

North Macedonia's local elections were competitive but adversely affected by legal shortcomings and political polarization: international observers

SKOPJE, 20 October 2025 – The campaign was competitive in North Macedonia's local elections and voters had a wide range of political alternatives to choose from, but they were negatively affected by systemic legal gaps and shortcomings in the oversight of campaign finances as well as political polarization and deep public disenchantment with politics, international observers said in a [statement](#) today.

The joint observation mission from the OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR), the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of the Council of Europe (Congress), and the European Parliament (EP) found that while the legal framework provides a basis for holding democratic elections, it contains numerous gaps and lacks clarity in many areas. At the same time, last year's legal amendments while taking some ODIHR recommendations into account, left most of the previous recommendations unaddressed.

"It was good to see a competitive campaign over the last weeks and a well-run and mostly peaceful election day yesterday, but gaps in election laws that weaken the work of institutions remain a concern," said Matteo Mecacci, Head of the ODIHR Election Observation Mission. "Addressing key aspects of the electoral process which require reform—from campaign finance to equitable campaign opportunities in the media for all contestants—will continue to be the focus of our work, including during the observation of the second-round contests on 2 November."

Fundamental freedoms were respected throughout the campaign and candidates were generally able to campaign freely. At the same time, while not in violation of the law, mayors and high-level government officials inaugurated, visited, or promoted investment and infrastructure projects both before and during the official campaign period, undermining legal safeguards to prevent the misuse of public resources and contrary to international standards. Reports of alleged pressure on public sector employees and intimidation of voters and opposition candidates, as well as vote buying by political parties, were also of concern.

Some 1.72 million citizens with permanent residence in the country were eligible to vote. The election administration managed preparations efficiently and generally enjoyed public trust. However, some concerns were voiced about its independence, since it is mostly composed of public officials. Election day was generally calm, although some shortcomings in procedures were noted such as group voting and undue interference by candidate representatives.

Women continue to be underrepresented in public and political life. While the law prescribes a 40 per cent gender quota for candidate lists, only 32 of the 309 mayoral candidates were women. Discussions on gender equality and women's rights were largely absent from the campaign. Observers noted concerns regarding sexist rhetoric against women candidates and women's political participation in general, especially online.

"We welcome the fact that election day was overall well-organised," said Gobnait Ní Mhuimneacáin, Head of Delegation from the Congress of the Council of Europe. "However, the low number of women mayoral candidates and the lack of accessibility for voters with disabilities and older people remain serious concerns. The absence of local media, particularly outside the capital, is also a major issue, limiting coverage of local issues — which should be central to a local election campaign — and contributing to the prominence of national topics, further polarising the electoral environment."

Systemic gaps in the legal framework regulating campaign finance combined with the limited capacity of the country's oversight bodies hindered effective scrutiny of campaign finance. Public funds make up a significant share of overall campaign financing, but the distribution formula significantly favoured major parliamentary parties to the exclusion of smaller parties with a parliamentary group, and offered only limited opportunities to other small parties and independent candidates.

"We listened to all our interlocutors with interest and attention. Although European integration was not a central campaign issue, we understand from most of them that a majority of parties and communities in North Macedonia remain committed to EU membership," said Marta Temido, Head of the EP Delegation. "We therefore suggest to the newly elected local authorities to advance their country's EU reform agenda."

The media landscape is diverse, but fragmented along political and ethnic lines. At the same time, unfavourable working conditions and limited human resources in the media sector affect the quality of reporting. The observation mission's media monitoring showed that coverage of the election in the broadcast media was balanced overall. Social media campaigning is largely unregulated, and there is no oversight authority mandated to monitor the campaign on social networks and detect disinformation or manipulative content.

The international election observation to the local elections in North Macedonia totalled 275 observers from 40 countries, made up of 253 ODIHR experts and long- and short-term observers, 15 members and staff from the Congress, and seven parliamentarians and staff from the EP.

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