INCLUDE

Inclusive Leadership and Democratic Engagement for Persons with Disabilities

North Macedonia Desk Research

Barriers and Good Practices in the Political and Civic Representation of Persons with Disabilities in North Macedonia

Work Package 2 · Task T2.1 · Participatory Research

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Executive summary

North Macedonia has a formal framework for disability rights centred on the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD), anti-discrimination protections and the National Strategy on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities 2023–2030. Yet available monitoring shows a substantive gap between formal guarantees and opportunities for persons with disabilities to become leaders, candidates, elected representatives and influential participants in public decisions. [1–4]

The strongest recent electoral evidence is ODIHR's final report on the October–November 2025 local elections (issued April 2026), which calls for removing restrictions on political rights affecting persons with intellectual or psychosocial disabilities and enforcing accessibility standards throughout the electoral cycle. [2]

A major national UN-supported disability situation analysis identified weak political representation, limited mechanisms for participation in decisions, and institutional tendencies to treat persons with disabilities primarily as recipients rather than creators of policy. Those findings establish a baseline rather than a current measurement of all 2026 practices. [4]

The 2025 political empowerment initiative by Inkluziva NGO demonstrates an important alternative: persons with disabilities participated in drafting local political programmes, joined candidate lists, and in one documented instance entered a party women's forum leadership structure. These are programme-reported outcomes, not proof of durable system-wide reform. [5]

Key findings

- Formal rights are considerably stronger than practical opportunities for representation; effective participation is uneven across institutions and municipalities.
- The route into political-party structures and candidate selection remains underdocumented and insufficiently supported.
- Physical, transport, information and digital barriers obstruct every stage of democratic participation, not only voting.
- Intersectional barriers particularly affect women and young persons with disabilities and persons with intellectual or psychosocial disabilities.
- There is no established comprehensive national series measuring disability representation in elected office, party leadership or senior public decision-making.
- National strategies, electoral accessibility measures and targeted political empowerment programmes offer starting points for transferable Toolkit practices.

Toolkit implications in brief

The Toolkit should address accessible candidate recruitment and party processes; municipal consultation procedures that document actual policy influence; supported and accessible self-advocacy; institutional monitoring with privacy safeguards; and realistic approaches for smaller and

rural municipalities. Its hypotheses should be checked against the experiences gathered through focus groups (T2.2) and stakeholder consultations (T2.1).

1. Methodological note

1.1 Scope

This desk review examines leadership, political representation, civic participation, electoral accessibility and the institutional participation of persons with disabilities in North Macedonia. It gives preference to documentary evidence issued during 2022–2026, while retaining the 2018 CRPD Committee conclusions as a historical accountability baseline. The focus is political agency and decision-making power, not disability services alone.

1.2 Sources and approach

Four main sources are used: (1) national legislation, national strategy, State Statistical Office and State Election Commission information; (2) UN CRPD and UN country-team analyses, including UNDP/UNICEF and OHCHR; (3) ODIHR electoral observation and IFES/Swiss Electoral Support Programme documentation; and (4) civic-sector and public-administration monitoring including the 2025 WeBER/EPI research. The annex lists the publicly accessible sources. [1–12]

1.3 Limitations

Desk research cannot establish the lived experiences of individual political actors and does not verify every claimed institutional programme outcome. Public data rarely distinguish disability status within political office or candidate lists; no national disability representation rate is calculated. Census prevalence cannot be used as a direct denominator for undisclosed political identities. Evidence from 2021–2022 is labelled as historical. Implementation status of every strategy measure has not been individually audited. Some good-practice descriptions derive from programme reporting and require independent follow-up.

1.4 Working definitions

Persons with disabilities: people with long-term physical, sensory, intellectual, psychosocial or multiple impairments interacting with environmental, institutional and attitudinal barriers (CRPD approach). Political and civic representation: access to candidacy, elected office, political parties, consultative bodies, public administration, civil society leadership and decisions. Leadership: formal positions as well as agenda-setting, advocacy, mentoring and meaningful influence on policy outcomes.

2. Legal and institutional framework

2.1 International and European layer

North Macedonia ratified the CRPD in 2011. Article 29 protects participation in political and public life; Article 4(3) requires close consultation with and active involvement of persons with disabilities through representative organisations; Articles 5, 9 and 12 relate respectively to non-discrimination, accessibility and equal recognition before the law. The UN Committee's 2018 concluding observations form a historical reference for evaluating progress. [3]

As an EU candidate country, North Macedonia can use the EU Strategy for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities 2021–2030 and European accessibility practice as benchmarks for approximation and reform. They must not be described as directly applicable member-state obligations without checking the specific legal instrument.

2.2 National policy and legislative layer

The National Strategy on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities 2023–2030 and Action Plan 2023–2026 set the overarching policy direction. Their existence provides a formal basis for coordinated action across sectors, although the country briefing cannot certify current delivery against each indicator. [1]

The Electoral Code and related administrative rules shape the rights to vote and stand for office. ODIHR's 2026 recommendations make clear that legal restrictions affecting persons with intellectual or psychosocial disabilities and practical accessibility remain important unresolved issues. [2]

The country's anti-discrimination and equality institutions, including the Commission for Prevention and Protection from Discrimination and the Ombudsman, offer channels for identifying systemic barriers. Their role should be assessed through cases, recommendations and implementation rather than institutional existence alone.

2.3 National and local institutions

The relevant institutional architecture includes the ministry responsible for social policy and disability rights; the State Election Commission; Parliament and its committees; the Ombudsman; the Commission for Prevention and Protection from Discrimination; municipalities and the City of Skopje; political parties; umbrella organisations and grassroots organisations of persons with disabilities. Local authorities are central because participation depends on meeting facilities, consultation channels, transport, public information and access to decision-makers. [1–4, 9]

2.4 The municipal implementation layer

North Macedonia has 80 municipalities and the City of Skopje. National law may be common, but local resources, accessible venues, transport and consultation culture differ. The relevant comparison is therefore not Austrian-style federal legislative fragmentation but uneven local implementation.

3. Demographic and statistical baseline

3.1 At-a-glance table

Indicator	North Macedonia	Interpretation
Resident population, 2021 census	1,836,713	Official census resident count [6]
Persons with disabilities, 2021 census	94,412	Census measure; definition differs from administrative recognition [6]
Persons with mobility difficulties within census disability group	38,499 (40.8%)	Not a measure of participation or leadership [6]
At-risk-of-poverty rate, total population, 2024	21.9%	Population-wide statistic; not disability-specific [8]
Disability employment gap, some activity limitation, 2022	24.3 percentage points	ESAP indicator; later North Macedonia entries unavailable [10]
Persons with disabilities in elected political positions	No comprehensive verified national series identified	Priority data gap; do not infer a percentage
Local-government units	80 municipalities plus City of Skopje	Significant scope for territorial variation [11]

3.2 Interpretation and intersectional gaps

The Census counted 94,412 residents with disabilities in 2021, including a relatively large older-age component. This provides important context, but it cannot establish how many citizens are eligible to vote, politically active, nominated as candidates or serving as elected representatives. [6]

The poverty rate of 21.9% for 2024 refers to the general population; the present evidence does not justify presenting it as a disability-specific rate. Separate regional monitoring indicates a disability employment gap of 24.3 percentage points in 2022 for those reporting some limitation, demonstrating a potential socioeconomic constraint on political engagement. [8,10]

Administrative and electoral reporting do not provide a routinely comparable series of persons with disabilities in elected leadership disaggregated by gender, age and disability type. Ethical voluntary self-identification and protection of sensitive information are essential prerequisites for any future monitoring approach.

3.3 Implications for the Toolkit

A practical institutional self-assessment should start with process indicators - accessibility provisions, invitations, participation, recorded recommendations and influence on final decisions - and only collect personal disability-status information where truly necessary, voluntary and legally justified.

4. Barriers to leadership and political representation

4.1 Restrictions and procedural barriers in electoral participation

ODIHR's 2025 local-election final report explicitly recommends removing restrictions affecting persons with intellectual or psychosocial disabilities and creating enforceable accessibility standards throughout the electoral process. This is a current, high-confidence finding. [2]

Barriers should be examined along the entire pathway: voter registration and information; polling-place access; assisted voting; candidate registration; accessible campaign materials; campaigning; access to elected office and reasonable accommodation once elected.

4.2 Party-political entry and leadership pathways

Inkluziva NGO's programme documentation identifies inaccessible party premises, inadequately adapted materials and low awareness as obstacles to political participation. The existence of a targeted programme indicates demand for structured coaching and engagement with party officials. [5]

Nationwide systematic evidence on internal party candidate-selection rules, accessible branch meetings, mentoring opportunities and advancement into executive structures is absent. Therefore, these are priority research questions, not proven uniform practices across all parties.

4.3 Territorial accessibility and urban–rural disparities

The United Nations situation analysis and recent public-service monitoring identify systemic accessibility and public-service gaps. Because participation requires travel, accessible buildings, understandable information and convenient meeting formats, uneven municipal provision can translate into unequal opportunities to influence decisions. [4,9]

The desk review does not quantify differences between the eight planning regions. INCLUDE should test them across urban, small-town and rural contexts, without presuming every municipality in a region is alike.

4.4 Institutional consultation without decision-making influence

The UN-supported situation analysis identified low representation and inadequate mechanisms for persons with disabilities in public decision-making, including insufficient involvement outside narrowly disability-related policy spaces. [4]

A critical distinction is between being informed, being consulted, co-designing a proposal and exercising binding influence. Institutions may count meetings as inclusion without demonstrating changes in decisions. The Toolkit should demand feedback loops and decision traces.

4.5 Intersecting barriers, stereotypes and socioeconomic constraints

Women and young persons with disabilities, and people with intellectual or psychosocial disabilities, may face compounded legal, material and attitudinal barriers. The national UN analysis identified the failure of some mainstream gender policies to incorporate disability adequately. [4]

Evidence about poverty and employment provides context for constrained time, mobility and resources; it is not a direct causal estimate of political underrepresentation. Further focus-group research should examine care responsibilities, personal assistance, discrimination, language, rural location and campaign expenses.

4.6 Statistical invisibility

The absence of regularly published disaggregated political leadership information limits the ability to set baselines, assess programme results and hold authorities accountable. Lack of data should be made explicit rather than filled with speculative representation figures.

5. Good practices and promising initiatives

5.1 Inkluziva NGO political empowerment programme (2025)

The initiative ran between March and September 2025 in cooperation with four political parties—SDSM, VMRO-DPMNE, Alliance for Albanians and ZNAM - in local contexts including Strumica, Veles, Gostivar and Kumanovo. Programme reporting describes 20 participants, eight of whom were persons with disabilities, benefiting from mentorship and training. [5]

Reported outputs include two people with disabilities placed on a municipal council candidate list in Strumica; participation in a party women's forum leadership structure; contributions to local programme design in Gostivar; a young candidate with a disability and sign-language-supported campaigning in Kumanovo; and local accessibility commitments in Veles. These should be presented as reported outputs and followed up for longer-term outcomes. [5]

Transferable element: pair accessible training with commitments by gatekeepers inside political parties and track concrete advancement into membership, nomination, election and leadership.

5.2 National strategy development and multi-stakeholder consultation

The development of the 2023–2030 strategy offers an example of formal cross-sectoral disability policy planning. The strategic framework can anchor regular consultation and coordination. However, whether consultations change budgets and implementation remains a separate evaluation question. [1]

Transferable element: convert consultation from an event into a timed, published process of co-design, feedback and monitoring.

5.3 Electoral accessibility resources and public information

The State Election Commission provides election-related materials and information about electoral procedures, while IFES reporting describes ways voters can check polling-place accessibility and obtain legally available voting assistance. [7,12]

Transferable element: extend checklists used for elections to local hearings, party congresses, public consultations and municipal council meetings. The continued ODIHR concerns caution against characterising electoral access as fully resolved.

5.4 Evidence-based advocacy and research

The UN situational analysis and the WeBER/EPI monitoring material show how rights monitoring and stakeholder perspectives can be translated into institution-specific recommendations. [4,9]

Transferable element: measure independent monitoring, lived experience and institutional procedures, then publish responsibilities and follow-up actions.

5.5 Organisational networks as routes to participation

National and local organisations of persons with disabilities - including organisations focused on physical, sensory and intellectual disabilities - provide potential channels for recruitment, consultation, peer support, accessible communications and leadership development. The existence of organisations is an enabling condition; evidence of co-decision authority must be independently established.

6. Comparative European perspective

Country	Relevant lesson for North Macedonia
Slovenia (INCLUDE partner)	Unitary state with substantial municipality-level variation; dialogue through umbrella disability organisations.
Austria (INCLUDE partner)	Structured self-advocacy, leadership education and independent monitoring institutions.
Portugal (INCLUDE partner)	Integrates socioeconomic inequalities, service access and local-government capacity into political participation analysis.
Malta and Italy (INCLUDE partners)	Accessible electoral information and multilevel/local implementation approaches discussed by partners.

7. Implications for the Inclusive Representation Toolkit

Recommendation 1 - An accessible pathway from party membership to leadership

Include templates for accessible party meetings, recruitment, mentorship, campaign communication, selection procedures and reasonable accommodation for candidates and office-holders.

Recommendation 2 - Municipal implementation standards

Provide a low-cost checklist for accessible consultation, public meetings, online participation and transportation considerations, usable in small municipalities as well as cities.

Recommendation 3 - Participation as measurable influence

Require a consultation register documenting recommendations received, accepted, rejected and implemented, including accessible feedback to participants.

Recommendation 4 - Intersectional and supported participation

Include easy-to-read materials, sign-language provision as needed, supported decision-making, formats accessible to persons with intellectual and psychosocial disabilities, and optional intersectional safeguards.

Recommendation 5 - Responsible measurement of representation

Provide voluntary, proportionate and privacy-respecting measurement tools; track office-holding, decision authority and engagement outcomes rather than mere invitations.

Recommendation 6 - Self-advocacy as a co-design partner

Make persons with disabilities paid co-facilitators, reviewers and members of validation teams, rather than only respondents.

8. Stakeholder map for Macedonian INCLUDE engagement

Stakeholder group	Role for T2.1/T2.2 and Toolkit	Priority
Representative networks and self-advocacy organisations	Focus-group recruitment; lived-experience review; Toolkit validation	High
Ministry responsible for social policy/disability rights	Strategy implementation, coordination and institution-level self-assessment	High
Commission for Prevention and Protection from Discrimination	Systemic barriers, complaints, recommendations and rights-based monitoring	High
Selected municipalities: urban, mid-sized, rural	Consultation practice, accessible councils, local implementation	High
Social-work centres and professional associations	Support-system barriers that affect public participation	Medium
Universities and policy researchers	Methodological review and analysis of representation data	Medium
Media and digital accessibility actors	Accessible information and public visibility	Medium

8.1 Suggested engagement sequencing

First, consult representative organisations and self-advocates to identify priority issues and accessible participation arrangements. Second, obtain official perspectives from public institutions. Third, interview mixed set of municipalities across Macedonia. Fourth, cross-check institutional claims against focus-group testimonies and candidate good-practice evidence. Finally, bring stakeholders back to a validation exercise for the Toolkit.

9. Conclusion

North Macedonia's challenge is not exclusively a lack of formal rights. The combined evidence points to gaps in implementation, political-party pathways, accessibility, recognition of persons with disabilities as leaders, and accountability for consultation outcomes. ODIHR's 2026 findings make electoral reform a current priority, while documented 2025 political empowerment work demonstrates that candidacy and internal party influence can improve through deliberate action. [2,5]

INCLUDE should prioritise the transition from participation as attendance to participation as sustained power to initiate, shape and evaluate decisions. The National Country Briefing should remain a living working paper and be updated once the planned focus groups and institutional consultations produce primary evidence.

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