INCLUDE

Inclusive Leadership and Democratic Engagement for Persons with Disabilities

North Macedonia National Summary

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

Work Package 2 · National Summary

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Executive summary

North Macedonia has a formal disability-rights framework anchored in the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD), domestic anti-discrimination mechanisms and the National Strategy on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities 2023–2030. However, the combined evidence points to a persistent gap between rights on paper and the ability of persons with disabilities to initiate, shape and evaluate public decisions. Accessibility barriers, attitudes, limited leadership pathways and inconsistent consultation procedures reinforce one another.

This national summary brings together three complementary evidence streams: the INCLUDE national desk research; two focus groups held in person and online on 26 & 27 October 2026 with 9 persons with disabilities (five women, four men, aged 18–37); and 22 contributions from institutional and organisational representatives gathered through consultations in October 2026. The findings are qualitative and should not be interpreted as a representative national survey.

The central finding is consistent across all three sources: meaningful participation must be measured by influence and follow-through, not by the number of invitations, meetings or consultations. The INCLUDE Inclusive Representation Toolkit should therefore connect individual leadership skills with accessible institutional processes, clear accountability and measurable outcomes.

1. Evidence base and interpretation

Source	Coverage and contribution
National desk research (T2.1)	Review of legislation, strategies, election observation, national and international monitoring, statistics and selected documented initiatives; primarily 2022–2026 evidence.
Focus groups (T2.2)	9 persons with disabilities; personal experiences, leadership aspirations, barriers, support needs and proposed Handbook content.
Institutional consultations (T2.1)	22 contributions from public institutions, municipalities, civil society, academia and other stakeholders; institutional practices, constraints and implementation proposals.

The desk research provides documentary and policy context, while the primary consultations illustrate lived experience and institutional perspectives.

2. National context: formal commitments and an implementation gap

The CRPD, ratified in 2011, establishes participation in political and public life and the active involvement of persons with disabilities in decisions affecting them. The 2023–2030 national strategy and its 2023–2026 action plan provide a policy basis for cross-sector action. Nevertheless, the desk research identifies uneven implementation and insufficient systematic data on candidates, elected officeholders and leaders with disabilities.

The ODIHR final report on the 2025 local elections, issued in April 2026, recommends addressing restrictions affecting persons with intellectual or psychosocial disabilities and enforcing accessibility standards throughout the electoral cycle. This links the broader participation challenge to legal and procedural election-related barriers. The 2021 census figure of 94,412 persons with disabilities is demographic context only; it does not establish political participation or representation.

3. Integrated thematic findings

3.1. From consultation to decision-making power

The review identifies weak participation mechanisms and a tendency to treat persons with disabilities as recipients rather than policy-makers. Focus-group participants described occasions when they were present but had little opportunity to influence decisions, alongside individual cases where concrete accessibility suggestions were accepted. Institutions reported ongoing partnerships, occasional consultations and service-centred communication, but acknowledged that these arrangements are not always formalised. The shared priority is a transparent pathway from invitation to proposal, decision, implementation and feedback.

3.2. Accessibility as a precondition for civic and political participation

Physical access, accessible transport, digital information, adapted communication and practical assistance recur across all sources. First-hand accounts include obstacles in healthcare facilities, poorly implemented ramps, difficulties using buses and interrupted personal assistance. Institutional contributors also cited inaccessible public premises, limited budgets and staffing gaps. The desk research demonstrates that accessibility must be considered across voting, candidacy, campaigning, council meetings and public consultations - not solely at polling stations.

3.3. Attitudes, representation and institutional culture

Participants reported prejudice about their capabilities, being addressed through accompanying persons, and fatigue from repeatedly having to prove competence. Institutional consultations likewise recognised stereotypes and the need for staff training. Both perspectives point to the importance of direct, respectful communication and leadership opportunities that treat persons with disabilities as rights-holders, partners and decision-makers.

3.4. Unequal opportunities across municipalities and groups

The desk research identifies uneven local implementation, while focus-group participants emphasised fewer activities, weaker accessibility and fewer options for independent living in smaller and rural communities. Some found local officials easier to reach but considered national decisions more far-reaching. Additional barriers were raised concerning women, young persons, people with intellectual or psychosocial disabilities, persons with sensory impairments and those with limited financial resources or rare conditions. Participation mechanisms should accommodate different needs instead of assuming one accessible format works for everyone.

3.5. Leadership development, trust and entry into politics

The desk research notes that pathways through political-party recruitment, candidate selection and leadership are poorly documented. The 2025 Inkluziva political-empowerment initiative reports examples of party participation, candidacy, campaign support and programme development, but longer-term outcomes still need assessment. Focus-group participants expressed interest in activism while questioning the responsiveness and transparency of some political and organisational structures. They requested practice-oriented communication, advocacy and public-speaking training, mentorship and opportunities to apply skills to real initiatives.

3.6. Sustainability, resources and accountability

Institutions described financial and staffing constraints, fragmented responsibilities and a need for stable coordination. Participants with disabilities stressed that one-off interventions and promises are not substitutes for implementation checks. Although examples of positive cooperation were presented, such as self-advocacy initiatives, participation in governing bodies and local consultations, the evidence does not establish that these practices are durable or widespread. Successful models should be evaluated against continuity, inclusion and observable results.

4. Convergence and differences between perspectives

Shared finding	Important nuance
Participation must have demonstrable influence	Institutions often describe mechanisms and contact; persons with disabilities place greater emphasis on whether decisions actually change.
Accessibility is essential	Institutional accounts highlight resources and formal responsibilities; lived experiences show immediate consequences for autonomy and participation.
Leadership support is needed	Institutions ask for procedures and staff capacity; participants ask for hands-on mentoring, direct representation and trust-building.
Good practices exist, but vary	Desk and institutional sources identify promising initiatives; some participants struggle to identify sustainable, systemic examples.

5. Priority actions for the Inclusive Representation Toolkit

- Participation pathway and decision trace: accessible invitations, early involvement, co-design, recorded proposals, reasoned responses and implementation follow-up.
- Municipal and institutional accessibility checklist: venues, public transport, websites, documents, communication support, meeting procedures and on-site verification.
- Practical self-advocacy tools: sample meeting requests, written submissions, follow-up letters, public-speaking preparation and step-by-step routes for engaging authorities.
- Leadership and political participation module: accessible party recruitment, mentoring, candidate selection, campaigning and reasonable accommodations for officeholders.
- Inclusive communication and supported participation: plain-language and accessible digital/print formats, sign-language support where needed, and direct engagement without replacing participants' voices.
- Institutional responsibility and assessment: designated focal points, staff training, action plans and a confidential, proportionate approach to tracking participation and influence.
- Good-practice validation: documented examples evaluated with persons with disabilities for outcomes, transferability and sustainability, including in smaller municipalities.

6. Suggested measures of progress

The following are proposed monitoring measures emerging from the synthesis, not adopted national or project targets:

- Number of institutions adopting accessible consultation procedures and appointing accountable focal points.
- Number and diversity of persons with disabilities with substantive roles in working groups, advisory bodies, political processes or leadership positions, recorded only with appropriate consent and privacy protection.
- Share of contributions receiving an accessible, reasoned response and share reflected in final decisions or implemented actions.
- Accessibility improvements verified in practice, and staff/organisers completing applied training.
- Participants' own assessment of whether they could speak freely, were heard and influenced outcomes.

7. Recommendations for INCLUDE implementation

First, validate the combined conclusions with persons with different disabilities and relevant institutions, particularly those outside major urban centres. Second, co-design and pilot a concise Toolkit with accessible formats and reusable templates, involving persons with disabilities as active reviewers and facilitators. Third, test the tools in a small, diverse set of institutional settings and document which suggestions were acted upon. Fourth, incorporate lessons from political empowerment, self-advocacy and municipal engagement while avoiding assumptions that individual examples represent nationwide practice.

8. Conclusion

The national evidence establishes a coherent direction for INCLUDE: progress is not simply the presence of disability-inclusive legal commitments or consultation opportunities, but the effective exercise of agency. Persons with disabilities need accessible environments, practical leadership support, equal recognition and institutions willing to share and document decision-making influence. Turning “Nothing About Us Without Us” into a repeatable, monitorable practice is the clearest common priority across desk research, first-hand experience and institutional dialogue.