has been created to register and publish related notifications, but this body lacks enforcement powers.

The ODIHR EOM media monitoring results show that the election-related coverage in broadcast media during the campaign period was overall balanced and neutral in tone.⁶¹ The public broadcaster *MRT* covered all presidential candidates in line with the legal provisions establishing a framework for allocating time to political parties in elections. The candidates endorsed by SDSM and VMRO-DPMNE dominated private broadcasters (19 per cent of coverage), both largely in neutral tone. *Telma* provided more balance coverage than other monitored broadcasters, dedicating equal time to the seven presidential contestants. *Alsat-M* allocated equal time (16-19 per cent) to contestants endorsed by the four major political parties, while *Sitel* primarily focused on candidates endorsed by SDSM and VMRO-DPMNE, dedicating 20 per cent of its election-related content to each, mainly in neutral tone. *Kanal 5* focused its primetime coverage on the race between the candidates endorsed by SDSM and VMRO-DPMNE, both receiving 22 per cent of coverage. *Alfa TV* covered the candidate endorsed by SDSM in a negative tone in some 51 per cent of its coverage. Among the online news portals, *Kurir.mk* devoted 71 per cent of its coverage to the candidate endorsed by VMRO-DPMNE, and *Tetovasot.com* dedicated nearly 50 per cent to the BDI/DUI candidate, in a largely positive tone. In the campaign period, there was one televised debate featuring all seven candidates.

⁵⁷ By law, the public broadcaster is obliged to dedicate 70 per cent of its newscast coverage to presidential candidates on *MRT 1* and 2. The Agency for Audio and Audio-visual Media Services (AAVMS) allocated 30 per cent of the time combined to the two candidates endorsed by the SDSM and BDI/DUI, a total 30 per cent between the four candidates endorsed by VMRO-DPMNE, the *Left*, Besa, and GROM, and 10 per cent to the candidate by ZNAM. Additionally, the AAVMS allocated three hours of media presentations on the Parliamentary Channel to each presidential candidate.

⁵⁸ Pursuant to the amendments, the funds for financing public broadcasters are provided from the state budget in a fixed 1 percentage of the total tax revenues, improving the stability of funding.

⁵⁹ In March 2024, the AAVMS adopted guidelines for broadcasters, which stipulate that media access provided for presidential candidates, including presentations on public and private channels, is distributed in line with their political party endorsements. According to the guidelines, the budget-funded 9.5 minutes per hour is allocated as follows: four minutes to candidates endorsed by the SDSM and BDI/DUI, four minutes to those backed by VMRO and Besa, one minute to candidates endorsed by the *Left* and Besa, and 30 seconds to the candidate endorsed by ZNAM. According to the guidelines, on 23 and 24 April, campaign silence was applicable in news and information programmes, both with respect to the presidential and the parliamentary race.

⁶⁰ The AAVMS informed the ODIHR EOM that, prior to the beginning of the campaign period, three political parties and 22 media outlets pledged to adhere to the [Code of Conduct](#).

⁶¹ The ODIHR EOM monitoring includes the public broadcasters *MRT 1* and *MRT 2* (in Albanian), the private broadcasters *Sitel*, *Kanal 5*, *Alsat-M* (in Albanian), *Alfa TV* and *Telma*, as well as the online portals *kurir.mk*, *plusinfo.mk*, along with *tetovasot.com* and *lajmpress.org* (in Albanian). It started its quantitative and qualitative monitoring of election-related prime-time coverage on 1 April.

Some of the legal amendments introduced in March 2024 included changes aimed at improving accessibility of electoral news to persons with disabilities. Broadcasters were obliged to adjust one edition of their newscasts and one piece of election-related content per day to accommodate persons with sensory impairments. Positively, in line with the law, most national public and private broadcasters monitored by the ODIHR EOM supplemented parts of their prime-time content with subtitles or sign language.⁶²

Election Dispute Resolution

The SEC has the mandate to decide on the majority of complaints. The law designates MECs to decide on election-day violations of individual voting rights; in practice, they forward voters' requests to the SEC for decision. The SEC may initiate misdemeanour or criminal proceedings for serious election-related violations with the basic courts or prosecutor's offices. The Administrative Court is the final appellate instance for decisions by the SEC. The Constitutional Court assesses the constitutionality of election-related legal acts or decisions.

The regulation of election dispute resolution contains numerous ambiguities and gaps, including with respect to conflicting deadlines, parallel avenues for submission, unclear mandates for dispute resolution, and authority of lower-level commissions.⁶³ Positively, the March legal amendments clarified some deadlines for appeals on election day. However, at odds with previous ODIHR recommendations and international good practice, the legal standing of voters to file complaints remains limited to cases regarding voter lists and their individual voting rights. The right to appeal election results is limited to the representatives of those that signed in support of the candidates.⁶⁴ Deadlines for lodging and deciding on complaints remain unduly short.⁶⁵ Moreover, while the SEC issued an instruction on election dispute resolution, it fails to clarify ambiguous legal rules and has not been brought in line with the recent changes to the Election Code.⁶⁶

Despite plans for implementation prior to the campaign period, the SEC launched its online complaint submission system on 11 April, less than 3 weeks before election day. The lack of clarity about the application of the relevant legal provisions when using the tool, decreased transparency and access to the complaint resolution process.⁶⁷ The SEC informed the ODIHR EOM that it had not received any complaints related to the presidential election. Before election day, the Administrative Court reviewed two SEC decisions related to voter registration, granting applicants' requests, and four

⁶² Except for *Klan Macedonia*, all broadcasters made adjustments to parts of their campaign period content accordingly. *MRT2* did not provide sign language in Albanian. A list of accessible programmes was published on the AAVMS website.

⁶³ Parallel submissions are stipulated to SEC regional offices, the MEC, and the SEC. Articles 50-a, 149, 148, and 151 prescribe different deadlines for resolving identical issues. Procedures and applicants in Article 151 are not specified, and this article prescribes different deadlines compared to procedures under Article 148, although their scopes at least partially overlap. Refer also to Article 69-a in conjunction with Articles 73 and 179-b (1).

⁶⁴ Paragraph II.3.3(f) of the 2002 Council of Europe's Venice Commission [Code of Good Practice in Electoral Matters](#) recommends that "[all] candidates and all voters registered in the constituency concerned must be entitled to appeal. A reasonable quorum may be imposed for appeals by voters on the results of elections".

⁶⁵ The SEC resolves voter registration complaints within 2-4 hours and addresses complaints related to election campaigns and challenges to election results within 72 hours. The Administrative Court makes decisions on appeals within 24-48 hours. Paragraph h II.3.3(95) of the Explanatory Report to the 2002 Council of Europe's Venice Commission [Code of Good Practice in Electoral Matters](#) states that "time limits must [...] be long enough to make an appeal possible, to guarantee the exercise of rights of defense and a reflected decision. A time limit of three to five days at first instance (both for lodging appeals and making rulings) seems reasonable".

⁶⁶ See the [SEC Instruction on the Manner and Procedure for Resolving the Complaints Within the Authority of SEC](#). For example, the instruction references the Constitutional Court as the due avenue for voters' appeals.

⁶⁷ The system is designed to function as a portal for submitting most voter complaints. However, the Electoral Code, as narrowly interpreted in the respective SEC regulation, does not permit submissions by post and, in most cases, via email. This left voters unclear about how they could submit complaints.

related to the registration of parliamentary lists, which were denied. The court also upheld an SCPC decision on violation of the ban on employment ahead of the election, after two rounds of revisions. The Administrative Court complied with the short deadlines but its procedural approach lacked consistency.⁶⁸

The basic court in Tetovo handled two requests for party leadership registration from the two factions of the Alliance of Albanians; a decision was made after recusals of three judges, allegedly due to political pressure.⁶⁹ The Constitutional Court received two petitions. One to assess the constitutionality of the Electoral Code remained unresolved by election day. The court refused to assess the second petition on the constitutionality of AAVMS guidelines on distribution of media airtime among presidential candidates, which it examined only after the campaign had ended and the guidelines had been implemented.⁷⁰ One petition remained unresolved by election day, due to the absence of expedited deadlines for constitutional review.

Many IEOM interlocutors voiced doubts about the fairness of adjudication of their election-related complaints, citing the potential for political influence, possible interruptions in inter-agency cooperation, a backlog of unresolved disputes from previous elections, as well as the perceived potential for corruption within the judiciary and law enforcement agencies.⁷¹

Election Observation

The Electoral Code allows for citizen and international observation, and entitles registered contestants to appoint authorized representatives to follow the entire election process and all levels of the election administration, contributing to transparency. In an inclusive process, the SEC accredited 915 citizen and 544 international observers. Major organizations including *CIVIL – Centre for Freedom* and *Roma for Democracy*, deployed 51 and 70 observers respectively.⁷²

CSO activities were generally limited, which most IEOM interlocutors explained as being due to lack of funding and a shift in orientation of activities. In the campaign period, *CIVIL* conducted long-term observation, focusing on monitoring the campaign on media and social networking platforms, as well as the role of disinformation. A few CSOs promoted rights of persons with disabilities, in some cases monitoring the inclusiveness of the electoral process for persons with disabilities. The foundation *Roma for Democracy* conducted civic and voter education within Roma communities.

⁶⁸ Under the Law on Administrative Disputes, the Administrative Court may relinquish cases for decisions at first instance. While the two complaints regarding voter registration were similar, one decision required the SEC to review the applicant's status, while the other ordered the voter's registration. In the appeal against the SCPC decision, the Court requested a new examination at the first instance due to procedural violations, and upheld the decision on second review, considering the violations addressed.

⁶⁹ The recusals were initiated by one of the factions due to alleged conflicts of interest: one was motivated by perceived bias, and another by a friendship between a deceased family member of a judge and the leader of the opposing faction. Additionally, a third judge filed for self-recusal immediately upon being assigned to the case. IEOM interlocutors maintained that the recusals of the three judges assigned to the case and informal withdrawal of two other judges from resolving it were politically motivated.

⁷⁰ On 14 March 2024, a group of voters challenged the constitutionality of the Electoral Code and its amendments, claiming that they do not ensure the equality of contestants. On April 1, the *Left* and its presidential candidate requested to assess the constitutionality of the Election Code and the legality of the AAVMS regulation, and to suspend the implementation of the latter. The applicants maintained that the regulation discriminated against the candidate, contradicted the constitutional principle of equal political participation, and that airtime was distributed based on an incorrect interpretation of the Electoral Code. The case is currently pending.

⁷¹ The 2023 OSCE Corruption Risk [Assessment](#) of the Judiciary of North Macedonia highlighted a decline in trust within the judiciary and law enforcement, alongside a rise in vulnerabilities to corruption. See also the [announcement](#) of the cessation of cooperation between the public prosecutor and the SCPC concerning the prosecution of corruption cases. ODIHR EOM interlocutors from the judiciary cited political interference in dispute resolution, mainly related to high-profile corruption cases.

⁷² The largest group registering observers was the association "Wake Up", with 752 observers that observed elections the first time.

Election Day

Election day was peaceful overall.⁷³ While campaign silence regulations were generally respected, including in the media, several presidential candidates and party leaders posted messages on social networks urging citizens to cast their votes on election day. The SEC provided regular updates about the voting process throughout the day, enhancing transparency. In the polling stations observed, women comprised 51 per cent of the EB members and 61 per cent of the polling station chairpersons.

IEOM observers assessed the opening procedures positively in 83 out of the 93 observed polling stations, with legally prescribed procedures generally adhered to. However, delays in opening were recorded in 29 polling stations, including four instances that exceeded 30 minutes. These delays appeared to IEOM observers to be mostly caused by technical difficulties in setting up the biometric voter identification devices (BVID) in a timely manner.

IEOM observers positively assessed the voting in 99 per cent of the 925 polling stations observed, describing the process as smooth and well-organized, with a high level of cooperation among EB members.⁷⁴ Some 51 per cent of the polling stations were not independently accessible for persons with physical disabilities, and the layout was unsuitable for such voters in 19 per cent of stations. In 11 per cent of the polling stations, one or more voters were refused the opportunity to vote, primarily because they lacked an acceptable ID or were not listed at that polling station. BVIDs were operational in nearly all cases, but in 28 per cent of the observations, not every voter on the voter list could be successfully identified by fingerprint scanning.

Although EBs are legally required to inform voters about the voting process, this was not followed in more than half of the observed polling stations. While the secrecy of the vote was generally maintained, IEOM observers reported group or family voting in 2 per cent of the observations (17 cases). In 2 per cent of the observed polling stations (20 instances), persons other than EB members were keeping track of voters who voted. Authorized candidate representatives were present in 77 per cent, and citizen observers were present in 9 per cent of stations.

While the counting process was assessed positively in 81 of the 90 observations, and characterized as mostly efficient and smooth, negative assessments were reported from 9 polling stations. Such assessments were primarily connected with instances in which EBs omitted important procedural steps or did not complete the prescribed procedures before the start of the count. Serious procedural errors included failing to count the number of voters who signed the voter list (21 cases), not invalidating unused ballots to prevent their use (21 cases), and not recording relevant data in the results protocols (18 cases). Counting procedures were not performed in the prescribed order in 50 instances or were performed concurrently, negatively impacting transparency. In 8 observations, the validity of ballots was not determined in a consistent manner or such determination was disputed by some EB members. In 10 cases, persons other than EB members participated in the count, raising concerns over the integrity of the count. IEOM observers reported from 17 counts that EBs had

⁷³ On election day, the law enforcement shared regular updates with the public on reported irregularities, including cases of vote buying, and intimidation. However, there were allegations reported in the media of police inaction in connection to some of these cases. In the evening, Besa held a press conference, urging the Ministry of Internal Affairs to take action regarding the Chief Commander Officer of the Tetovo Regional Police, who refused to cooperate with the advisor deployed by the Ministry of Internal Affairs to monitor the security of the electoral process.

⁷⁴ The SEC announced that three polling stations in the municipality of Kumanovo did not open for voting, one due to missing the EB stamp and two due to malfunction of the BVID, and four other polling stations in municipalities of Delchevo, Demir Hisar, Lipkovo, and Mogila had to prolong voting due to technical issues leading to interruption of voting for more than one hour.

difficulties in filling in the final protocols.⁷⁵ In 26 polling stations, the EBs did not post copies of the protocols for public display as required by law.

The SEC reported receiving 362 complaints related to the right to vote, with approximately 114 of these remaining undecided by the close of the polls. Of the 248 decided complaints, the SEC granted 136, allowing the voters to vote, and rejected 71 on merits and 41 as inadmissible. No justification was provided for the majority of the decisions that were available to the ODIHR EOM to review, and many decisions contained varying deficiencies, undermining the effectiveness of legal remedies.⁷⁶

The results tabulation process, observed in 74 MECs, was evaluated as efficient and transparent, despite a few instances of overcrowding due to inadequate layout. Discrepancies in some EB results protocols were observed in 47 MECs; in 19 cases, EBs were observed completing or correcting protocols, indicating insufficient understanding of the counting procedures. Tabulation was generally completed by the early hours of 25 April. Shortly after the closing of the polls, the SEC began posting partial results, received electronically from polling stations online, and announced the preliminary results based on 90 per cent of protocols at 23:30 on election night. The voter turnout was reported at 49.95 per cent.

***The English version of this report is the only official document.
Unofficial translations are available in Macedonian and Albanian.***

⁷⁵ IEOM observers reported a difference in the Macedonian and Albanian versions of the results protocol forms, leading to discrepancies between the two protocols.

⁷⁶ The SEC stopped publishing its decisions in the complaint database after 14:00 on election day, at which point the initially posted election-day related decisions also became unavailable on the platform. The ODIHR EOM was able to obtain 72 decisions, all of which cited the Supreme Court as the appellate instance, which, by law, has no jurisdiction to review SEC decisions. All but four decisions were unmotivated, while 17 of the 33 rejections cited a 2018 SEC guideline related to referenda that is not applicable to the presidential election. Paragraph 5.11 of the 1990 OSCE [Copenhagen Document](#) states that “administrative decisions against a person must be fully justifiable and must as a rule indicate the usual remedies available”.

MISSION INFORMATION & ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Skopje, 25 April 2024 – This Statement of Preliminary Findings and Conclusions is the result of a common endeavour involving the OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) and the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE). The assessment was made to determine whether the elections complied with OSCE commitments and other international obligations and standards for democratic elections and with national legislation.

Ambassador Jillian Stirk is the Head of the ODIHR EOM, deployed from 20 March and Mr. Alfred Heer headed the PACE delegation.

Both institutions involved in this International Election Observation Mission (IEOM) have endorsed the 2005 Declaration of Principles for International Election Observation. This Statement of Preliminary Findings and Conclusions is delivered prior to the completion of the electoral process. The final assessment of the elections will depend, in part, on the conduct of the remaining stages of the electoral process, including the count, tabulation and announcement of results, and the handling of possible post-election day complaints or appeals. ODIHR will issue a comprehensive final report, including recommendations for potential improvements, some eight weeks after the completion of the electoral process. The PACE will present its report at its June 2024 part-session, in Strasbourg.

The ODIHR EOM includes 19 experts in the capital and 20 long-term observers deployed throughout the country. On election day, 234 observers from 33 countries were deployed, including 20 long-term and 177 short-term observers deployed by ODIHR, as well as an 18-member delegation from the PACE. Opening was observed in 93 polling stations and voting was observed in 925 polling stations across the country. Counting was observed in 90 polling stations, and the tabulation in 75 MECs.

The observers wish to thank the authorities for their invitation to observe the elections, and the State Election Commission and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of North Macedonia for the assistance. They also express their appreciation to other state institutions, political parties and civil society organizations and the international community representatives for their co-operation.

For further information, please contact:

- Ambassador Jillian Stirk, Head of the ODIHR EOM, in Skopje (jillian.stirk@odihr.mk);
- Katya Andrusz, ODIHR Spokesperson (+48 609 522 266), or Hamadziripi Munyikwa, ODIHR Election Adviser, in Warsaw (+48 723 960 008);
- Bogdan Torcătoriu, senior elections officer, Election Division, PACE (bogdan.torcatoriu@coe.int)

ODIHR EOM Address:

Pirinska 29, 1000 Skopje, Republic of North Macedonia

e-mail: office@odihr.mk

website: <https://www.osce.org/odihr/elections/north-macedonia/563601>