

A GENDER
ANALYSIS OF THE
2025 COUNTRY
REPORT FOR
NORTH MACEDONIA

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A Gender Analysis of the 2025 Country Report for North Macedonia

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Overview of the 2025 Reporting Period for North Macedonia

The 2024 parliamentary and presidential elections marked a major political shift in North Macedonia. The centre-right VMRO-DPMNE party, secured a parliamentary majority and formed a coalition government with VLEN and ZNAM. The coalition also backed the country's first woman president - a symbolic milestone overshadowed by her support for erasing gender from education reforms¹. Despite meeting quota requirements, most women candidates were placed at the lowest legally allowed positions, and only 25% led electoral lists². Gender equality was absent from campaign narratives, and women had minimal visibility in political events. On October 29, 2024, Parliament adopted a long-term National Development Strategy³, though it lacks specific commitments to gender justice. Meanwhile, coordinated anti-gender groups (comprising over 30 actors) continue to undermine democratic reforms⁴. It has blocked the Gender Equality Law, pressured municipalities to erase gender-sensitive language, and obstructed national legislation on labour rights, workplace harassment, and gender recognition. Recent education reforms, passed through opaque processes, eliminated all gender-related provisions, with institutional and political support enabling smear campaigns and disinformation.

Civic space in North Macedonia has narrowed significantly. Civil society organizations, particularly those advocating for gender and LGBTQI+ rights, face growing legal, financial, and institutional pressures. Disinformation targeting human rights defenders and LGBTQI+ communities is escalating, met with silence from state officials that fuels further hate and stigmatization⁵. In several municipalities, gender equality terminology has been replaced with biologically essentialist definitions, reflecting deeper patterns of democratic erosion. Despite its EU aspirations, the country is undergoing democratic backsliding, mirroring regional and global trends where hybrid regimes restrict civic freedoms and silence dissent.

Cluster 1: The Fundamentals of the Accession Process

Functioning of Democratic Institutions and Public Administration Reform Democracy

The section on Democracy highlights that the conduct of the first round of local elections in North Macedonia was competitive, with fundamental freedoms largely respected, although noting the highly polarised political environment and some procedural shortcomings. However, the Commission also noted no progress on addressing the outstanding recommendations⁶ of the OSCE's Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) and the Venice Commission, a repeated finding also pointed out in the Commission's 2024 country report⁷, as a necessary step to be implemented swiftly and before the 2025 local elections.

In this year's report, unlike in 2024, the Commission addresses the **gender dimension of the local elections and of political participation and representation**. Supported with a graph illustrating women's position in political life in North

¹ Gender Equality Platform. (2025). "Public Reaction: Violence, discrimination, and ignorance in formal education are the new 'normal' promoted by the government, the Parliament, and the country's President." Gender Equality Platform. Available at: <https://tinyurl.com/3wybb4ad>

² Republic of North Macedonia – Parliamentary Elections and Presidential Election Second Round 2024.

³ THE NATIONAL DEVELOPMENT STRATEGY 2024-2044

⁴ Cvetkovikj, I. (2024). "Anti-gender mobilizations in North Macedonia: A transnational tool-kit for domestic actors against gender equality and LGBTQI+ rights." Heinrich Böll Stiftung, Sarajevo. Available at: <https://ba.boell.org/en/2024/04/19/anti-gender-mobilizations-north-macedonia-transnational-tool-kit-domestic-actors-against>

⁵ Velichkovska, M., Milenkovska, S. & Atanasovska, G. (2024). "Censorship, boycott and reduction of the space for action of LGBTIQ activists and artists as a result of hate speech." Skopje: Institute for Media and Analytics. Available at: <https://ima.mk/2024/12/17/cenzura-bojkot-i-namaluwane-na-prostorot-za-deluvane-na-lgbtik-aktivistite-i-na-umetniczite-kako-rezultat-na-govorot-na-omraza/>

⁶ (i) Revision of the Electoral Code through inclusive consultations; (ii) Adopting measures to increase transparency on party and campaign financing; (iii) Revising the rules on the apportioning of paid political advertisement; and (iv) Eliminating restrictions that impede effective electoral dispute resolution.

⁷ European Commission. (2024). "Commission Staff Working Document: North Macedonia 2024 Report." Available at https://enlargement.ec.europa.eu/document/download/5f0c9185-ce46-46fc-bf44-82318ab47e88_en?filename=North%20Macedonia%20Report%202024.pdf

Macedonia, the report underscored that, in practice, **meaningful political empowerment of women remains limited**, as parties frequently place women in non-competitive positions or do not support their candidacies beyond what is required by law. It also **underlines the significant underrepresentation of women among mayoral candidates**. The Commission stressed that **further measures are needed to increase women's participation in the electoral process and political decision-making**, including the strengthening of **quota provisions** in the legal framework⁸.

These **conclusions are welcomed** in this year's report and show **improvement in the gender assessment** of local elections and women's political participation when compared to the 2024 report. We have identified several additional aspects that should be considered further. Regarding **political participation and representation of women**, the Commission should recommend the country to **strengthen women's political participation and leadership, including that of Roma women, young women, and LGBTQI+ persons, through urgent amendments to the Electoral Code to introduce quotas where they are currently absent and to enforce 50–50 gender parity in all elected and appointed bodies**, in line with the commitments set out under the Gender Equality Strategy 2022–2027⁹. In addition, **political parties should be held accountable for ensuring meaningful representation of women, particularly at the local level and within executive branches and functions** where they are least represented, through transparent nomination processes and effective oversight mechanisms¹⁰.

Regarding the state of **democracy**, one of the most significant **democratic regressions** has been the **mainstreaming of anti-gender narratives**, which **have become increasingly institutionalised through coordinated networks involving political actors, religious institutions, and municipal authorities**. These groups continue to play a central role in framing gender equality and LGBTQI+ rights as threats to national identity¹¹, a discourse that has often gone unchallenged and, in some cases, has been echoed by state institutions. This has contributed to a **hostile environment for civil society and minority groups**¹² and has **translated into political endorsement of anti-gender positions by parliamentary actors, resulting in legislative backsliding, stagnation and obstruction**.

Key legislation, including the Gender Equality Law and the Civil Registry Law, remains obstructed, while **efforts to remove gender-related terminology and protections from education laws and administrative protocols have succeeded**. These developments raise **serious concerns on democratic backsliding** of the country, and **dangerous precedent in in compliance with EU legal standards, national anti-discrimination legislation and North Macedonia's obligations under international human rights frameworks**. Moreover, the spread of anti-gender and anti-rights groups and narratives is linked with the rise of anti-democratic and anti-EU sentiments in the country¹³.

To stop democratic backsliding, the EU should urge the state to **safeguard existing gender equality and anti-discrimination protections and to address the safety of human rights defenders**, ensuring that no acquired rights are undermined through non-transparent legislative procedures or political pressure from anti-gender groups. **All legal reforms should be conducted through inclusive public debate, grounded in international human rights standards, and ensure meaningful engagement of civil society at every stage of the process**.

Parliament

The Commission notes that four additional inter-party groups were established, focusing on anti-corruption, the environment, the rights of persons with disabilities, and the implementation of obligations stemming from the Berlin Process and the Reform Agenda under the Growth Plan. However, it also highlights that **no consensus was reached on the adoption of several important laws, including those aimed at improving the status of the Ombudsman's Office**.

While the establishment of parliamentary inter-party groups represents **a procedural improvement**, their contribution to IPA III objectives on democratic governance and fundamental rights remains limited. **Inter-party mechanisms lack systematic gender equality and civil society engagement**, weakening alignment with IPA III cross-cutting priorities and GAP III commitments. Therefore, the European Commission should assess their contribution against **GAP III**

⁸ Reactor – Research in Action. (2023). *Women in Politics 2: Path to Public Office and Impact at the Local Level in North Macedonia*. Reactor – Research in Action, available at <https://reactor.org.mk/en/publication-all/women-in-politics-2-path-to-public-office-and-impact-at-the-local-level-in-north-macedonia>; Reactor – Research in Action. (2025). *Local Elections 2025: A Gender Analysis of Political Party Programmes and Candidates Lists*. Reactor-Research in Action, Available at: <https://tinyurl.com/39c8rv7p>

⁹ Gender Equality Strategy 2022-2027. Official Gazette of the Republic of North Macedonia no.170/22.

¹⁰ Reactor – Research in Action. (2023). *Women in Politics 2: Path to Public Office and Impact at the Local Level in North Macedonia*. Reactor – Research in Action, available at <https://reactor.org.mk/en/publication-all/women-in-politics-2-path-to-public-office-and-impact-at-the-local-level-in-north-macedonia/>

¹¹ Cvetkovikj, I. (2024). "Anti-gender mobilizations in North Macedonia: A transnational tool-kit for domestic actors against gender equality and LGBTQI+ rights." Heinrich Böll Stiftung, Sarajevo. Available at: <https://ba.boell.org/en/2024/04/19/anti-gender-mobilizations-north-macedonia-transnational-tool-kit-domestic-actors-against>

¹² Stojanovska, A. & Dzugumanova, I. (2024). *Report on the Needs and Priorities of LGBTQI+ People in the Republic of North Macedonia*. Helsinki Committee for Human Rights. Available at: https://coalition.org.mk/wp-content/uploads/2024/06/report-for-the-needs-and-priorities-of-the-lgbt-people-in-the-republic-of-north-macedonia_mk_compressed-1_compressed.pdf

¹³ Cvetkovikj, I., Velichkovska, M. (2023). *Who Is Afraid of Gender? Analysis of Anti-Gender Narratives and Actors in North Macedonia*. Coalition Margins. Available at: <https://coalition.org.mk/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/Who-is-afraid-of-gender-ANG-FIN.pdf>

Priority Area 1 (ending gender inequalities in political and public life) and Priority Area 3 (inclusive participation and accountability), focusing on outcomes rather than formal existence. The Commission should require evidence that these parliamentary mechanisms meaningfully integrate gender equality and intersectional analysis, include structured engagement with women's rights and feminist CSOs, and translate deliberations into legislative or oversight action. **Clear benchmarks, gender-responsive indicators, and conditionality are required to ensure that parliamentary structures deliver measurable reform outcomes rather than symbolic compliance.**

Furthermore, the continued failure to adopt legislation strengthening the **Ombudsman's Office** directly undermines **GAP III commitments on accountable governance** and **IPA III performance indicators related to democratic institutions, checks and balances, and fundamental rights**. The Commission should therefore link progress in parliamentary reform to **clear IPA III benchmarks and conditionality**, including:

- measurable steps toward strengthening the independence, mandate, and resourcing of the Ombudsman's Office;
- regular parliamentary reporting on follow-up to inter-party group recommendations, disaggregated by gender and impact area; and
- systematic inclusion of civil society evidence in parliamentary oversight of reform implementation.

Without such conditionality and monitoring, inter-party structures risk becoming symbolic, while substantive progress on gender equality, institutional accountability, and democratic governance remains stalled.

EU Integration

The Commission reiterates its earlier observation, noted as well in the 2024 report¹⁴, that no monitoring reports were produced on the implementation of the latest (June 2021) National Plan for the Adoption of the EU Acquis (NPAA), highlighting that NPAA should be fully aligned with the government's annual and institutional work plans. However, the country report **overlooks the importance of the meaningful engagement, consultation, and monitoring role of women's civil society organizations (WCSOs)** under the Stabilisation and Association Agreement (SAA), the NPAA, and the Growth Plan and Reform Agenda¹⁵, **where involvement remained limited and unstructured, and therefore often lacking a gender perspective**¹⁶.

While the Commission correctly highlights the absence of monitoring reports on the implementation of the latest National Plan for the Adoption of the EU Acquis (NPAA), Reactor's national-level monitoring of the EU accession process¹⁷ shows that this gap is compounded by the **systematic exclusion of women's civil society organizations (WCSOs)** from structured consultation, monitoring, and follow-up under the **Stabilisation and Association Agreement (SAA)**, the **NPAA**, and the **Growth Plan and Reform Agenda**. In this regard, we reiterate the findings and recommendations from Reactor – Research in Action's **national-level monitoring of GAP III and IPA III progress**¹⁸, which document persistent gaps in gender mainstreaming, civil society participation, and accountability within EU accession processes (outlined below).

- **Institutionalise the role of WCSOs in NPAA and Growth Plan monitoring.** The European Commission should require the Government to establish **formal, structured mechanisms** for the meaningful participation of women's civil society organizations (WCSOs) in the design, monitoring, and reporting of the NPAA, the Growth Plan, and the Reform Agenda. Reactor's monitoring of EU accession processes at the national level consistently shows that ad hoc consultations and informal engagement result in weak gender mainstreaming and limited accountability.
- **Link NPAA implementation reporting to gender-responsive monitoring frameworks.** The Commission should require that future NPAA monitoring reports systematically integrate **gender-sensitive indicators**, sex-disaggregated data, and civil society evidence, in line with **GAP III and IPA III cross-cutting priorities**. Without such requirements, implementation remains technocratic and detached from the lived impacts of reforms on women and marginalised groups.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ European Commission. (2024). "Commission Staff Working Document: North Macedonia. Commission Implementing Decision approving the Reform Agendas and the multiannual work programme on the approval under the Reform and Growth Facility for the Western Balkans." Available at https://enlargement.ec.europa.eu/commission-staff-working-document-north-macedonia_en

¹⁶ Kvinna till Kvinna. (2025). *A Gender Analysis of the EU Growth Plan for the Western Balkans. Blind Spots or Inclusive Growth?* Available at: <https://kvinna.tillkvinna.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/11/The-Kvinna-till-Kvinna-Foundation-blind-spots-or-inclusive-growth.pdf>; Reactor – Research in Action. (2024). *Contribution to the Progress Report in Implementing the Action Plan for Implementing the Strategy for Cooperation with and Development of Civil Society 2022-2024*.

¹⁷ Ivanova, T., & Jolevska, I. (2024). *Gender Mainstreaming in the EU Accession Process: Country Assessment Report*. Reactor – Research in Action. Available at: <https://reactor.org.mk/en/wp-content/uploads/sites/4/2024/02/North-Macedonia-Assessment-Report-2023-1.pdf>

¹⁸ Ibid.

- **Condition progress assessments on documented civil society engagement and follow-up.** In line with the Stabilisation and Association Agreement, the Commission should assess progress not only on policy alignment but also on the **quality of participatory governance**, including **traceable engagement with WCSOs and documented responses to their inputs**. Reactor’s monitoring¹⁹ highlights that the absence of feedback loops and follow-up mechanisms significantly undermines both reform ownership and gender equality outcomes.

Civil Society

On civil society, the Commission has noted a **downward trend compared to 2024**, underscoring the **narrowed space in which civil society operates**, despite an overall enabling operating environment. The report marks that the reactivation of the Council for Cooperation between the Government and Civil Society and the appointment of its members, as well the adoption of the action plan for the implementation of the 2025-2028 Government strategy for cooperation with civil society, needs to be guided by **the key priority of the Council to ensure transparency in state funding for civil society organisations (CSOs) and a clear institutional set-up for cooperation with civil society**²⁰. The Commission also highlights the need for timely implementation of the Government Strategy key measures such as **creating a model for structural involvement of civil society in the country’s EU accession negotiations** by 2026, **enhancing the participation of CSOs in the National Council for EU Integration** and the Council for Open Government Partnership, and **urgently develop a consistent approach to involving CSOs in policymaking at national and local levels**, by building trust and cooperation.

However, beside the welcoming recommendations on the institutionalized set up for involvement and cooperation with CSOs, the report did not emphasize the importance of transparent, timely and inclusive consultation mechanisms **that ensure the participation of diverse civil society actors, particularly women’s rights organizations and groups, LGBTQI+ and local CSOs**, in policymaking processes (legislative drafting, policy planning, and monitoring of reforms) at national and local levels and **throughout all phases of the EU integration process including the Reform Agenda**.

These concerns have been highlighted in the findings of two recent monitoring reports by Reactor²¹ and Kvinna till Kvinna²². For instance, WCSO involvement in the preparation of the Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance (IPA) III Strategic Response and its revised version was limited. The NPAA 2021-2025, which was assessed in the monitoring as **gender-mainstreamed to a minimal extent**, was expected to undergo revision back in 2023. Nonetheless, to the best of our knowledge, no consultations with CSOs have taken place thus far. WCSO participation in the Stabilisation and Association Agreement (SAA) processes was also notably lacking. Moreover, Women CSOs in North Macedonia have **voiced concerns about the limited attention to gender equality across the Reform Agenda**, warning that, without concrete commitments and measurable targets, **gender mainstreaming risks remaining hollow words**. Therefore, priority must be given to **meaningful participation of diverse civil society organizations, including women’s and LGBTQI+ groups, in national monitoring and evaluation mechanisms**, particularly for reforms related to fundamental rights.

Public Administration Reform

Public Financial Management

In this section, the Commission underscores the delay of the reforms outlined in the Organic Budget Law (OBL), reiterating its observation from the 2024 report²³ regarding Gender-responsive budgeting (GRB). While noting that OLB established GRB, the report also emphasizes that **it is still necessary to facilitate stronger policy discussions**

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ European Commission. (2025). "Commission Staff Working Document: North Macedonia 2025 Report." Available at: https://enlargement.ec.europa.eu/document/download/267b368e-6b55-4a42-bb72-6395593de4da_en?filename=north-macedonia-report-2025.pdf

²¹ Ivanova, T., & Jolevska, I. (2024). *Gender Mainstreaming in the EU Accession Process: Country Assessment Report*. Reactor – Research in Action. Available at: <https://reactor.org.mk/en/wp-content/uploads/sites/4/2024/02/North-Macedonia-Assessment-Report-2023-1.pdf>

²² Kvinna till Kvinna. (2025). *A Gender Analysis of the EU Growth Plan for the Western Balkans. Blind Spots or Inclusive Growth?* Available at: <https://kvinna.tillkvinna.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/11/The-Kvinna-till-Kvinna-Foundation-blind-spots-or-inclusive-growth.pdf>

²³ European Commission. (2024). "Commission Staff Working Document: North Macedonia. Commission Implementing Decision approving the Reform Agendas and the multiannual work programme on the approval under the Reform and Growth Facility for the Western Balkans." Available at https://enlargement.ec.europa.eu/commission-staff-working-document-north-macedonia_en

during budget preparation, further refine budget classifications, and increase the number of indicators disaggregated by sex – a recommendation that is welcomed.

Public Service and Human Resources Management

The report noted the absence of data from the register of public sector employees and provides an estimate of the share of women employed in the public sector, excluding the army and several law enforcement agencies. However, it continues to **lack further detail or critical analysis and recommendations on the equitable and substantive representation of women in leadership and decision-making positions in the public sector**, such as senior, upper-management, high-level and executive roles in the public sector.

Rule of Law and Fundamental Rights

Chapter 23: Judiciary and Fundamental Rights

Fundamental Rights

Under the general framework, the report notes that the country continues to meet its general obligations on fundamental rights. However, it highlights the necessity for **improved protection, respect and fulfilment of fundamental rights** in the country.

The Commission recommends strengthening evidence-based monitoring, reporting and interinstitutional coordination, as well as putting more efforts of the country to fully benefit from its observer status in the EU Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA). While this recommendation is welcomed, the report does not highlight the overall need to **strengthen human rights data collection and the monitoring system** by establishing a comprehensive, transparent, and sustainable system for monitoring and data collection on the implementation of human rights legislation, policies, and strategies. A system that must be adequately funded, institutionalized, and aligned with EU standards to enable effective tracking of progress and inform policymaking.

Moreover, **prevention of legislative regression and protection of acquired rights** is of utmost importance. **The state must put an end to the practice of removing legally established rights through non-transparent legislative procedures.** Any amendments to laws affecting fundamental rights, particularly those related to gender equality and protection against discrimination, must be subject to inclusive public debate, with full transparency and civil society participation. **The European Commission should issue a clear recommendation urging the state to uphold and safeguard** acquired rights in accordance with EU legal standards and human rights obligations.

Freedom of Expression

Intimidation of Journalists

The report noted the intimidation of journalists, particularly the challenging effective implementation of legal protection and **the concerning online harassment and gender-based violence (GBV) directed at female journalists.** This acknowledgement of the specific vulnerabilities experienced by women journalists is significant and welcomed, particularly in a context where **technology-facilitated and online GBV is rising**, yet remains not fully addressed in legislation, aside from a narrow cyberstalking provision, and the Criminal Code does not explicitly recognize technology-facilitated GBV.²⁴ Moreover, it is essential for the country **to strengthen the capacities of all relevant institutions** (including the Ministry of Interior and the Department for Cybercrime and Digital Forensics, the Public Prosecutor's Office, and the judiciary) on identifying, classifying, and handling cases of gender-based violence in digital spaces, ensuring the application of the due diligence principle and the prohibition of (re)victimisation in line with the Law on Prevention and Protection from Violence against Women and Domestic Violence, and promote the consistent use of a gender-sensitive approach in cases of online violence against women journalists, given its frequent classification as gender-based violence.²⁵

²⁴ UNDP. (2024). *Analysis of the Legislation Related to Technology Facilitated Gender Based Violence*. Available at <https://www.undp.org/north-macedonia/publications/analysis-technology-facilitated-gender-based-violence>

²⁵ OSCE Mission to Skopje. (2022). *From Normalization to Self-Censorship: Analysis of Online Harassment of Women Journalists in North Macedonia*. Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe. Available at <https://www.osce.org/mission-to-skopje/526985>

Non-Discrimination

In this section, the Commission notes **continuing delays in the harmonization of non-discrimination principles across all relevant legislation**. Particular concerns are expressed regarding the Parliament's adoption of amendments to the Law on Primary Education, the Law on Secondary Education, and the Law on Textbooks for Primary and Secondary Education through an expedited procedure and **without consultations with relevant stakeholders**. **The removal of content related to sexual and reproductive health and gender equality** through these amendments **raises substantive concerns** regarding compliance with the Law on Prevention and Protection from Discrimination, as well as compliance with international standards.

These concerns expressed by the Commission are in line with the strong criticism and opposition to the regressive legislative backsliding publicly expressed by diverse CSOs – particularly the **Gender Equality Platform**²⁶ representing **women's and LGBTQI+ organisations and groups**. However, **the report lacks a critical overview of the growing and increasingly normalized institutional legitimisation of anti-gender mobilisation by anti-rights groups**, which has resulted in concrete efforts to remove gender-related terminology and protections from education laws and public administration protocols. The **positive institutional responses to these anti-democratic groups** represent a **serious breach of EU legal standards** and contradict North Macedonia's **own legal obligations under international human rights frameworks**. The Commission should therefore **highlight these developments as an emerging and structural risk that fuels further erosion of democratic processes and continued backsliding in the country's path toward EU accession**. Moreover, it is essential to emphasize that all legal amendments and reforms must be subject to **inclusive public debate, grounded in international human rights standards, and ensure meaningful engagement of civil society at all stages of the process**.

On the work of the Commission for the Prevention and Protection against Discrimination (CPPD), the report highlighted **the need for merit-based appointments of Commissioners** by the Parliament, in line with the clear criteria established by the law, further noting the **CPPD's lack of institutional and financial independence** as well as shortages in administrative staff. Reiterating its observation from 2024 country report²⁷, the Commission noted **no visible results** from the implementation of the **2021-2026 Strategy for Equality and Non-Discrimination**. These conclusions are welcomed. However, the report should also include more targeted recommendations regarding the **transparency assurance and independence in the work of the CPPD**, including the **government's obligation to guarantee transparent and public participation in the selection process of CPPD members** through the public disclosure of candidate information and the meaningful involvement of civil society. In addition, the **legally guaranteed financial autonomy of the Commission must be fully implemented** in order to safeguard its functional independence and enable it to carry out its mandate effectively and free from political interference.

Lastly, the report noted 1391 CSOs registered cases of alleged hate speech, the most prevalent being on grounds of nationality, ethnic origin, political affiliation, sexual orientation and gender identity. This represents an increase compared to 2024 (1,171 cases) and points to **a trend of growing polarization in public discourse, both offline and online, alongside an enabling environment for anti-democratic actors and further narrowing of democratic space**.

Gender Equality

Compared to 2024, this year's report provides a broader coverage of gender equality developments in the country, putting greater focus on gender-based violence. While this is a welcome development, this section's wording, conclusions, and recommendations **do not sufficiently capture the concerning regressive trends and continued backsliding in the area of gender equality**. Namely, the report noted the **incomplete legal and institutional framework** on gender equality and combating gender-based violence, further underscored the need for **improvement of the implementation and enforcement mechanisms**, and pointed out **no significant developments in the national policy framework for integrating gender equality, nor in the efforts to align with the EU *acquis* and relevant international standards on gender equality**. The report reiterates its 2024 finding on the **deficient or weak implementation of the national Strategy for Gender Equality 2022-2027 and its corresponding action plan**²⁸. Moreover, it stresses the **need for greater efforts for institutional and legal reforms to address the key gender equality aspects**, particularly on access to political, economic and social life, access to health services, the prevention of gender-based and domestic violence, and the protection of victims. It further raises concerns about the **prevalent gender-based hate speech and**

²⁶ Gender Equality Platform. (2025). "Public Reaction: Violence, discrimination, and ignorance in formal education are the new 'normal' promoted by the government, the Parliament, and the country's President." Gender Equality Platform. Available at: <https://tinyurl.com/3wybb4ad>

²⁷ European Commission. (2024). "Commission Staff Working Document: North Macedonia. Commission Implementing Decision approving the Reform Agendas and the multiannual work programme on the approval under the Reform and Growth Facility for the Western Balkans." Available at https://enlargement.ec.europa.eu/commission-staff-working-document-north-macedonia_en

²⁸ Reactor-Research in Action. (2025). *Shadow Report on the Implementation of the Gender Equality Strategy 2023/2024*. Reactor – Research in Action. Available at: <https://reactor.org.mk/publication-all/извештај-во-сенка-за-родова-еднаквост/>.

threats against female human rights defenders, particularly on social media. It also notes the **shifts in municipal policies from gender equality to 'equality between men and women', which undermine gender equality.**

While these assessments and recommendations are welcomed and align with Reactor's findings and the input provided during the preparation phases of the 2025 report, a clear indication of significant underlying processes and developments is still missing. Namely, there is a **lack of clear emphasis on the continuation of the delays and non-adoption of key bills, such as the Law on Gender Equality and the Civil Registry Law** (affecting legal gender recognition)²⁹, and on the **institutional legitimisation of anti-gender and anti-rights groups** in the country and **their influence on decision-making processes**. Unlike the previous two reports (2023 and 2024), in which **anti-gender groups and their growing presence** were clearly highlighted in the EU report, this aspect in the 2025 report is omitted, despite the growing hostile and unsafe environment for civil society and minority groups³⁰ and their increased influence, power, and enabling environment provided by political and institutional actors³¹. This trend has become increasingly visible and relevant, as evidenced by the recent regressive amendments to education legislation (see section on Non-Discrimination) and blocked adoption of the Law on Gender Equality, representing a **serious breach of EU legal standards and a contradiction to North Macedonia's own legal obligations under international human rights frameworks**.

Moreover, relevant authorities should **strengthen the enabling environment, safety, and security for CSOs and human rights defenders (HRDs) by effectively addressing and processing cases of misinformation, hate speech, and attacks against activists**, including measures to protect CSOs and HRDs from smear campaigns. In this context, the Ministry of Interior should, in close cooperation with civil society organizations, **develop and implement a dedicated Security Protocol for Human Rights Defenders** to ensure systematic protection, prevention, and response mechanisms for those engaged in human rights advocacy.

The report also highlights **the persistent challenges in the implementation of the Istanbul Convention**, notably due to **missing legislation and inadequate funding**. Observes remaining incomplete alignment with EU standards, as **no assessment has yet been conducted to ensure compliance with Directive (EU) 2024/1385 on violence against women and domestic violence**. It is noted that **further amendments to the Criminal Code are required** as recommended by the Group of Experts on Action against Violence against Women and Domestic Violence (GREVIO), **particularly in regard to the criminalization of forced marriage and psychological violence**. Further, the Commission points out that institutional capacity remains weak, stressing **the need for continuous training of judges, prosecutors, and police**, in line with GREVIO recommendations. It highlights **insufficient support services, limited operational shelters, and an under-resourced reintegration framework**. Preventive health programmes, while aligned with EU standards, remain constrained by limited funding and access.

These recommendations by the Commission are welcomed; however, they are not sufficient. The report should call upon the authorities to **strengthen the legal, economic, and institutional framework addressing gender-based violence (GBV) and domestic violence by amending the Law on Free Legal Aid** to ensure access to secondary legal aid for women survivors, particularly those facing intersecting forms of discrimination, and by guaranteeing accessible, survivor-centred legal services across all regions and languages. The **economic consequences of GBV** should be addressed through targeted state support, including the **establishment of a state compensation fund and the integration of financial assistance, employment support, housing, and social protection measures within the national welfare system**, with focused outreach to marginalised groups. **Full implementation and adequate funding of the Istanbul Convention and GBV legislation remain essential** (fulfilling obligations under Articles 17–21), alongside the adoption of a comprehensive National Strategy for Prevention and Protection against GBV and Domestic Violence (2026–2033) that addresses systemic gaps through **sustainable financing, inter-sectoral coordination, gender-sensitive data, public education, and survivor-centred justice and support services**.

LGBTIQ Persons

In this section, the report highlights the **continuous discrimination** faced by LGBTIQ+ persons in the country and the **need for improvement of the legal protection of the rights** of LGBTIQ+ persons. It also raises concerns that the current legislative framework does not recognise same-sex partnerships and that **the adoption of a national LGBTIQ equality strategy or action plan remains pending**. It further notes that **no steps have been taken to implement the January 2019 European Court of Human Rights judgment on legal gender recognition**, pointing to continued gaps in the protection of LGBTIQ+ rights.

²⁹ Janowska, A. & Puchalska, M. (2024). "Western Balkans and their uneasy road to (gender) democracy". Heinrich Böll Stiftung, Warszawa, Polska. Available at: <https://pl.boell.org/en/2024/02/26/western-balkans-and-their-uneasy-road-gender-democracy>

³⁰ Stojanovska, A. & Dzugumanova, I. (2024). *Report on the Needs and Priorities of LGBTIQ+ People in the Republic of North Macedonia*. Helsinki Committee for Human Rights. Available at: https://coalition.org.mk/wp-content/uploads/2024/06/report-for-the-needs-and-priorities-of-the-lgbti-people-in-the-republic-of-north-macedonia_mk_compressed-1_compressed.pdf

³¹ Cvetkovikj, I. (2024). "Anti-gender mobilizations in North Macedonia: A transnational tool-kit for domestic actors against gender equality and LGBTIQ+ rights." Heinrich Böll Stiftung, Sarajevo. Available at: <https://ba.boell.org/en/2024/04/19/anti-gender-mobilizations-north-macedonia-transnational-tool-kit-domestic-actors-against>

The Commission also noted that **hate speech against the LGBTIQ community persists, particularly online**, while legal and institutional responses remain insufficient. It highlighted the **lack of progress in addressing hate-motivated violence and investigating past attacks against LGBTIQ organizations and activists**. The Commission further observed that **reduced funding for LGBTIQ programming risks weakening LGBTIQ and gender equality movements as anti-democratic activists continue to gain influence**, while awareness-raising measures to combat LGBTIQ-phobia remain inadequate.

These raised concerns by the Commission are welcomed and in line with inputs from LGBTIQ+ activists and groups. However, further recommendations remain necessary. Authorities should **adopt legislation on legal gender recognition based on the principle of self-determination, in line with ECtHR jurisprudence, and ensure the explicit inclusion of sexual orientation, gender identity and expression, and sex characteristics (SOGIESC) as protected grounds across labour, health, education, and anti-discrimination legislation**. In addition, Members of Parliament and the Assembly of North Macedonia should **establish and operationalize the work of a new inter-party, inter-parliamentary LGBTIQ+ group dedicated to supporting and advancing the rights of the LGBTIQ+ community**. Public funding must be secured to support shelters and community services for LGBTIQ+ persons experiencing gender-based violence.

Roma

The Commission observed that **the Action Plan for Roma women and girls' rights is being implemented to a moderate extent**, while significant challenges persist, including **irregular school attendance, the presence of street children, and school segregation**. It further noted that, although the government remains committed to the priorities of the Poznan Declaration³², implementation requires substantial improvement, and the adoption of the action plans for 2025–2026 remains pending. While these conclusions are welcomed, further recommendations must include a stronger EU call for **dedicated programming and budget lines to address the systemic exclusion faced by Roma women, persons with disabilities, and other structurally marginalized groups**. This should encompass **improved access to early childhood education, maternal and reproductive healthcare, mobile health services, clean water, and vocational training**. In addition, **anti-discrimination measures in employment and education should be effectively enforced, and intersectional data collection strengthened** to monitor disparities and inform policy responses. **Amendments to the Law on Personal Identification should also be prioritized** to ensure equal access to the health care system and services for persons without identification.

Economic Criteria

Under Economic criteria, the Commission highlights the **structural problems that persist** in the labour market, including low participation, rates, substantial emigration and a **large gender gap**, and it provides a table (Table 19) with an overview of sex disaggregated data on activity and unemployment rates. However, does not provide any accompanying narrative or analysis beyond the conclusion provided under the “Functioning of the labour market” section, where the Commission observes that the **labour market continues to suffer from structural shortcomings such as low participation rates, particularly for women, and skills mismatches**.

Chapter 18: Statistics

This section, similarly to the 2024 report, once again omits challenges acknowledged in previous reports (e.g. 2023), notably through the **complete removal of references to gender statistics and to the lack of reliable sex-disaggregated data across sectors in the country**. Previous reports³³ identified these challenges as a significant obstacle to evidence-based policymaking, further noting institutional shortcomings in capacity and coordination for gathering and analyzing gender statistics.

Since these observations still hold and no significant progress has been achieved in the past two years, it is crucial that the Commission brings back these key aspects in the following report and includes the recommendations. **Gender mainstreaming in the statistical system remains weak. Key indicators, such as the gender pay gap** (noted in Chapter 19), **have not been updated** since 2022³⁴. The second edition of the National Gender Equality Index (GEI)³⁵

³² Regional Cooperation Council. (2019). “Declaration of Western Balkans Partners on Roma Integration within the EU Enlargement Process”. Declaration/Decision, available at:

<https://www.rcc.int/docs/464/declaration-of-western-balkans-partners-on-roma-integration-within-the-eu-enlargement-process>

³³ European Commission. (2023). “Commission Staff Working Document: North Macedonia 2023 Report”. Available at <https://op.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/7a850ca0-7eee-11ee-99ba-01aa75ed71a1/language-en>

³⁴ State Statistical Office. *SDG 5 'Gender Equality'*

³⁵ Bashevska, M. (2023). *Gender Equality Index for North Macedonia 2022*. MLSP, SSO, EIGE, UN Women. Available at: https://www.stat.gov.mk/publikacii/2023/Gender-Index-2022_EN-web.pdf

reveals **major data gaps**, particularly in the Domain of Time, where data is over a decade old. **National authorities must be urged to regularly produce gender-disaggregated and updated data to support policy development and EU monitoring.** The State Statistical Office (SSO) suffers from underfunding and high turnover, affecting its capacity to produce timely, gender-sensitive statistics³⁶.

Cluster 2: Internal Market

Across Cluster 2, **gender mainstreaming is absent**, with **no references to women or gender equality included in any of the chapters.** Although the 2023 country report, under **Chapter 6 (Company Law)**, highlighted the need for further alignment with the EU acquis, including the **Directive 2022/2381³⁷ on improving the gender balance among directors of listed companies and related measures (Women on Boards Directive)**, as in 2024, the 2025 report once again omits this issue in this section, and instead it is mentioned briefly in Cluster 3, Chapter 19 (Social Policy and Employment). The Directive requires that, by 2026, Member States ensure that at least 40% of non-executive director positions, or 33% of all director positions encompassing both executive and non-executive roles, are held by the underrepresented sex. **This omission is particularly noteworthy in the context of North Macedonia, where men occupy all CEO positions (100 percent), as well as the majority of executive (68.3 percent), and non-executive roles (70 percent)**³⁸.

Chapter 28: Consumer and Health Protection

Public Health

In this section, the report briefly noted that **more efforts that go beyond awareness campaigns are needed to improve women's access to health, including sexual and reproductive health.** Further recommendations need to include the adoption of **targeted positive measures and allocate adequate funding to improve access to primary gynaecological healthcare in underserved municipalities.** This should include **additional funding and incentives for gynaecologists to establish practices in underserved areas.** It should also involve equipping gynaecological offices within primary healthcare centres, either through leasing arrangements for private practitioners or by employing gynaecologists directly within these centres.

In addition, **mobile gynaecological services should be expanded through increased resources to improve coverage in rural and hard-to-reach areas, including the reimbursement of travel costs for women living in municipalities without local gynaecological services.** Furthermore, **budget allocations for cervical and breast cancer screening programmes should be significantly increased to reflect population needs,** with the aim of expanding coverage to at least 75% of women over a three-year period, and ensuring that mobile gynaecological clinics operate year-round rather than on a limited seasonal basis. Finally, **dedicated funding should be provided for health education on women's reproductive health, including healthy pregnancy and mental health support,** as part of the Programme for Healthcare of Mothers and Children.

Cluster 3: Competitiveness and Inclusive Growth

Chapter 19: Social Policy and Employment

In this section, **the Commission's recommendations from last year were partially implemented and therefore remain largely valid.** The Commission's observations and recommendations in this section mostly align with the findings³⁹

³⁶ Ivanova, T., Leshoska, V., & Jolevska, I. (2022). *Gender Statistics and Gender Mainstreaming of the Statistical System of North Macedonia: Gender Analysis*. Reactor – Research in Action. https://reactor.org.mk/en/wp-content/uploads/sites/4/2022/08/rodova_analiza_en-1.pdf

³⁷ "Directive (EU) 2022/2381 of the European parliament and of the Council on improving the gender balance among directors of listed companies and related measures" (2022). *Official Journal of the European Union*, available at: <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:32022L2381>

³⁸ European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE). (2022). "Largest listed companies: CEOs, executives and non-executives, 2023-b2." Available at: https://eige.europa.eu/gender-statistics/dgs/indicator/wmidm_bus_bus_wmid_comp_compex/bar/year:2023-B2/geo:MK/EGROUP:COMP/sex:M,W/UNIT:PC/POSITION:CEO/NACE:TOT

³⁹ Reactor – Research in Action. (2024). *Towards Inclusive EU Accession: Follow-up Assessment of Western Balkans' EU Accession Process from a Gender Perspective*. Reactor – Research in Action, available at <https://reactor.org.mk/en/publication-all/towards-inclusive-eu-accession-follow-up-assessment-of-western-balkan-eu-accession-process-from-a-gender-perspective/>; Reactor – Research in Action. (2024). *Availability of Kindergartens and Gender Equality in the Labour Market*. Reactor – Research in Action, available at <https://reactor.org.mk/en/publication-all/availability-of-kindergartens-and-gender-equality-in-the-labour-market/>; National Federation of Farmers. (2024). "Statement to the Universal Periodic Review Pre-Session on the Republic of

and input provided by Reactor and mark a welcome step toward more systematic gender mainstreaming in the monitoring of Chapter 19 developments. In this chapter, the Commission noted that in the **area of non-discrimination in employment and social policy, national legislation is still not aligned with the relevant EU acquis, including the Employment Equality Directive and the Racial Equality Directive**. It was observed that the **harmonisation of the Law on Labour Relations with the Law on Prevention and Protection against Discrimination was further delayed**.

On equality between women and men in employment and social policy, the Commission highlighted that the **notable gender gap in the labour market persists**, despite the planning of a new Action Plan (2024–2027) for the implementation of the National Employment Strategy (2021–2027). It was further observed that **the Strategy for Formalising the Informal Economy (2023–2027) lacks sufficient gender sensitivity**. The Commission also noted the **absence of data on women beneficiaries of active labour market measures for 2024, while rural women remain poorly integrated into the labour market**, underscoring the need to **strengthen the capacity of the Employment Service Agency**.

The report further noted that **the new law on harassment at work has not yet been adopted**. It further highlighted that **gender gaps in labour force participation remain stark, with a significantly higher share of women economically inactive compared to men, with poor childcare infrastructure** continuing to be a major contributing factor, given the limited availability of kindergartens and low coverage rates in a majority of municipalities. It is underscored that while the 2024 Programme for Social Security of Women Farmers introduces **maternity benefits**, these remain discretionary and lack legal permanence. It also observed that **monitoring the gender pay gap continues to be hindered by the absence of official and up-to-date data**. Overall, the Commission concluded that North Macedonia still needs to further align its legislation with the Gender Equality acquis under this Chapter, including the Work-life Balance Directive, the Pay Transparency Directive, and the Women on Boards Directive.

The Commission's recommendations are well-received; however, additional key aspects should also be addressed. The report should place greater emphasis on the introduction of essential provisions in labour legislation, including **paternity leave and shared parental leave⁴⁰, strengthened workplace and employment protection of women on the grounds of pregnancy and motherhood⁴¹**, and the **recognition of the fundamental right to a workplace free from gender-based violence and harassment**. These measures are necessary to ensure **compliance with EU standards, particularly the EU Work-Life Balance Directive and ILO Convention No. 190**, which was ratified by the country in 2023. Moreover, the Commission should further **ensure an intersectional approach** to monitoring and addressing vulnerabilities in employment and social policy, taking into account, alongside gender, grounds such as disability, SOGIESC, ethnicity, age, and socio-economic status.

Chapter 26: Education and Culture

Under this chapter, the report reiterates the 2024 observation that the capacity of public and private institutions providing early childhood and care (ECEC) has increased by 1072 places, **noting a slight increase in the enrolment of children aged 0-6 (37.4 percent)**, however, **still falling considerably short compared to the EU target on ECEC attendance set at 96 percent**. As outlined in the previous section above, and our country's findings⁴², there is a clear relationship between childcare availability and women's employment outcomes, **highlighting once more the importance of affordable and accessible care services across the country**.

The report continues to present sex-disaggregated data on enrolment in primary, secondary, and tertiary education, consistent with previous reporting practices. However, several **concerning developments** in this area, already noted under Chapter 23, warrant renewed attention in this Chapter, as they directly affect education and cultural processes and the related legislative framework. Specifically, the Parliament's adoption of amendments to the Law on Primary Education, the Law on Secondary Education, and the Law on Textbooks for Primary and Secondary Education through an **expedited procedure and without consultations with relevant stakeholders** led to the **erasure of gender and sexual and reproductive health provisions and the elimination of all gender-related content from educational reforms**. This represents an act of **regressive legislative developments affecting fundamental rights and gender equality**, with broader implications for inclusive education, the prevention and protection against all forms of violence,

North Macedonia", available at https://upr-info.org/sites/default/files/country-document/2024-02/National_Federation_of_Farmers_statement.pdf

⁴⁰ Reactor – Research in Action. (2022). *Men in Care: Exploring Men's Engagement with Care Work in North Macedonia (Men in Care Series)*. Reactor – Research in Action, available at https://reactor.org.mk/en/wp-content/uploads/sites/4/2022/11/menincare_web_en.pdf

⁴¹ Reactor – Research in Action. (2022). *Gender-Based Discrimination and Labour in North Macedonia*. Reactor – Research in Action, available at https://reactor.org.mk/en/wp-content/uploads/sites/4/2022/03/en_b5-web.pdf

⁴² Reactor – Research in Action. (2024). *Availability of Kindergartens and Gender Equality in the Labour Market*. Reactor – Research in Action, available at <https://reactor.org.mk/en/publication-all/availability-of-kindergartens-and-gender-equality-in-the-labour-market/>

including gender-based violence, evidence-based teaching, and the protection of children's and adolescents' rights within the education system, and is **contrary to mandatory compliance with the Law on Prevention and Protection from Discrimination and with international standards.**

Cluster 4: The Green Agenda and Sustainable Connectivity

The EU's Gender Action Plan III (GAP III) emphasizes the need for women, in all their diversity, to influence decision-making processes in environmental conservation and climate change policies, recognizing their role as primary users and managers of natural resources. **Despite the clear gender dimensions across all Chapters in this Cluster, none are gender mainstreamed or include any references to women.**

Chapter 14: Transport Policy

A **gender perspective is absent from this chapter**, despite clear evidence of **gendered mobility patterns that shape access to transport, safety, and employment opportunities for women** in the country. Recent reports⁴³ show that **women disproportionately rely on walking and public transport**, while being significantly underrepresented among private car users and drivers. This reliance exposes women to **heightened safety risks in public spaces and constrains their mobility, with direct implications for access to employment, services, and participation in public life.** These dynamics highlight the gendered nature of urban space and transport systems and yet remain absent from the report. The **lack of adequate public transport and infrastructure in Roma and rural areas, combined with safety concerns in public spaces, further exacerbates barriers to employment for women in these communities, highlighting the need for gender-responsive transport and urban policies that should be reflected in the country report and recommendations.**

It is essential that the Commission recommend that the country **systematically integrate a gender perspective into transport and urban mobility policies.** This should involve the **development of gender-responsive transport planning that explicitly addresses women's mobility patterns, safety concerns, and access to employment and services.** Targeted and tailored transport and mobility services should be introduced for vulnerable and marginalised groups, including Roma women and women with disabilities. The government should also **improve the availability, affordability, and safety of public transport**, particularly in rural and Roma communities, and **introduce measures to enhance women's safety in public spaces**, such as free or subsidised night transport options, safe ride programmes, and improved lighting and infrastructure. **These measures should be reflected in national transport strategies, adequately funded, and monitored through gender-disaggregated data to ensure their effectiveness.**

Chapter 15: Energy

In this section, the report briefly notes that the implementation of the National Energy and Climate Plan (NECP) and the Just Transition Roadmap lag behind, yet without addressing any gender implications. Moreover, there is **limited data on gender and intersectional inequalities in North Macedonia's green agenda**, but expanding research is crucial for inclusive policymaking. Findings from Reactor's qualitative assessment on *Gender Differences in Households, Impact and Acceptability of Energy Reforms*, conducted for the OECD, revealed that **traditional gender roles contribute to unequal energy expenditure within households**, with women being primarily responsible for energy-intensive tasks such as cooking and laundry, leading to a disproportionate energy burden. This assessment also confirms that women often make considerable lifestyle adjustments, such as scheduling chores during off-peak hours, at the cost of their rest and leisure time, which has an impact on their quality of life and further exacerbates their unpaid labour. The assessment also confirmed that **marginalized groups, especially rural and Roma women, often miss out on government energy subsidies due to informal employment, limiting their access to support.**

Given the expected rise in energy prices, there is a growing concern about the escalation of energy poverty disproportionately affecting vulnerable and marginalized groups. Therefore, it is important **to recommend that national authorities develop targeted mechanisms to ensure equitable access to affordable energy, protect low-income households and marginalized groups, and promote sustainable and inclusive energy practices.** Furthermore, **gender-sensitive energy policies** should be developed that acknowledge and address the unequal distribution of energy-related responsibilities within households.

⁴³ World Bank. (2024). North Macedonia Country Gender Assessment (Report No. P177035). World Bank, available at <https://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/099062524152010516/pdf/P177035-5de0e50d-af96-41c8-98b0-673c6863561b.pdf>; Reactor – Research in Action. (2025). *Gender-based Violence in Public Spaces in North Macedonia (Research Report)*. Reactor – Research in Action, available at https://reactor.org.mk/en/wp-content/uploads/sites/4/2025/04/gbv_public_spaces.pdf

On a similar note, **subsidies and financial assistance programs should be made equally accessible to all women, particularly those in rural and marginalized communities.** This includes revising eligibility criteria to account for informal employment and unpaid labour.

It is essential for **women to be involved in the design and implementation of energy policies** to reflect their needs. Additionally, further research is needed on the intersectional impacts of energy policies across demographic groups, focusing on gender, socioeconomic status and urban versus rural living conditions to refine and target interventions effectively. Authorities should also **collect sex-disaggregated data on energy consumption, energy poverty and overall financial management within households** to better understand gender disparities and inform future policies.

Chapter 27: Environment and Climate Change

This section lacks a gender perspective, despite **mounting evidence that climate and environmental risks are experienced differently by women and men.** Recent gender gap analysis on climate change and the environment⁴⁴ highlights **significant gendered disparities in vulnerability and adaptive capacity,** urging for **gender-responsive climate action in national planning processes.** Findings show that **women's social and economic roles shape their exposure to climate impacts,** and that gender differences must inform mitigation, adaptation, and resilience strategies to ensure equitable outcomes. **Failure to integrate a gender perspective into environmental assessments and climate planning can perpetuate existing inequalities and reduce the effectiveness of climate policies.**

Therefore, the Commission should recommend that the government **strengthen the integration of a gender perspective within climate and environmental policy frameworks.** This includes **adopting a formal gender mainstreaming framework in climate policy instruments and environmental action plans** and establishing **gender-sensitive indicators** and **sex-disaggregated data collection for vulnerability and adaptation assessments.** Such measures would align with international best practices and support the identification of different impacts on women, men, and marginalised groups. Further, **capacity-building for key institutions on the intersection of gender and climate change** should be systematised to improve policy design and implementation.

Cluster 5: Resources, Agriculture and Cohesion

All Chapters in this Cluster remain gender-insensitive and lack references to women or gender equality. **Chapter 11 (Agriculture and Rural Development)** does not address challenges faced by rural women. The State Audit Office (SAO) found that **the gender equality measures and activities for women from rural areas undertaken by the relevant state institutions are not sufficiently efficient and effective to include women from rural areas in the labour market and retain them in rural areas**⁴⁵. Moreover, SAO reported that a small percentage of women in rural areas hold property rights, limiting their ability to apply for and receive approval for measures under the IPARD 3 Program⁴⁶. This was also backed up by Reactor's research on property ownership⁴⁷. Although the 2024 country report mentions the IPARD program, it does not address these gender-related issues.

Cluster 6: External Relations

Under **Chapter 31: Foreign, Security and Defence Policy,** the report briefly mentions that **the country continues to implement Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security** through its Second National Action Plan 2020 – 2025, but further gender-focused analysis is lacking. This plan includes elements such as gender self-assessment, a specific Ministry of Defence gender action plan, and enhanced cooperation on the prevention and protection against violence against women. In this regard, the Commission should recommend that the country **prepare a new action plan through an inclusive and consultative process, grounded in a comprehensive evaluation of the implementation and outcomes of the previous Action Plan 2020–2025.**

⁴⁴ UN Women. (2025). *Gender Gap Analysis on Climate Change and Environment in North Macedonia*. UN Women, available at <https://eca.unwomen.org/en/digital-library/publications/2025/08/gender-gap-analysis-on-climate-change-and-environment-in-north-macedonia>

⁴⁵ State Audit Office North Macedonia. (2024). "Final Report on the Performance Audit on Gender Equality of Women from Rural Areas Through Their Inclusion in the Labour Market." State Audit Office North Macedonia, available (only in Macedonian) at: https://dzt.mk/sites/default/files/2024-07/MK-Konecen-revizorski-izvestaj_web.pdf

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Reactor – Research in Action. (2024). *No Women's Land - Gender Analysis on Property Ownership*. Reactor – Research in Action, available at https://reactor.org.mk/en/wp-content/uploads/sites/4/2024/09/gender_analisys_women_property_ownership.pdf

Conclusions

The 2025 country report for North Macedonia points out **the lack of significant developments to integrate gender equality in the national policy framework and to align it with the EU *acquis*** and relevant international standards on gender equality. However, **the report does not sufficiently capture the concerning regressive trends and continued backsliding in gender equality, supported and accelerated by the growing presence and institutional legitimization of anti-gender and anti-rights groups** in the country and **their influence on decision-making processes**, with already concrete impact on regressive legislative amendments in education laws and stalling adoption of the Law on Gender Equality.

Expanding gender mainstreaming beyond the traditional focus on Chapters 23 and 19 and including more recommendations to improve gender equality is essential. The country report should serve not only as a tool for advancing EU accession but also as a vital advocacy instrument for CSOs, pressing the government to make necessary changes in legislation, policy, and institutional practices.

Across the report's clusters and chapters, important gender gaps remain. In **Cluster 1 (Fundamentals)**, there is some progress, as the assessment of local elections now points to women's limited political power and the need for stronger quotas. Still, more is needed to support women's leadership at all levels, including the participation of Roma women, young women, LGBTQI+ persons, and women with disabilities in public decision-making. At the same time, **the growing influence of anti-gender narratives has created a hostile climate for civil society and democratic debate.** The EU should more clearly call on North Macedonia to **protect human rights defenders, address hate speech and misogyny in public life, and ensure that women's rights organizations and other marginalized groups are meaningfully involved in all legislative and policy processes, including the EU accession process.**

Most chapters in **Clusters 2, 4, 5, and 6 are not gender mainstreamed and lack a gender perspective.** Key sectors – such as the **internal market, digital economy, agriculture, environment, transport, energy, and climate change** – lack any gender analysis or sex-disaggregated data. This repetitive omission is striking, as women's needs and contributions in these sectors are well documented. Going forward, the European Commission should **integrate a gender perspective across all clusters.** This means explicitly acknowledging gender disparities in economic reforms, the green agenda, and regional development, and formulating recommendations to remedy them. By including gender-responsive measures in areas like transport policy, digital transformations, energy, climate adaptation, and agriculture development, the Commission report can guide North Macedonia to adopt truly **inclusive policies that benefit all citizens.**

In sum, the gender analysis of the 2025 Country Report reveals that **much stronger action is needed** to close the gender equality gaps identified. North Macedonia's EU accession process must accelerate **legislative alignment** with European gender equality standards, ensure the **inclusion of civil society** (especially women's rights and LGBTQI+ organizations and groups) in shaping policy reforms and monitoring, and reinforce the **safeguarding of existing rights** against any rollback. The rising anti-gender groups and instances of institutional backsliding pose a serious risk to the progress achieved so far, and countering these trends will require strong political will and clear support from the EU. The Country Report should not only assess compliance with the *acquis* but also serve as a **policy compass and support advocacy efforts** – helping domestic stakeholders and international partners to press for the necessary changes in laws, policies, and institutional practices. At the same time, the EU's role as a key driver of democratic progress deserves recognition, and its continued commitment to gender equality remains essential in shaping North Macedonia's path toward EU membership.

Recommendations:

For the next Enlargement Package, and specifically for the country report on North Macedonia's progress, we would recommend that the EU:

- **Expand gender mainstreaming across different Chapters and Clusters** and ensure that gender perspectives are integrated beyond the traditional Chapters 23 and 19, particularly in areas such as the green agenda, energy, transportation, and agriculture.
- **Increase the number and scope of gender-related recommendations**, focusing on tangible legislative, policy and institutional reforms, and ensure they are consistently tracked in future reports.
- Recommend to national authorities to **amend the Electoral Code to introduce gender quotas where they are not yet in place to ensure compliance with the 50-50 gender balance commitment** included in the national Gender Equality Strategy.

- Encourage political parties to adopt measures to **ensure and promote women's participation in the electoral process and in decision-making roles**.
- Urge national authorities to **produce and regularly update gender-disaggregated data and gender statistics**, preferably as a targeted recommendation in Chapter 18.
- Continue recommending to national authorities to **urgently finalize and adopt the Law on Gender Equality, Law on Labour Relations, and the Law on Prevention and Protection from Harassment at Work**, ensuring their harmonization with international standards and the EU acquis.
- Recommend **integrating the issue of unpaid care work into labour and social policy discussions and policies**, emphasizing its impact on women's labour market participation.
- **Ensure that reforms and legislative amendments do not weaken existing gender equality standards or anti-discrimination protections**, such as the removal of gender-related terminology observed in recent amendments to education laws and administrative protocols. Such developments raise concerns regarding alignment with EU legal standards, national anti-discrimination legislation, and North Macedonia's commitments under international human rights frameworks, and should be addressed to prevent further democratic backsliding. Recommend a **structured and systemic consultation process with civil society** to ensure their active participation in the EU integration process.
- **Institutionalise the role of WCSOs in NPAA and Growth Plan monitoring**. The European Commission should require the Government to establish **formal, structured mechanisms** for the meaningful participation of women's civil society organisations (WCSOs) in the design, monitoring, and reporting of the NPAA, the Growth Plan, and the Reform Agenda.
- **Link NPAA implementation reporting to gender-responsive monitoring frameworks**. The Commission should require that future NPAA monitoring reports systematically integrate **gender-sensitive indicators**, sex-disaggregated data, and civil society evidence, in line with **GAP III and IPA III cross-cutting priorities**. Without such requirements, implementation remains technocratic and detached from the lived impacts of reforms on women and marginalised groups.
- **Condition progress assessments on documented civil society engagement and follow-up**. In line with the Stabilisation and Association Agreement, the Commission should assess progress not only on policy alignment but also on the **quality of participatory governance**, including traceable engagement with WCSOs and documented responses to their inputs.
- **All legal reforms should be conducted through inclusive public debate**, grounded in international human rights standards, and **ensure meaningful engagement of diverse civil society actors**, particularly women's rights organizations and groups, LGBTQI+ and local CSOs, at every stage of the process.
- Encourage **continuous monitoring and continuous reporting on the influence of the anti-gender groups** and **recommend actionable measures to counter the threats** to human rights activists, their impact on democracy and gender equality progress.