

ANALYSIS OF POLITICAL PARTIES PROGRAMMES FROM A GENDER PERSPECTIVE – SUMMARY OVERVIEW

PARLIAMENTARY AND PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS 2024

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INTRODUCTION

One of the key components for integration into the European Union (EU) is the process of democratizing society, specifically through improving the social status of women and marginalized groups. Considering the EU membership criteria, this democratization process, with a focus on gender equality and women's issues, requires legal and political engagements and mechanisms that will guarantee equality in society, as well as their appropriate implementation.

Under the EU Advocacy programme, with a special focus on women's rights and gender equality, supported by the Kvinna till Kvinna Foundation, we continuously analyse the electoral programmes of political parties to highlight the gender aspect within them. The inclusion of a gender perspective in political programmes is an indicator of the parties' overall commitment to advancing gender equality and creating a fair and equal society.

Gender analysis of political programmes represents an attempt to objectively assess the political parties' programmes and electoral coalitions that have won mandates in Parliament for the parliamentary elections in 2024. In addition to reviewing the use of general terms such as gender equality/equal rights and/or women's rights, this analysis also seeks to map whether the political programmes include measures for: economic empowerment of women, addressing gender-based violence and violence against women, inclusion of women in positions of power and decision-making, sexual and reproductive rights, as well as inclusiveness in education.

In this context, the political parties' programmes and electoral coalitions for the parliamentary elections in 2024 that are the focus of this analysis are: VMRO-DPMNE's programme (Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization – Democratic Party for Macedonian National Unity), the party that led the coalition "Tvoja Makedonija" (Your Macedonia), LEVICA's programme (The LEFT), SDSM's programme (Social Democratic Union of Macedonia), the party that led the coalition 'For a European Future,' as well as the programme of the electoral coalition VLEN (which includes the Movement BESA, the Alliance for Albanians, and the Democratic Movement).

In the programmes of the political parties Movement ZNAM (I KNOW) and the coalition EUROPEAN FRONT, led by DUI (Democratic Union for Integration), there is no mention of the specific rights and needs of women, nor are the programmes written in a gender-sensitive language. Therefore, they could not be included in this analysis as they do not contain any of the elements analysed here and are entirely gender-blind.

Additionally, the analysis also examines the electoral programmes of the two presidential candidates who reached the second round of the presidential elections: candidate Gordana Siljanovska-Davkova, supported by VMRO-DPMNE (which led the coalition 'Your Macedonia'), who in the meantime became the first female President of the Republic of North Macedonia, and candidate Stevo Pendarovski, supported by SDSM (which led the coalition "For a European Future").

CONCLUDING OBSERVATIONS REGARDING THE POLITICAL PROGRAMMES FOR THE PARLIAMENTARY ELECTIONS

Gender-sensitive language is a direct indication of respect and acknowledgment of the diverse identities within gender experiences. Such language promotes an inclusive society where individuals can authentically express themselves and make decisions without fear of discrimination.

Generally, the gender-sensitive language is largely absent in all the analysed programmes. The term "gender" is most frequently used in the programme of the coalition led by SDSM, followed by its much lesser use in the political programme of LEVICA. It is the least or not at all mentioned in the programme of the electoral coalition led by VMRO-DPMNE and in the programme of VLEN. The remaining analysed programmes do not feature any gender-sensitive elements that would allow for a more detailed analysis. Specifically, SDSM, although not sufficiently, uses the term "gender" quite appropriately in various contexts, such as violence, equality, and similar topics. In contrast, the VMRO-DPMNE programme (as well as that of VLEN) does not use the term "gender" at all, instead exclusively referring to "equality of the sexes". On the other hand, although LEVICA addresses gender-based violence, recognizing gender as a category, it still uses the phrase "equality of the sexes" throughout the rest of its programme. The distinction between "gender" and "sex" needs to be recognized, and the use of these categories should be clearly differentiated. Their interchangeable use may imply either a lack of understanding or a conscious decision not to recognize the difference between these two categories, which contradicts existing legal documents and international charters. In this regard, the clear definitions provided by the Istanbul Convention, as well as by domestic legislation, on what constitutes "gender", "gender-based violence", and "domestic violence", leave no room for ambiguity or word substitution. By ratifying the Istanbul Convention, every entity is obligated to consider, respect, and implement its provisions. Consequently, neither in the Convention nor in the programmes of political parties should there be any reference solely to "sex-based violence".

One of the key indicators of the degree of commitment of the programmes in terms of gender equality and the prevention of gender-based violence against women is precisely the Istanbul Convention and its implementation through concrete mechanisms. In LEVICA's programme, the term "violence" is mentioned 11 times, most of which refer to domestic violence, peer violence, with sexual violence and gender-based violence and/or violence against women each mentioned only once. In VMRO-DPMNE's program, the term "violence" is mentioned 29 times, covering peer violence, domestic violence, and violence against women. However, the context is focused on "sex-based violence" rather than "gender-based violence". A notable advancement in the section of the programme dedicated to preventing violence can be observed in the programmatic commitments of SDSM. Here, out of the 29 times the term "violence" is used, nine instances refer specifically to gender-based violence. Moreover, this political programme clearly distinguishes between domestic violence, gender-based violence, and violence against women.

With the limited approach to defining and differentiating the various forms of violence, and more specifically with the rejection of gender as a concept in the programmes of LEVICA and especially VMRO-DPMNE, there arises an additional risk that may result in limited mechanisms for addressing gender-based violence.

Regarding the handling of different forms of violence, the electoral programme of LEVICA proposes strengthening the personnel of the special department that deals with cases of domestic violence, gender-based and sex-based criminal offenses, and organized institutional assistance by trained professionals to victims of abuse and sexual violence ("human trafficking"). It also includes extensive public campaigns against sexual harassment in the workplace. On the other hand, the electoral programme of the coalition led by VMRO-DPMNE proposes increasing penalties for criminal offenses related to paedophilia and domestic violence, raising awareness to overcome violence, supporting measures for the protection of women victims of violence, and opening new centres and multisectoral municipal teams for the protection of victims of domestic violence. This programme also envisions strengthening the capacities of professional workers in violence centres. The political programme of SDSM includes significantly more commitments for the prevention of gender-based violence. However, what is most lacking in the analysed programmes concerning gender-based violence (and other areas that will be discussed later) is precisely **intersectionality**. A noteworthy and more concrete commitment that considers intersectional elements and other factors within the occurrence and handling of gender-based violence is the online access mentioned in the programme of SDSM. This approach could make counselling centres more accessible to individuals who, for various reasons, are unable to visit them physically, and could also reduce

social pressure and the sense of shame among victims. Intersectionality refers to the different and complex multilayered structure of discrimination, which may correlate with class, gender, sex, religious affiliation, sexual orientation, and other discriminatory grounds, all of which are simultaneously and inextricably linked. It stems from the premise that people live with multiple and layered identities that arise from social relations, history, and the functioning of power structures.¹ The term “woman” alone does not clarify that it encompasses all the different groups of women in our country, who, due to varying identity components, are exposed to certain types and degrees of violence in different ways and therefore should be separately targeted in programmes for addressing and preventing such violence. Hence, not only are certain groups of women more exposed to violence than others (e.g., women and girls with disabilities,² sex workers³), but also the very environment in which they live and operate can differently affect them and play a role in gender-based violence.⁴ Therefore, it is necessary to anticipate and implement measures that would encompass all different groups of women as victims of gender-based violence, in line with one of the goals of the Istanbul Convention, to create a comprehensive framework of policies and measures for the protection and assistance of all victims of violence against women and domestic violence.⁵ In this regard, aside from the mention in the SDSM’s programme of improving the legal framework concerning gender-based violence and the reminder of the multiple discrimination faced by women and girls with disabilities and women from marginalized communities, it can be concluded that the analysed programmes do not introduce new measures for preventing and protecting against gender-based violence.

The remarks on the intersectionality of gender issues also apply to measures for the **economic empowerment of women**. While all the detailed programmes of VMRO-DPMNE, SDSM, and LEVICA include various measures or perspectives on the commitment to women’s economic empowerment, the common point where all three programmes share a partially similar stance is the regulation of maternity leave for women farmers in rural areas. This indicates that all parties recognize the long-standing unfavourable position of women farmers in rural areas, but it also highlights the need for gender intersectionality in the drafting and implementation of laws and policies. Recent individual opinions on

1 Intersectionality – The European Institute for Gender Equality’s Glossary & Thesaurus (EIGE). Available at: https://eige.europa.eu/publications-resources/thesaurus/terms/1050?language_content_entity=en

2 Dimitrovska, N. Kochoska, E. (2022). Research report – Preventing gender-based violence against women and girls with disabilities. Available at: https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/5/d/513253_0.pdf

3 Association for Emancipation, Solidarity and Equality of Women – ESE (2017). Guide to protecting sex workers against violence. Available at: <https://esem.mk/pdf/Publikacii/2017/ESE%20Vodic%20za%20sex%20rab%20A6%20052017.pdf>

4 Reaktor – Research in Action (2020). Gender-Based Violence in Public Spaces In Skopje: A scoping study. Available at: <https://reaktor.org.mk/en/wp-content/uploads/sites/4/2020/11/Reaktor-Scoping-Study-ANG-web.pdf>

5 Convention of the Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence. Available at: <https://rm.coe.int/168046253a>

complaints submitted to the Commission on Prevention and Protection against Discrimination (CPPD), which have established indirect, prolonged, intersectional discrimination against women farmers from rural areas,⁶ particularly regarding the realization of the right to salary compensation during maternity, childbirth, and parental leave, highlight the need for a genuine commitment and systematic solution for the maternity leave of women farmers. This also emphasizes the necessity for greater attention and specific measures for this group of women in all electoral programmes. In VLEN's programme, there are no specific measures related to this category, and there is a noticeable lack of serious commitment to gender issues or gender equality between men and women.

One of the ways to eradicate intersectional discrimination is by **involving women in decision-making processes** (at both local and national levels). Different groups of women in every society have distinct experiences, and these experiences can contribute to new perspectives for reducing the gender gap in various spheres and raising specific issues related to gender-based violence, unpaid labour, and gender-based discrimination, especially during pregnancy, and so on. Women's participation in key decision-making processes is also stipulated in the international Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, to which our country is a signatory. However, the programmes of LEVICA and VMRO-DPMNE do not contain any specific commitments or measures for equal representation of women in decision-making positions. In SDSM's programme, there are commitments to uphold the principle of 50-50 for parliamentary and council lists, mandatory 30% female candidates for mayors, as well as revising the legal framework to ensure at least 40% women in all executive positions and 50-50 representation in parliament. Additionally, it is proposed to increase the representation of women in governing bodies. To achieve these measures, specific training programmes are proposed to enhance participation and attainment of leadership positions within political parties and various government bodies. It is important to note that these electoral promises were also present in SDSM's programme for the early parliamentary elections in 2020,⁷ but they were not fulfilled. VLEN's programme, although briefly and without further explanations, anticipates quotas of 40% for all appointed positions, but it does not offer specific measures for this, nor does it anticipate changes to the electoral code.

Regarding **women's sexual and reproductive rights** in the programmes of political parties, at least in those where they are mentioned, LEVICA dedicates the least attention. One of its proposals suggests introducing optional menstrual leave from work and tax relief for products that support menstrual hygiene

⁶ KSZD's official opinion Number 08-119/3 from 03.03.2023. Available at: [08-119-од-03.03.23-утврдена-дискриминација-08-574.pdf \(kszd.mk\)](https://bit.ly/4dXKa3g)

⁷ Reaktor – Research in Action (2020). Review of the Gender Aspect in the Programmes and Electoral Lists of the Political Parties for the Early Parliamentary Elections 2020. Available at: <https://bit.ly/4dXKa3g>

and women's reproductive health, which is certainly commendable but not sufficient for comprehensive progress in this area. What is lacking is the right to use and access contraceptive methods, as well as mechanisms (or at least commitments) to improve the conditions related to the sexual and reproductive rights of women from marginalized groups. The programme commitments of VMRO-DPMNE in this area are slightly better than those of LEVICA, as they include not only healthcare and access to appropriate health services, with a particular emphasis on improving women's reproductive health, but also access to information, especially for socially vulnerable groups regarding HIV/AIDS and other sexually transmitted infections, abortion, infertility, and malignant diseases of the breast and uterus, as well as raising awareness about women's health. However, it must be noted that access to information alone is not sufficient to adequately address these issues and to properly protect the mentioned groups. For SDSM, *sexual and reproductive health and rights* involve investing in education and programmes aimed at empowering, especially young women and girls, to make informed choices. Furthermore, it includes ensuring that contraceptive methods are included on the positive list of the Health Insurance Fund (FZOM) and increasing the budget for contraception within preventive programmes for vulnerable and socially excluded groups of women. Additionally, there are plans to increase budgets for prevention targeted at women and vulnerable groups, focusing on programmes for protecting the population from HIV, preventing malignant diseases, and safeguarding mothers and children. However, despite these programme commitments, it is important to emphasize that the authorities have significantly reduced the budget allocated for the HIV population protection programme⁸ multiple times in recent years. Sex workers are a group of women that none of the programmes address, which is part of the broader global issue of the violation of the sex workers' rights.⁹

Education plays an important role in shaping public opinion and influencing individuals as well as the collective. The curriculum and the socialization process prepare students to face various challenges in both private and public spheres, at both individual and professional levels. To achieve gender equality in and through education, more measures are needed, such as equal access to education for all minors regardless of their differences, revising curricular content to remove stereotypical elements, and introducing comprehensive sexual education that addresses the psycho-physical and emotional development of young people, with an emphasis on responsibility towards oneself and others in relation to sexuality.

8 The "saving" of 19 million denars for HIV prevention, a risk of a new health crisis - PINA, published on 29.03.2022. Available at: <https://pina.mk/5909-zashtedata-od-19-milioni-denari-za-sprecuvanje-na-hiv-rizik-za-nova-zdravstvena-kriza/>

9 Star – First Collective of Sex Workers in the Balkans, Strategic Plan 2022-2025. Available at: [Стратешки-план-2022-2025-ревидиран-20122023.pdf \(starsexwork.org\)](https://starsexwork.org/pdf/starsexwork.org)

Among the analysed programmes, LEVICA (and VLEN, which do not address this issue in detail) pays the least attention to **inclusivity in education**. The election programme of LEVICA includes commitments regarding the inclusion of the Roma community in education, as well as individuals with disabilities, but the gender aspect is not mentioned at all in the context of primary, secondary, or higher education.

The measures proposed by VMRO-DPMNE do not mention sexual education at all, nor do they focus on any changes to the curriculum. Their approach to inclusivity refers to girls and marginalized groups that are underrepresented compared to boys in primary education. Regarding reducing the gender gap in the scientific and professional fields, they propose career counselling for girls. Improving the quality of the curricula, which shape both the mental and social characteristics and capacities of students, could have a much greater impact on young people than occasional counselling. Counselling (of this type, as proposed in the VMRO-DPMNE programme) serves a guiding role, while the educational process itself plays a crucial role in creating, modelling, and even establishing aspects, attitudes, beliefs, and often misconceptions, unfortunately. Furthermore, the programme does not specify what profile of workers will be part of these career counselling centres. VMRO-DPMNE's programme does not mention any gender-sensitive content in primary and secondary education or gender studies at universities. Additionally, it does not explain the mechanism for implementing inclusivity for girls and marginalized groups, which would implicitly indicate the reasons for their underrepresentation.

SDSM's programme contains the most measures for inclusivity in education. It includes general commitments to principles of interculturalism, gender equality, and non-discrimination on which curricula should be based. It also outlines measures to remove barriers and create opportunities for women and vulnerable groups to access education. Additionally, it emphasizes understanding sexuality through comprehensive sexual education, aiming to positively impact social skills, self-confidence among young people, and decision-making for building healthy, non-violent relationships. Both LEVICA's and SDSM's programmes consider the challenges and obstacles faced by Romani women. One of the programme commitments is to provide accessible education that encourages Romani women and helps them escape the risk of poverty. Furthermore, SDSM's programme includes the introduction of comprehensive sexual education in schools, as well as ensuring equal access to education regardless of social status, place of residence, ethnic affiliation, sexual orientation, gender identity, or intellectual or physical disability. Although the commitments of SDSM are significantly improved compared to the programmes of VMRO-DPMNE and LEVICA, a careful reading of the measures for achieving these commitments

reveals certain inconsistencies. For example, it is not specified which exact programmes and at what level of education the new gender-sensitive curricula should be implemented. Additionally, there is no detailed explanation of how the issue of accessibility to education for Romani communities is expected to be addressed.

In terms of past political engagement and the proposed measures for the upcoming period, SDSM's programme is more gender-sensitive compared to the electoral programmes of LEVICA and the coalition led by VMRO-DPMNE. Through decisive positions and measures such as opposing anti-gender movements, advocating for a Law on Termination of Pregnancy, and promoting comprehensive sexual education, SDSM demonstrates a significantly greater interest in the gender context within Macedonian society. Additionally, SDSM mentions measures and mechanisms for addressing gender issues to a much greater extent than the other political parties, placing a stronger emphasis on the rights of Romani women.

Regarding gender-based violence against women and domestic violence, it is important to mention that in previous electoral periods, specifically before the 2016 elections, the Declaration for the Ratification of the Istanbul Convention, prepared by the National Network to End Violence Against Women and Domestic Violence, was supported and signed by multiple parties, including LEVICA.¹⁰ However, their commitments to addressing and preventing violence against women do not align with the provisions of the Istanbul Convention, particularly concerning gender-sensitive language and the measures themselves.

Furthermore, the Declaration for the Amendment of the Law on Termination of Pregnancy and the Protection of Women's Health and Reproductive Rights, from the same year, was also signed by multiple parties, including LEVICA. However, within this year's programmatic measures, there are no significant commitments regarding this issue, and the promises are limited and almost exclusively related to a small segment of women's reproductive rights. It is essential to reiterate this point, particularly due to the anti-gender movements and the constraints they can impose on equal rights and freedoms, especially concerning women's sexual and reproductive rights, as well as their participation in the public sphere. This threat to democracy and the rights of women and marginalized groups is only mentioned in the programme of SDSM.

¹⁰ The declaration, by which the parties advocated that if they came to power, they would ratify the Convention, was supported and signed by: Levica, SDSM, DUI, the Democratic Union, the Liberal Party and the Besa Movement and Uniteti. The declaration was not signed by VMRO-DPMNE. The Declaration for the Amendment of the Law on Termination of Pregnancy and the Protection of Women's Health and Reproductive Rights, prepared by the Platform for Gender Equality, with which the parties pledged that, if they came to power, they would change the restrictive provisions in the Law, with the goal of free choice and access to safe abortion, was signed by: Levica, SDSM, and the Liberal Party. VMRO-DPMNE, DUI, the Democratic Union, Besa Movement and Uniteti did not sign this declaration.

The same applies to the programme of the coalition led by VMRO-DPMNE, although they were not signatories to the aforementioned declarations, which remains a concerning factor, especially considering that VMRO-DPMNE currently leads the ruling coalition with a larger majority in the government.

What is important to note is that despite the completely different approaches in the programmes of all parties, there are numerous similarities regarding general commitments in areas such as infrastructure, energy, digitalization, and similar fields. However, concerning gender equality, there are very few similarities, which leads to the conclusion that greater gender sensitivity is necessary among the parties, particularly through training and collaboration with the civil sector, as well as the implementation of a structured and systemic approach to issues related to gender equality and the rights of women and girls. The absence of even similar stances on women's issues underscores the diversity and extent of the challenges women (among others) face and highlights the need for a systemic approach to addressing these various problems. Additionally, the lack of concrete mechanisms present in most programmes and the persistence of general commitments without proposing more informed solutions emphasize the need for education of party members on gender issues and a more serious engagement with these topics at a level of genuine commitment, not just at the level of promises without concrete steps for their realization. The goal of such training would be to recognize the importance of socio-economic inclusion of women and the overall benefits of improving the status of women in Macedonian society. The consequences of unequal access for a group in society (in this case, women, who make up half of the population) are clearly visible in existing gaps and inequalities but are also implicit in the development of the entire society. Gender discrimination, although it primarily concerns women who have historically faced and continue to face unequal access, extends into other social spheres, and understanding it is equally important for women, men, and the overall well-being of society. A further step is understanding gender as a complex category, which necessitates an awareness of gender intersectionality. This understanding is particularly lacking in most political programmes subject to gender analysis.

A BRIEF OVERVIEW OF THE POLITICAL PROGRAMMES OF THE CANDIDATES WHO ENTERED THE SECOND ROUND OF THE PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS 2024

The two candidates who entered the second round of the presidential elections generally expressed their views and promises in significantly shorter formats than those of the political parties. Candidate Gordana Siljanovska-Davkova (supported by VMRO-DPMNE) shared her principles of action in 40 pages, while candidate Stevo Pendarovski (as a representative of SDSM) presented an electoral programme spanning 28 pages. It is important to note that the commitments of Stevo Pendarovski do not always reflect the positions and measures presented in the electoral programme of SDSM, and there is also a noticeable difference in the opinions and views of Gordana Siljanovska-Davkova and the program of VMRO-DPMNE. Additionally, it would be significant to emphasize that even before her candidacy for president, Siljanovska-Davkova terminated her party membership.

The general conclusion from the brief analysis of these presidential programmes is that issues related to women's rights, gender inequalities, and discrimination based on gender occupy a small part of the programmes and do not offer more serious content for analysis that could be the subject of this document.