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ANALYSIS OF THE POLITICAL PARTIES ELECTION PROGRAMMES FOR THE LOCAL ELECTIONS 2025

FEBRUARY, 2026





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February 2026

Published by: Reactor – Research in Action

Publisher: Tanja Ivanova

Free/non-commercial copy

This research was financed by the European Union within the project LOCAL VOICES FOR DEMOCRACY: POWER, INFLUENCE AND EQUALITY IN PRACTICE CONDUCTED BY Reactor- Research in Action. This project is a subgrant realized as part of the EU Support to the Civil Society Resource Center – Phase 2 financed by the European Union. The content of this document is a sole responsibility of the realizer of this project and does not necessarily reflect the views of the European Union and the Civil Society Resource Center

Contents

Methodology	6
The Selection of the Political Parties and their Election Programmes	6
Analysis of the Election Programmes by Political Party	7
VMRO-DPMNE	7
<i>Gender-based violence and safety on a local level</i>	7
<i>Care, social services and local social infrastructure</i>	7
<i>Economic equality and local economic development</i>	7
<i>Urbanism, transport and public space from a gender perspective</i>	8
<i>Women’s participation in local decision-making and governance</i>	8
<i>Gender responsive budgeting and institutional mechanisms</i>	8
SDSM	8
<i>Gender-based violence and safety on a local level</i>	8
<i>Care, social services and local social infrastructure</i>	8
<i>Economic equality and local economic development</i>	9
<i>Urbanism, transport and public space from a gender perspective</i>	9
<i>Women’s participation in local decision-making and governance</i>	9
<i>Gender responsive budgeting and institutional mechanisms</i>	9
VLEN	9
<i>Gender-based violence and safety on a local level</i>	9
<i>Care, social services and local social infrastructure</i>	10
<i>Economic equality and local economic development</i>	10
<i>Urbanism, transport and public space</i>	10
<i>Women’s participation in local decision-making and governance</i>	10
<i>Gender responsive budgeting and institutional mechanisms</i>	11
NAI	11
<i>Gender-based violence and safety on a local level</i>	11
<i>Care, social services and local social infrastructure</i>	11
<i>Economic equality and local economic development</i>	11
<i>Women’s participation in local decision-making and governance</i>	12
<i>Gender responsive budgeting and institutional mechanisms</i>	12
Levica	12

<i>Gender-based violence and safety on a local level</i>	12
<i>Care, social services and local social infrastructure</i>	13
<i>Economic equality and local economic development</i>	13
<i>Urbanism, transport and public space from a gender perspective</i>	13
<i>Women’s participation in local decision-making and governance</i>	13
<i>Gender responsive budgeting and institutional mechanisms</i>	14
COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS FROM A GENDER PERSPECTIVE BY AREA	14
Gender-Based Violence and Safety on a Local Level	14
Care, social services and local social infrastructure	14
Economic equality and local economic development	14
Urbanism, transport and public space	15
Women’s participation in local decision-making and governance	15
Gender responsive budgeting and institutional mechanisms	15
Trends in the Local Election Programmes from a Gender Perspective	15
The Risks that Arise from the Dominant Trends	16
Structural Gaps in the Election Programmes from a Gender Perspective	16
Conclusions	17
Main Findings	17
Overall Assessment of the Election Programmes	18
Recommendations to the Political Parties	18
Recommendations to the Central Government	19
Recommendations to the Local Government	19
Recommendations for the Civil Society Organizations	19
Recommendations for the Media	20
Recommendations for the (Women) Politicians and Activists	20

1. INTRODUCTION AND THE GOAL OF THE ANALYSIS

Local elections are a key democratic mechanism by which citizens exert direct influence on the administration of the community in which they live. They determine the composition of the local government, the mayor and the municipal councils whose authority is in areas that have a direct effect on people's daily life including urban planning, local economic development, social welfare, as well as child protection, education, culture, sport, environment, communal services and public safety.

In this context, the local election programmes are not only political declarations but key documents that reflect the priorities, values and vision of the political parties regarding the development of the local community. They provide the foundation for the future policies, allocation of the budgetary funds and institutional practices during their term of office.

Gender equality is a fundamental democratic value and prerequisite for effective, transparent and accountable governance. It entails equal rights, opportunities and access to resources for both women and men, as well as recognition and addressing of the structural barriers that limit certain groups and prevent them from full participation in the public and economic life.

On a local level, gender equality has a distinct developmental dimension. Municipal policies and services have a different impact on women and men owing to their different roles, responsibilities and social positions. Women, for instance, are more often beneficiaries of the care services, public transport and social welfare, while at the same time bear the unproportionally greater burden of unpaid care.¹ Failure to take into consideration these differences can lead the political parties to adoption of policies that deepen inequality, albeit unintentionally.

To integrate the gender perspective in the local election programmes would lead to a shift from declarative support towards concrete and measurable actions supported by the municipal budget. This involves gender responsive planning, analysis of the impact of the policies on different groups, and securing mechanisms for equal participation of women in the local decision-making. Hence, gender equality is not a 'sectoral' or 'social' issue but a horizontal principle that improves the quality and effects of local governance in general.

In this analysis, as an integrated gender perspective we acknowledge explicit programme commitments that recognize the gender inequalities and translate them into concrete, targeted measures with stipulated mechanisms for implementation, institutional accountability and, where possible, budgeting and indicators. Universal measures, formulated 'for all citizens' with no gender analysis, targeting or monitoring of the effects are not perceived as integrated gender perspective, even when they have secondary positive gender effect.

Gender equality in the local policies and election programmes is directly regulated by the national and international commitments of the republic of North Macedonia. On an international level, the state is a signatory of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW),² which obligates all state and local institutions to undertake active measures to improve gender equality in all areas of public life. Additionally, the Istanbul Convention³ lays emphasis on the role of the local government in the prevention and responding to gender-based violence, through local services and safe public spaces in particular.

With the Agenda 2030⁴ that the state has pledged itself to implement its Sustainable Development Goals, while its Goal 5, concerning gender equality, has direct implications on the local planning, budgeting and monitoring of policies. Furthermore, the process of EU accession and full compliance with the European legislation and policies for equal opportunities emphasizes the necessity for systematic integration of gender perspective on local level as well.

On a national level, the constitutional guarantees of equality,⁵ the Strategy for Gender Equality 2022-2027,⁶ and the Law on Equality of Women and Men regulate the obligations of the municipalities to plan and implement gender

¹ Women and Men in North Macedonia, State Statistical Office, 2025: https://www.start.mk/media/3dvc2npg/mk_zenite-i-mazite-2025.pdf

² Convention of the UN and Council of Europe on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women <https://www.un.org/womenwatch/cedaw/>

³ Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence (Istanbul Convention) <https://www.coe.int/web/istanbul-convention/about-the-convention>

⁴ 2030 Agenda of the UN: <https://sdgs.un.org/2030agenda>

⁵ The Constitution of the Republic of North Macedonia <https://www.sobranie.mk/ustav-na-rsm.nspk>

⁶ Strategy for Gender Equality of the Republic of North Macedonia <https://cms.mtsp.gov.mk>

responsive policies. In this context, the programmes of the political parties for the local elections are an important instrument for evaluation of their compliance with the existing legislative and strategic framework and the international commitments of the state.

2. METHODOLOGY AND SELECTION OF THE POLITICAL PARTIES AND ELECTION PROGRAMMES

Methodology

This analysis is completed on the basis of a qualitative content analysis of the election programmes of the political parties and coalitions that participated in the local elections in 2025. The methodology aims at a systematic identification, classification and evaluation of the commitments in the programmes concerning the gender equality and equal opportunities on a local level.

Within the analysis an analytic framework is applied with criteria and thematic areas determined in advance in order to allow for comparability among the programmes and evaluation of the degree of integration of the gender perspective. The analysis focuses on:

- the presence and visibility of gender equality in the programme documents,
- the quality and specificity of the proposed measures,
- the scope of the key local policies and services with a gender dimension,
- the existence of mechanisms for implementation, budgeting and accountability.

The approach relies on the officially accessible election programmes⁷ of the political parties and did not analyze their implementation or the individual profiles of the candidates. The content analysis is complemented with a comparative approach in order to identify shared trends, risks and structural gaps in the approaches to gender equality in the programmes of the political parties.

The analysis does not evaluate the institutional capacity, political will and feasibility of the proposed measures, nor their future implementation on a local level. The findings apply to the discourses, priorities and proposed policies as articulated in the election programmes.

The Selection of the Political Parties and their Election Programmes

Owing to the large number of political parties and coalitions that participated in the local elections 2025, as well as owing to the complexity of their election programmes, the analysis is limited to (5) political parties and coalitions (VMRO-DPMNE, SDSM, VLEN, NAI and Levica)

These parties and coalitions are selected on the basis of the following criteria:

- their political relevance and representation on both national and local level,
- their continuous performance in the previous election cycles,
- their roles as the largest representatives of the two major ethnic communities in the state,
- their potential to form a local government and influence the creation and implementation of local policies.

This approach enables the analysis to cover the dominant political offers and narratives regarding gender equality without losing its analytical depth, which might have been the case if too many political subjects had been involved. At the same time, this selection provides the findings with ethnic and political relevance, bearing in mind that the local governance and public policies are created in a context of a multi-ethnic society.

⁷ The subject of our analysis are 77 programmes of the candidates of VMRO-DPMNE and its coalition, 77 programmes of the candidates of SDSM and its coalition, 19 programmes of the candidates of Levica, 9 programmes of the candidates of the VLEN coalition, and 4 programmes of the candidates of the NAI coalition.

The analysis reviews the received election programmes of the political parties and coalition for the Local Elections 2025, that is, the election commitments of the mayoral candidates regarding the local government.

3. ANALYSIS OF THE ELECTION PROGRAMMES

Analysis of the Election Programmes by Political Party

VMRO-DPMNE

Gender-based violence and safety on a local level

In all analyzed programmes safety is defined as a question of public order, communal discipline and infrastructural arrangement. The typical measures include improvement of the street lighting, reconstruction of the streets, video-surveillance and increased effectivity of the communal services. This approach is evident in both the large urban municipalities like Skopje (Centar, Aerodrom, Karpoš, Čair) and smaller environments such as Rosoman, Konče, Krivogaštani or Čaška.

Although these measures can influence the feeling of safety indirectly,⁸ gender-based violence is not recognized as a specific local safety risk. Even in the larger urban municipalities with pronounced social and safety challenges, like Štip, Tetovo, Kumanovo or Bitola, the programmes do not provide local mechanisms for prevention, victim support or inter-sector coordination. In rural and tourism-oriented municipalities (Dojran, Demir Kapija, Pehčevo) safety remains infrastructurally defined with no recognition of the risks of violence in the home or in the public spaces.

Care, social services and local social infrastructure

Social infrastructure is one of the most elaborate sections of the programmes. In the urban municipalities like Skopje, Strumica, Prilep and Ohrid, the emphasis is on the expansion of the capacities of the kindergartens, schools and medical services, while in the rural areas such as Debrca, Dolneni, Vasilevo, or Mogila, the emphasis is on the improved access to basic services. The improvements to the access to health, educational and social services contribute directly to people's everyday life by making it easier and by enabling greater participation in the public and economic life.

And yet, care is perceived exclusively as a service, with no gender analysis. This failure to recognize care as a gender and economic issue is problematic since accessible and good quality care services are a key prerequisite for improved participation of women in the labor market and for reduction of the structural economic inequality between women and men. In none of the programmes, including the programmes for the municipalities with a high rate of female labor market inactivity, such as Planica, Centar Župa or Šuto Orizari, the unpaid care labor is not recognized as a structural problem. No activities are planned for provision of daycare, support for carers, or services in the community that would enable economic inclusion of women.

Economic equality and local economic development

Economic development is the central axis of the programmes in all municipalities. In the industrial and logistic centers, such as Ilinden, Veles and Kumanovo, the emphasis is on business-zones and investments, while in the agricultural municipalities, such as Bosilovo, Novaci, Karbinci and Rosoman, the focus is on the support for primary production. The tourist destination municipalities, such as Ohrid, Struga, Gevgelija and Dojran, lay emphasis on the development of tourism and services.

Despite this versatility, the economic policy remains gender-neutral. Not in one of these municipalities targeted measures have been specified for female entrepreneurship, better access to finances for women, or for overcoming

⁸ Reactor – Research in Action, *Gender-based Violence against Women and Girls in Public Places in Skopje and Tetovo* (Skopje: Reactor, 2025), approached on 20. 01. 20125, <https://reactor.org.mk/publication-all/rodovobaziranonasilstvo>

of the employment gender gap. Women are taken for granted as part of the 'work force' with no analysis of their specific barriers, especially in the rural and multiethnic environments.

Urbanism, transport and public space from a gender perspective

Infrastructure and urban planning projects are among the most elaborate parts of the programmes, especially in the urban municipalities, such as Centar, Karpoš, Aerodrom, Bitola and Štip. Reconstruction of streets, parks, embankments and public areas are among the suggested improvements.

And still, the gender perspective is almost completely absent in the planning. Even in the densely populated urban areas with complex models of mobility, such as Čair, Saraj or Šuto Orizari, the safety of pedestrian routes, the access for parents with children, or the lighting of the public space are not analyzed. In the rural municipalities the public space is addressed only with a view to its purpose with no analysis of the day-to-day mobility of women.

Women's participation in local decision-making and governance

Civic participation is assumed as a general principle in all programmes, but women are not recognized as political subjects with structural barriers to their participation. This is particularly visible in the larger municipalities with developed institutional capacities, such as Skopje, Strumica, Prilep and Tetovo, where measures in support of female leadership are to be expected, but they are missing.

In rural and smaller municipalities, women's participation is reduced to public debates with no mechanisms that would enable more substantial inclusion of women and especially women from the marginalized communities.

Gender responsive budgeting and institutional mechanisms

Although transparency and accountability are referred to in the programmes time and again, gender responsive budgeting is not recognized as a tool of local government. This is consistent throughout the larger municipalities with significant budgets, such as Skopje, Bitola and Kumanovo, but also in the smaller municipalities with limited resources.

No gender analyses of the budgets and impact indicators, or a clear role for the committees for equal opportunities are specified in the fiscal planning. Thus, the gender perspective remains left out of the key decisions for allocation of the public resources.

SDSM

Gender-based violence and safety on a local level

The safety issue can be found in almost all local programmes, but it is most commonly subsumed under the general framework of public order, traffic safety and urban organization. In the municipalities of Tetovo, Strumica, Veles and Vinica safety is associated with street lighting, organized public spaces and regulated traffic, while in the smaller rural environments of Zelenikovo, Želino, or Zrnovci the emphasis is on the basic communal and institutional safety.

This approach contributes towards a general feeling of safety, but it does not address the specific unsafety that women have to face. Gender-based violence, especially domestic and partners' violence, as well as harassment in public spaces, are not explicit local priority, either in the large urban centers, such as Skopje, Kumanovo and Prilep, or in the smaller municipalities, such as Tearce or Studeničani. No commitment to local protocols, counselling centers, preventive programs or intersectoral cooperation can be found in any of the programmes, which implies that safety is considered infrastructurally first and foremost, not as a gender and social issue.

Care, social services and local social infrastructure

Care and social services belong to the strongest and most elaborate sections of the programmes. In the municipalities of Strumica, Veles, Kisela Voda, Probištip and Vinica the emphasis is on the investments in kindergartens, schools, healthcare and social services, as well as in care for old persons and persons at social risk.

In the programmes for the rural municipalities of Novaci, Mogila, Vasilevo and Zrnovci, for instance, social infrastructure is presented as the necessary foundation for a dignified life and survival of the community.

Although these policies have a strong gender impact, most commonly they are framed as gender-neutral. It is not recognized that the burden of unpaid care mainly falls upon women, or that the single mothers or women from the rural areas face specific barriers in their access to services. Care is perceived as a social or familial obligation, and only rarely as a structural gender and economic issue.

Economic equality and local economic development

Economic development is the core topic in all programmes and support is offered to local businesses, agriculture and tourism. In Kavadarci, Rosoman and Valandovo, agriculture is perceived as the leading economic sector, while in Strumica, Ohrid and Struga the emphasis is on the role of services and tourism. In the larger urban municipalities of Skopje, Tetovo and Kumanovo the focus is on the local economy and creation of new jobs.

Still, in none of these contexts economic equality is viewed from a gender perspective. Women are not recognized as a separate economic group with a limited access to resources, capital and formal employment and no measures are proposed in support of female entrepreneurship or economic empowerment. Economic development is presented as a universal solution with no analysis to determine which parties actually benefit from it.

Urbanism, transport and public space from a gender perspective

Urbanism, transport and public space are important topics, especially in the larger municipalities, such as Skopje, Tetovo, Veles and Štip, where the emphasis is on the necessity for a human urban development, better public transport and limitation and control over the chaotic construction activities.

In all these cases, however, there is no gender perspective either. There is no analysis of women's safety, their day-to-day models of movement relative to their caring for children and older persons, nor is access approached as a gender issue. Urban planning remains a technical domain with no social and gender sensitive dimension.

Women's participation in local decision-making and governance

The local election programmes lay emphasis on the transparency, accountability and civic participation in local governance, as is evident in Veles, Strumica, Kumanovo and Radoviš. Still, women are not recognized explicitly as political actors with specific barriers.

Despite the fact that in many municipalities, including Karpoš, Centar and Prilep, women are fairly visible in the municipality councilors lists, this presence is not complemented with systemic measures in the programmes and empowerment of female leadership, or with protection from political violence, or support for their continuous participation in the decision-making processes.

Gender responsive budgeting and institutional mechanisms

One of the most frequently emphasized values in the programmes is the transparent and responsible managing of the public resources, as is the case in Štip, Rankovce, Skopje, and Šuto Orizari. And yet, there is no gender responsive budgeting, either as a concept or as a practice.

Budgets are perceived as gender-neutral financial documents with no gender analysis, indicators, or institutional mechanisms that would allow for monitoring of their impact on women and men. Thus, the gender effects of the local policies remain invisible.

VLEN

Gender-based violence and safety on a local level

In the programmes of VLEN gender-based violence as a problem is rarely explicitly identified. The question of safety is most commonly viewed through the broader lens of public order, emergency services, firefighting protection and

general safety in the community. In several programmes, especially in Tetovo, a support for women and children, victims of violence, is mentioned, as a preventive activity in the schools and in the community, which is an important, but isolated step.

Still, none of the programmes includes a systemic approach to gender-based violence, there are no local procedure protocols and no clearly defined roles for the municipality in the processes of prevention and protection, or cooperation with the social welfare centers, healthcare institutions and civil society organizations. No budgetary funds are allocated for such measures. This absence and explicit failure to recognize gender-based violence as a special form of structural inequality implies that this subject has not been integrated as a priority in the local policies of VLEN.

Care, social services and local social infrastructure

In the area of social welfare and public services, VLEN's programmes exhibit a significantly stronger content and clearer vision. Investments in the healthcare infrastructure are planned in many municipalities in order to broaden primary healthcare, improve access to gynecological and pediatric services, 24/7 emergency medical services, as well as in the educational infrastructure, including construction of new kindergartens, schools and improvement of the conditions in the existing institutions.

Although these policies have a strong gender impact, they are most frequently articulated as gender-neutral. Care services could be better articulated as tools for gender equality and no development of specific local services is specified (day centers, mobile care, support for single parents and carers).

Economic equality and local economic development

The programmes of the VLEN coalition rely strongly on the economic development based on infrastructure, investments and support for the local economy, agriculture, tourism and small businesses. Farmer subsidies are planned in many municipalities, as well as improvements to the irrigation systems, support for the crafts and small family businesses and development of industrial and ecological zones.

Nevertheless, economic equality is perceived as a universal category with no gender differentiation. Women are not recognized as a separate economic group with specific barriers: difficult access to capital, property, markets, and training. There are no targeted measures for female entrepreneurship, economic empowerment of rural women and integration of the gender perspective in the local economic policies. Consequently, although the local economic development is clearly prioritized, its potential to reduce gender economic inequalities remains underutilized.

Urbanism, transport and public space

One of the best developed areas in the programmes of the VLEN coalition is that of urbanism and public infrastructure. In the programmes for Čair, Struga, Saraj, Kumanovo and Tetovo detailed measures are elaborated regarding traffic, parking, pedestrian zones, bicycle paths, public transport, green areas and planning of public spaces.

These measures are plentiful and technically elaborate, but the gender perspective is completely absent. The safety, access and availability of public space to women, persons with disabilities, parents with young children and older persons are not problematized as separate issues. Urban planning remains gender-neutral instead of becoming gender sensitive although this area offers a significant potential for improvement of the day-to-day safety and mobility of women.

Women's participation in local decision-making and governance

The programmes of the VLEN coalition lay great emphasis on transparency, open municipality and civic participation through digital platforms, surveys, public consultations and empowerment of the local communities. These mechanisms are a positive step towards a more inclusive local government.

Still, women's participation is not recognized as a specific political challenge. No measures are specified for their empowerment in local decision-making, no specialized forums, advisory bodies or programs for development of

female leadership. To presume that these general participation mechanisms would lead to equal participation of women is to ignore the existence of structural and cultural barriers that limit their influence in reality.

Gender responsive budgeting and institutional mechanisms

Gender responsive budgeting is not explicitly cited in any of the election programmes of VLEN, and although in many municipalities measures such as transparency, digitalization and public monitoring of budget expenditure are promised, they do not start from any gender analysis of the allocation of funds and their effect on both women and men.

This suggests that gender equality has not been incorporated as a horizontal principle into their local planning and budgeting.

NAI

Gender-based violence and safety on a local level

In the programmes of the NAI coalition there are elements pertaining to public safety, lighting of public spaces, planning of pedestrian zones and enhanced traffic safety that can have an indirect positive influence on women's feeling of safety, especially in urban areas. Still, the question of gender-based violence is not explicitly identified as a separate policy or priority. In their programme for Gostivar they lay great emphasis on the public lighting, traffic regulation and redesigning of public spaces, and all this can contribute indirectly towards reduction of the risks of violence in the public space. And yet, there is no clear interconnection with policies for prevention and responding to gender-based violence, such as local protocols, cooperation with social welfare centers and civil society organizations or specialized services for victims.

In conclusion, we can say that safety is considered gender-neutrally, with no recognition of the specific risks and experiences of women and girls.

Care, social services and local social infrastructure

In this area, the programmes demonstrate a more developed and more specific approach, especially in childcare, education and support for vulnerable groups. In the Lipkovo programme concrete measures are listed concerning the construction and reconstruction of kindergartens and support for children with special needs, which include transport and other expenses. These measures have a direct gender dimension as they facilitate the unpaid care that most commonly is women's responsibility, but in the programmes of the NAI coalition they are presented as gender-neutral.

In the programme for Struga, the social services are part of the concept of "the municipality as an institution for all citizens" where the emphasis is on more effective social services and protection of the marginalized groups. Still, here too, there is no explicit recognition of women as a specific target group, or an analysis of the gender inequalities in the access to services.

Generally speaking, care is present as a policy, but with no gender analysis and with no clear correlation with the concept of economic and social autonomy of women.

Economic equality and local economic development

Economic development is among the central topics in all programmes, with a strong focus on the local business, industrial zones, facilitation of the administrative procedures and attracting investment. In the programme for Gostivar a creation of economic eco-system is promoted, which is to be achieved through support for the small and medium enterprises, local producers and tourism.

Still, the way these measures are formulated is blind to gender. There is no recognition of the structural barriers that women have to face in the labor market, where they receive unequal pay, have limited access to capital, and are forced to bear the double burden of paid and unpaid work. No female entrepreneurs are mentioned or targeted measures for their support.

Therefore, although the programme's vision for economic development is ambitious, gender equality is not integrated as a principle or a goal in this local economic development.

This is one of the most elaborate sections of the programmes, especially in the programme for Gostivar, where the proposed measures for urban development, green areas, pedestrian zones, public parks and public transport are described in detail. All these interventions have a significant potential for a positive gender impact, because on average, women use public transport and public spaces more than men in their day-to-day care-related activities.

This potential aside, the gender perspective is not explicitly included in the planning. No participation of women in the urban planning is brought up, and no analysis of the different needs of women, children, older persons and persons with disabilities is put forward in the design of the space.

The programmes focus on the 'citizens' as a homogenous category, which is an opportunity missed to introduce gender responsive urbanism.

Women's participation in local decision-making and governance

In the section dedicated to local democracy, transparency and accountability, the programmes promote the concept of open municipality, participative mechanisms and civic participation. In the programme for Struga a clear emphasis is laid on the participative budgeting and citizens' inclusion in the decision-making processes.

Nonetheless, women are not recognized as a separate group with different barriers that prevent their participation. No measures are specified toward increasing women's participation in the councils, committees or public consultations, or support for the female leadership on a local level.

The absence of gender sensitive measures in this section implies that this participation is perceived only as a formality and not as an essential element seen from the equal opportunity perspective.

Gender responsive budgeting and institutional mechanisms

Although the programmes of the NAI coalition include elements of transparent, participative and project budgeting, the concept of gender responsive budgeting is not cited and consequently, no institutional mechanisms for its implementation are proposed.

This is a significant gap, bearing in mind that the local level is crucial for the implementation of gender sensitive policies.

Levica

Gender-based violence and safety on a local level

In the programmes of the political party Levica, the issue of gender-based violence is not articulated as a separate policy, but in most municipalities, it appears indirectly, in the measures for public safety, urban development and social welfare.

The clearest and explicit approach can be noted in the municipality of Kisela Voda, where a shelter center for victims of domestic violence is proposed, as well as support for single parents. This makes Kisela Voda an exception among the local election programmes of Levica as the violence against women is not specified as such in the programmes for the other municipalities.

In the City of Skopje, Centar, Tetovo, Struga and other urban municipalities, safety is covered in the planning of public space, better lighting, video surveillance, traffic and public transport regulation. These measures have a clear positive effect on women's safety, especially at night, but they are not grounded in gender analyses, or in any way linked with the prevention or institutional response to gender-based violence.

There are no local protocols either for cooperation with the social welfare centers, healthcare institutions and police and no preventive programs and campaigns aimed at changing the societal norms. As a result, although safety is an important subject, it is not recognized as a gender issue, but only as a general urban and social function.

Care, social services and local social infrastructure

Social policy and care infrastructure are the best developed and most consistent section in the programmes of the political party Levica throughout all municipalities. This focus has a significant impact on gender equality, although the gender dimension is not explicitly articulated.

In the City of Skopje, the programme proposes construction and expansion of the social housing, public parks, botanical gardens, youth and pensioners' clubs, as well as public toilets and accessible infrastructure. Although these measures lessen the burden of unpaid care directly, as labor typical mainly for women, they are not sufficiently elaborated as regards their beneficiaries, conditions, etc.

In Struga and Tetovo programmes the social housing, old people's homes and public services are all viewed as part of the concept of social justice and equal access to resources. In the smaller and rural municipalities, such as Makedonski Brod, Berovo and Pehčevo, the emphasis is on the basic social services, local cohesion and access to the public institutions, which is of great importance for the women in rural areas.

Although the effects of these policies are clearly gender relevant, there is no analysis that would show which groups of women use these services, under what conditions, and whether the conditions themselves are designed in a manner that reduces the inequality in the allocation of care. Therefore, we can conclude that the social policy of Levica is strong, but gender-unaware.

Economic equality and local economic development

Levica sees the local economic development in all municipalities as a public and social process, not as a market-oriented activity. This approach has the potential to improve the economic status of women, but yet again, there is no clear gender targeting.

In Struga, Tetovo, Gevgelija, Kočani, Makedonski Brod and Berovo, this economic development is to be achieved through support for small family businesses, crafts, agriculture, tourism and local production. In Centar and Skopje, public markets, fairs and energy projects are proposed as means for creating new economic opportunities.

Still, women are not recognized as a separate target group in their economic measures. There is no mention of policies for support of female entrepreneurs, access to finances, or measures for reduction of the gender gap in pay or in the informal economy. As a result, their economic policy is socially inclusive, but unstructured with respect to gender.

Urbanism, transport and public space from a gender perspective

Urbanism and public space are among the segments that are most elaborate, especially in the programmes for the City of Skopje and the Skopje municipalities Centar, Gjorče Petrov and Aerodrom. The programmes are marked by strong resistance to the 'chaotic urbanization' and the focus is on the green areas, public transport and accessibility.

In Tetovo and Struga, they propose reconstruction of the streets, improvement of the signalization and public transport, which is of particular importance for the safe day-to-day mobility of women, children and old persons.

Although these measures in their essence conform with the principle of gender sensitive urbanism, they are not a product of an analysis of the different needs of women and men. No 'care routes' are recognized or any specific models of women's usage of space. Their urbanism is therefore functional, but gender blind.

Women's participation in local decision-making and governance

The programmes of Levica lay a strong emphasis on direct democracy, achieved through local communities, public gatherings, referenda, open days and digital tools. This approach can be found in the programmes for Skopje, Centar, Struga, Tetovo and for some smaller municipalities.

Still, this participation is conceived as gender-neutral, with no recognition of the structural barriers that women have to face when entering local politics. There are no specific measures for empowerment of women councilors, or women's forums and mechanisms for balanced participation.

An exception to this context is Tetovo, where equal gender representation in the public sector employment is demanded, but this is not extended to encompass political decision-making.

Gender responsive budgeting and institutional mechanisms

In all analyzed municipalities, Levica proposes measures for improved transparency of the budgets, quarterly reports and public expenditure reviews. This provides a good basis for accountability.

Nevertheless, there is no gender responsive budgeting, either in concept or in practice. There are no gender indicators, local coordinators for gender equality, or institutional mechanisms that would provide systemic inclusion of the gender perspective in the planning or spending of the budgets.

COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS FROM A GENDER PERSPECTIVE BY AREA

Gender-Based Violence and Safety on a Local Level

In all analyzed election programmes safety is primarily approached as a technical and infrastructural issue, not as an issue of unequal exposure to risk. In the programmes of SDSM, VMRO-DPMNE, NAI and Levica, safety is associated with street lighting, traffic regulation, communal order and video surveillance, as evident in the programmes for the urban municipalities of Centar, Aerodrom, Gostivar and Štip.

Gender-based violence is almost completely non-existent in the programmes as an explicit local policy. An exception is Levica, where their programme for Kisela Voda includes a shelter-center for victims of domestic violence, which is something that is not often seen in local election programmes. VLEN, in its programme for Tetovo, talks about support for women and children, victims of violence, but with no systemic approach, budget framework or local protocols.

On the whole, safety is approached in a gender-neutral manner and the municipalities are not recognized as active actors in the prevention, early intervention and support for the victims.

Care, social services and local social infrastructure

This is the strongest and most consistent section in all party programmes. The focus in the programmes of SDSM and VMRO-DPMNE is on kindergartens, schools, healthcare institutions and social services, both in large urban municipalities (Skopje, Strumica, Bitola) and in rural areas (Dolneni, Vasilevo, Debrca).

In the programme of the political party Levica the social infrastructure is more specifically developed, with measures for social housing, public services and protection for the vulnerable categories in Skopje, Centar, Struga, and Tetovo. NAI and VLEN also plan extensive investments in educational and healthcare services.

Nonetheless, all parties approach care as service and not as a structural gender issue. Unpaid care labor, the status of single mothers and the specific barriers for women in rural and marginalized communities are not systemically analyzed.

Economic equality and local economic development

All parties have economic development as a central axis of their programmes, but it is almost universally gender blind. VMRO-DPMNE and SDSM focus on investments, business-zones and support for the local economy in municipalities like Ilinden, Veles, Kumanovo, Ohrid and Gevgelija, with no gender differentiation.

Levica and NAI perceive the local economic development as a public and social process (agriculture, crafts, local production) especially in Struga, Tetovo, Berovo and Makedonski Brod, but here too women are not recognized as a separate economic group. In the programme of VLEN, the economic measures are focused on infrastructure and subsidies with no targeted measures for female entrepreneurship or economic empowerment of rural women.

As a result, the local economic development remains gender-neutral, with a limited potential for reduction of the existing economic inequalities between women and men.

Urbanism, transport and public space

Urbanism and infrastructure are among the most elaborate segments in the election programmes, especially in those of VMRO-DPMNE, Levica and VLEN (in the municipalities of Centar, Karpoš, Čair, Tetovo, Struga and Kumanovo).

However, the gender perspective is almost completely absent. The safety of the pedestrian routes, or 'care routes', the access for the parents with children or the various models for use of public space are not analyzed. Urbanism remains technical and functional, instead of being gender sensitive, in all party programmes with no exception.

Women's participation in local decision-making and governance

All political parties lay great emphasis on transparency, the concept of open municipality and civic participation. Levica and NAI in particular promote direct democracy and participative mechanisms, while SDSM, VMRO-DPMNE and VLEN talk about accountability and consultations.

Still, women are not recognized as political actors with specific barriers. There are no programs for female leadership, local women's forums or measures for balanced participation, not even in the municipalities with developed institutional capacities like Skopje, Strumica or Prilep.

Gender responsive budgeting and institutional mechanisms

There is no mention of gender responsive budgeting in any of the programmes. Although all political parties talk about transparency and accountability, the budgets are perceived as technical instruments, with no gender analysis, indicators or institutional mechanisms to monitor impact.

4. TRENDS, RISKS AND STRUCTURAL GAPS IN THE ELECTION PROGRAMMES

Trends in the Local Election Programmes from a Gender Perspective

The analysis of the local election programmes suggests a strong and consistent trend toward the universalist approach to public policies in which gender equality is perceived as an automatic outcome of measures aimed at 'all citizens'. Instead of being clearly articulated as a political goal, the gender perspective is incorporated only implicitly, in social, infrastructural and economic policies of a general character. This trend is evident among all analyzed political subjects regardless of their political orientation.

A technical and infrastructural discourse dominates in the programmes, especially in the areas of safety, urbanism, transport and public space. Safety is to be achieved through physical interventions, lighting, streets, traffic and surveillance, while the public space is perceived as a functional and engineering category. The social aspects of space utilization are rarely problematized, as are the various models of day-to-day mobility.

At the same time, we can observe a strong trend toward investing in social infrastructure and care services, especially in education, healthcare and social welfare. These areas are among the most elaborate segments in the programmes and are a key element of the local developmental visions. Although the gender dimension is not explicitly articulated, these policies have a clear gender relevant effect, given that it is mostly women that bear the care burden.

Economic development is another dominant axis in the programmes, perceived as a gender-neutral process. The focus is on investments, local businesses, agriculture, tourism and infrastructure and economy is presented as a technical and market sphere, separate from the social relations and inequalities. This approach neglects the actual situation in real life where the economic policies and local development measures have different effects on women and men, especially in the access to resources, employment, property and economic power.

In the segment dedicated to local democracy, all programmes exhibit the trend toward formal inclusivity, through transparency, digitalization and participative mechanisms. The civic participation is promoted as a value, but with no differentiation of the groups and their real powers of influence.

Finally, a common trend is the absence of gender responsive budgeting and systems for measuring of the gender influence. The budgets are perceived as a financial and administrative tool, unrelated to gender goals, indicators or accountability.

The Risks that Arise from the Dominant Trends

The main risk that arises from the universalist approach is the reproduction of the existing gender inequalities. When the designed policies are not founded upon the different starting positions of women and men, in general, they only solidify the existing power structures instead of changing them. Development becomes uneven and the benefits are not equally distributed.

The technical approach to safety and urbanism generates the risk to have the real experiences of not feeling safe remain invisible. Although the planned infrastructural alterations can improve the public space, with no gender analysis, they cannot guarantee that women will feel safer or will have equal access to the city, as regards their mobility at night and in the peripheries and rural areas in particular.

As far as care is concerned, the risk is that the social investments will remain compensatory instead of being transformative. Instead of leading to redistribution of unpaid labor and greater economic autonomy of women, they might solidify the existing division of roles, with women remaining the primary care givers. This happens when care services are developed as isolated social services without being accompanied with policies and public messages that promote division of care between women and men and without measures that link the access to care with increased and sustainable women's participation in the labor market.

The economic policies, perceived as gender-neutral, bear the risk of having women remain peripheral beneficiaries of the economic growth. Without targeted measures, access to capital and support for female entrepreneurship, this economic development can deepen the existing gaps in employment, income and property.

In local decision-making, formal inclusivity generates the risk of symbolic participation. Women can be formally present in the processes, but without a real opportunity to influence decision-making owing to time limitations, their care burden and informal power networks.

Finally, the absence of gender responsive budgeting and indicators generates the risk of having gender equality remain declarative and unmeasurable. With no clear tools for monitoring and accountability even the well-intentioned policies are not guaranteed to produce essential and sustainable results.

Structural Gaps in the Election Programmes from a Gender Perspective

In the programmes gender equality is not embedded in their vision for local development, or translated into concrete results, or demanding institutional responsibility. It remains a value or a principle that is not transformed into public policy. Consequently, the municipalities are not positioned as active actors in the reduction of gender inequalities, but as neutral administrators of services.

This is especially visible in the absence of functional institutional architecture for gender equality. Although the legal framework stipulates the establishment of equal opportunity committees and specifies some obligations for the local self-government, these mechanisms are mostly unrecognized in the programmes as policy makers, initiators of changes or coordinators of intersectoral approaches.

In this context, gender-based violence remains left out of the domain of local government. Although safety is a common subject in the programmes, it is reduced to infrastructural and communal interventions, with no recognition of violence against women as a specific, systemic and gender marked risk. There are no local protocols, budget solutions, partnerships with civil society organizations and there is no clearly defined role for the municipalities in the prevention, early intervention and support for victims. Violence is approached as a problem of other institutions and this creates a structural gap between women's needs and the local policies.

A similar gap is evident in the approach to care. Although social services, kindergartens, healthcare and education are among the most elaborate segments, care is perceived as a service function exclusively and not as an economic and gender issue. Unpaid care labor is not analyzed, its unequal distribution is not recognized and no policies are developed that would lead to its redistribution. Thus, the local programmes contribute to facilitation of care, but not to transformation of the relations of inequality behind it.

Economic development is another deep structural gap. Although it is the central axis of the programmes, economy is perceived as a gender-neutral space. Women are not recognized as economic subjects with specific barriers in their access to work, income, capital, property and markets. There are no measures for female entrepreneurship, economic empowerment of rural women and overcoming of the gender gap in employment. As a result, local economic policies have a limited capacity to contribute to a structural change and often reproduce the existing model of inequality.

The scope of the planned interventions in urbanism, transport and public space is significant, but the gender perspective is almost absent here too. Space is perceived as a technical and infrastructural category, with no analysis of the different manners in which different groups of women and men use the city, the ways they move, where they feel unsafe and what barriers they face in their everyday lives. This gap produces urban solutions that can be functional, but not inclusive or more just.

As far as the participation in local decision-making is concerned, the programmes demonstrate a clear tendency toward formal inclusivity, but without analyzing the power of barriers. Women are called to participate as 'citizens' with no recognition of the structural limitations that reduce their influence in reality: time, their care burden, the informal power networks and the exposure to political pressures. So, equal rules do not necessarily lead to equal opportunities and women's participation risks remaining symbolic.

Finally, all these gaps are deepening owing to the complete absence of gender responsive budgeting and systems for monitoring. With no gender indicators, gender divided data and clear budget obligations, gender equality is left out of the key decisions for distribution of the public resources. This makes gender equality unmeasurable, difficult to validate and easy to neglect in practice.

Taking all this into account, we can say that the structural gap in the local election programmes is not in the lack of development goals, but in the lack of systemic approach to gender equality. With no explicit political goal, institutional responsibility and fiscal support, the gender perspective remains on the margins of local government and the potential of the existing policies to create more just and more inclusive communities remains underutilized.

5. CONCLUSIONS, MAIN FINDINGS AND OVERALL ASSESSMENT

Conclusions

The analysis of the local election programmes shows that gender equality has not yet been integrated as a structural principle of local governance, but that it occurs in the programmes only indirectly and fragmentarily. Although the programmes include a significant number of measures with a potentially positive effect on the status of women, they are rarely grounded in gender analysis and even less are they combined with institutional responsibility and fiscal support.

The chief conclusion is that the gap between the ambitions of the programmes and their transformative capacity does not arise from some shortage of activities, but from the absence of a systemic approach. These local policies have a developmental character, but they lack a clearly articulated gender focus, which implies that their impact on the reduction of the gender inequalities remains limited and unpredictable.

Main Findings

The first and most consistent finding is the domination of the universalist approach to public policies. Gender equality is perceived as an automatic outcome of the policies 'for all' with no recognition of the different starting positions and structural barriers that women and men have to face. This approach limits the capacity of the local programmes to address the inequalities that are embedded deeply in the economic, social and cultural relations.

The second important finding is that safety, urbanism and transport are perceived predominantly as technical and infrastructural domains. Although all these topics are among the most elaborate segments of the programmes, they

are rarely analyzed from the perspective of women's day-to-day experience, which limits their potential to contribute towards greater safety and accessibility.

The social infrastructure and care services are identified as the strongest components of the programmes. Still, their gender impact remains implicit. Care is not recognized as an economic and gender issue, but as service, which generates the risk for these policies to facilitate, but not redistribute unpaid care.

Economic development emerges at the central, but gender-neutral axis of the programmes. Women are not recognized as a separate economic group with specific barriers and the local economic policies do not have targeted measures for their economic empowerment. At the same time, women's participation in local decision-making is adopted only formally with no analysis of the power, time and informal structures that limit their actual influence.

Overall Assessment of the Election Programmes

In general, the local election programmes can be appraised as development-oriented, but insufficiently gender-aware. They offer a solid basis for improvement of the infrastructure, services and local economy, but they rarely utilize the potential on the local level as a space for active promotion of gender equality.

The programmes demonstrate a high level of harmonization as regards the priorities, but a low level of differentiation as regards the gender needs. Although the political parties whose programmes were analyzed have different ideological orientation, this difference is not reflected in their programmes' priorities, or in the level of their sensitivity to topics that should arise from their ideology. This suggests a systemic pattern, not an isolated omission on the part of individual political subjects. As a result, gender equality remains on the margins of local planning instead of being embedded as a horizontal principle that shapes all policies.

6. IMPLICATIONS FOR THE LOCAL GOVERNANCE AND POLICIES

The implications of these findings are important for the future development of local governance. If gender perspective is not explicitly integrated in the planning, implementation and budgeting, the local policies will continue generating unequal results, even when their intentions are inclusive.

For the local governance this implies that the municipalities will fail in their roles as key actors in the improvement of gender equality. With no clear institutional responsibility, gender responsive budgeting and monitoring systems, gender equality will remain dependent on individual initiatives, instead of becoming part of the system.

On a policy level, the results indicate the necessity of a shift from declarative to operationalized gender equality. This should include explicit definition of the gender goals, introduction of indicators, regular use of gender divided data and empowerment of the local institutional mechanisms. Only by including this, the local election programmes will grow from development documents with gender relevant impact into strategies that contribute actively and measurably toward reduction of the gender differences.

7. RECOMMENDATIONS

The recommendations suggest that the next crucial step is not amendment of the policies but their transformation. Only through explicit integration of the gender perspective in the political programmes, institutions and budgets, local governance would be able to respond to the real needs of women and contribute toward more inclusive and sustainable development.

Recommendations to the Political Parties

Political parties should make a clear step forward from their implicit to an explicit approach to gender inequality in their election and programme documents. This entails a clear definition of gender equality as a political goal on a

local level, with concrete priorities, anticipated results and measures that address gender inequalities directly instead of relying on universal policies exclusively.

Political parties should incorporate gender analysis in the development of the local programmes systematically, especially in the areas of economic development, urbanism, safety and participation. This includes recognition of women as a specific target group with structural barriers, as well as development of targeted measures for their economic empowerment, safety and political participation.

Additionally, it is necessary for the political parties to strengthen their intraparty gender democracy through real support for their female candidates, clear mechanisms for prevention of gender-based political violence and securing resources for the women's forums of the political parties. Without this, gender equality will remain only a declarative and not a practiced value.

Recommendations to the Central Government

The central government has a key role in the creation of conditions for systemic integration of gender equality on a local level. It is necessary to reinforce the normative and political framework that connects gender equality with local governance, through clear directions, standards and obligations for the municipalities.

The institutionalization of the gender responsive budgeting is of particular importance as an obligatory practice in the processes of planning and expenditure of the public funds, with clear instructions, indicators and monitoring mechanisms. The central government should provide support for the local government through trainings, methodologies and financial encouragement so that the local authorities can implement gender analysis.

Another necessity is to establish a systemic link between the policies for prevention and responding to gender-based violence and the local level of government through clear definition of the role of the municipalities, as well as to provide stable funding and promote intersectoral cooperation among the institutions.

Recommendations to the Local Government

Local government should assume an active role in the improvement of gender equality as essential part of their mandate, not only as an additional or secondary topic. This entails incorporation of the gender perspective in all the stages of local planning, starting with a need analysis, proceeding with designing of policies, and finishing with implementation and evaluation.

Municipalities should establish new or reinforce the existing functional institutional mechanisms for gender equality, with clear responsibilities, resources and accountability. Gender responsive budgeting should become an integral part of the local budget processes, not a pilot or an isolated project.

In the area of safety and urbanism, the local government should introduce gender sensitive planning on the basis of consultations with women and analysis of their day-to-day mobility, as well as identification of the risks in the public space. In their economic development, they need to create local measures for support of female entrepreneurship, rural women and formalization of labor.

Recommendations for the Civil Society Organizations

Civil society organizations play a key role in the overcoming of the gap between the formal policies and the real experiences of women. Civil society organizations should continue and further develop their monitoring of the local policies and budgets from a gender perspective, using evidence and data to advocate and promote public debate.

The existing local and topical coalitions should be reinforced by connecting the gender equality issues with the economy, urbanism, safety and the environment, in order to position gender as a horizontal issue, not as an isolated subject.

The civil sector should make an active contribution toward changing the public discourse by problematizing the gender inequalities in the local policies and by increasing the visibility of women's perspectives and expertise.

Recommendations for the Media

The media should abandon their reporting practice that perceives gender equality as a marginal or a social issue and integrate it as a constituent part of their political and economic reporting. This entails a systematic approach in their questions about the impact of gender on the local policies, budgets or infrastructural projects.

Media need to contribute to the deconstruction of the stereotypes, especially as regards women in politics and local leadership, by avoiding gender stereotypical narratives that reduce women politicians to their private roles, personal characteristics or emotional reactions. Instead of sensationalism and stereotypical framing, the media reports should provide a balanced and responsible approach that will drive the political agenda, expertise and public responsibilities of the woman elected official in the foreground.

The media, together with the civil society sector should make an active contribution toward a change in the public discourse by problematizing the gender inequalities in the local policies and by increasing the visibility of women's perspectives and expertise.

Recommendations for the (Women) Politicians and Activists

(Women) politicians and activists play a key role in the transformation of gender equality from an analytical concept into a political agenda. They need to use data, budget analyses and local examples strategically in order to position gender equality as an issue that relates to the quality of life, economic development and democratic rule.

Networking, mutual support and building local and national coalitions are important in the struggle against isolation and political pressure. At the same time, (women) politicians and activists should search actively for institutional solutions, formal mechanisms, budget lines and clear obligations that would help make gender equality part of the system, not something depending on individual engagements.