

Experience of persons with disabilities of their participation in the electoral process in Macedonia

- Conducted Focus Groups Report -

Introduction

Upon the completion of the early parliamentary elections held on 11th December 2016, the Open the Windows project team conducted four focus groups with persons with various types of disability: intellectual disability, hearing impairment, visual impairment and physical disability. The aim of this mini-research was to obtain information on the experiences of persons with disabilities in regard of their participation in the electoral process, as well as to summarize their views for possible improvements of inclusiveness of elections.

The focus groups encompassed 28 persons, 13 of whom were female and 15 male. The age of the participants ranged between 18 and 38 years. These four focus groups were conducted in Skopje. The manner of implementation was adjusted to the needs of the participants. For instance, there was a sign language interpreter hired for the group of persons with hearing impairment.

The mini-research is part of the project “My Vote Counts”, funded by the Civica Mobilitas programme, which purpose is to improve inclusiveness of the electoral process in Macedonia.

The focus groups were prepared and conducted by the associates in charge, Magdalena Dimkova and Marija Velinovska, who drafted this report.

Findings and conclusions from the focus groups conducted

I. Prior experience related to electoral processes

Have you ever voted until now?

Most of the participants in all four groups have experience of voting and have been previously involved in the electoral processes.

As an exception, most of the participants with hearing impairment were young persons and they obtained their right to vote or they pursued their right to vote for the first time during the early parliamentary elections in December 2016.

For those who have voted previously:

How was the situation like for you during the previous elections? Did you face any difficulties? Did someone help you to vote? How did you choose who you would vote for? Was the choice of the one you would vote for you own?

Focus group participants have relatively positive experiences related to their participation in previous electoral processes in the country: Their parents are most often the persons who provide them with support, help them understand the necessary information and explain the voting process. All participants emphasised that the decision who they would cast their vote for in the previous electoral processes was their own.

Nevertheless, in spite of the fact that most of the participants have voted previously, the majority of them also underlined the difficulties they had faced:

Persons with physical disability underlined that they regularly face the same or similar problems, which have not been overcome over the course of time: physical inaccessibility of polling

places, positioning of voting booths and ballot boxes requiring to stand during voting or when casting the ballot in the ballot box, etc.

To illustrate, one of the participants remarked: “It is hard for me to stand on my feet and vote, I am more stable when I sit, I have less tremor”.

A young woman in a wheelchair highlighted: “Even though there is an adapted voting seat for me as a wheelchair user, I have difficulty when I have to cast the ballot in the ballot box, because it is not positioned at the appropriate height.”

Persons using a wheelchair say that when elections are held in winter they face difficulties in terms of mobility: “If it is cold or if there is snow, it is hard for me to push the wheelchair”.

Persons with complete blindness expressed their concern about an inappropriately marked vote: “Blind persons vote with an escort and we are not always sure that the escort circles our choice”.

For those who have not voted:

What was the reason for not voting?

The participants who have not voted during previous elections, a smaller part of the total number of participants, did not state their reasons for not voting that would relate them to their disability.

II. Experience during the early parliamentary elections 2016

Did you vote in the early parliamentary elections 2016?

Most of the participants of all four focus groups emphasised that they had voted in the elections held on 11th December 2016.

One of the participants with visual impairment said that his right to vote was not ensured because when he went to vote his name was not on the Voters’ List, even though he had previously checked on the website of the State Election Commission and his name had been included on the list.

For those who voted:

How did the voting go for you? Did you face any difficulties? Did someone help you to vote? Was the choice of the one you would vote for you own? How did you choose who you would vote for?

The participants with intellectual disability who voted were the only ones who highlighted that they had not come across with any major difficulties during the voting process. They easily knew how they should cast their vote because the symbols of the political parties were placed on the ballot: “It was easy because there were symbols of the party”.

The remaining participants who voted faced difficulties during the voting process:

The participants with physical disability pointed out difficulties in accessing the polling place: “The classroom where I was supposed to vote was on the first floor and my mother had to take me out of my wheelchair in order to reach the polling place with her help”.

Another difficulty was related with the voting process itself, mainly related with the height of the voting booth and the need to stand during registration of voters and the voting itself. In addition, one of the participants remarked: “I carry my own pen from home, since I cannot pull the one given there”.

Casting the ballot in the ballot box for persons in a wheelchair is also a difficulty – the box is positioned too high and they cannot do that on their own and they need to ask for help from another person to cast the ballot that for them.

The participants with partial visual impairment underline that they face difficulties in discerning all the numbers and the text in the Voters' List: "I am not sure that I circled the number which was my choice because the letters were too small".

One participant with complete blindness stated that in the polling place where he voted, the commission and the board were not sufficiently informed about the way how a person with visual impairment ought to vote: "The board in the classroom was not sufficiently informed about the rule how a person votes with an escort".

The participants with hearing impairment complained that the voting process was not fully clear to them: "It was rather confusing to me". Most often, they got the information related to the voting process from their parents, but this was not always enough: "I was there with my parents and I saw what they were doing. They gave me something, then they asked for something, not that hand, this one, I was very confused". The persons with hearing impairment underlined that they had not seen an explanation of the voting process on TV with a sign language interpreter on TV. Nevertheless, it should be emphasised that most of the persons with hearing impairment involved in the research were rather young and most of them turned 18 this year and voted in the elections for the first time.

For those who did not vote:

What was the reason for not voting?

A small part of the focus group participants stated that they had not voted in the early parliamentary elections held in December 2016.

One girl with physical disability stated that she was prevented to vote due to personal reasons.

A young boy with partial visual impairment said that he did not manage to vote because his name was not on the Voters' List even though it was previously there on the list published on the website of the State Election Commission. He suspects that his cooperation with a high representative from the opposition within the civil society association where he is a member is the reason why his name does not appear on the Voters' List in the polling place.

One girl with intellectual disability was not motivated to vote: "Last year I voted, but in vain – nothing has changed".

Several persons with hearing impairment who did not vote do not believe they could change something with their vote and it was not important for them to vote: "This way or the other, the majority decides", "It's the same, I will change nothing".

Did you have an opportunity to find out what was foreseen in the political parties' programmes?

Who told you? How did you decide who you would vote for?

With regard to the offers of political parties, focus group participants point out that most often they get information for the political commitments from the TV and Internet. This helps them decide who they would give their vote for. But they also remark that the information shared on television or in printed media are often incomprehensible and unclear.

When it comes to political parties' programmes, the participants with intellectual disability stated that until now they have never come across a programme written in an easy-to-read way. The association where they are members helped them review the party programmes and explained in general the party commitments, not only those relating to disabilities: "I am interested in the whole programme, not only the part for persons with disabilities".

Not a single person from the participants with visual impairment and hearing impairment read a single programme of the political parties: "At home I saw it, but the material was not comprehensible"; "The texts are not comprehensible enough, even though we have them available on PC".

The persons with hearing impairment underlined that they can rarely see a sign language interpreter in any of the shows broadcasted presenting the programmes of political parties or discussing what they offer.

All participants decide to cast their vote in the elections based on the information for the party programmes. One young boy with physical disability illustrates that in the following way: “I observe who has a better plan for life in Macedonia”.

Are you politically active?

Almost none of the participants is politically active, nor are they members of a certain political party.

As an exception, one person with hearing impairment pointed out that he had participated in rallies of one political party in several towns because “they called him”, even though he was not a member of the party. Two participants with intellectual disability said that they are members of a political party, but after signing the membership form they were not active, even though they received invitations to attend meetings and rallies.

Why are you not a part of a political party?

A part of the participants stated that at the moment they have no interest to be a part of a political party, but that they do not exclude the possibility to be in the future.

A part of the participants has a difficulty obtaining information where the offices of political parties are: “But we do not know where their parties are so that we go there; if we knew where they were, I would go there and talk to them”. A part of them points out the difficulties in accessing the offices of parties: “We cannot be active, because the offices of parties are inaccessible, some of them are on the second floor and there is no elevator”.

One participant with visual impairment underlined that due to a previous experience he does not want to be a part of a political party again: “I have been active, but I realized that they only try to collect our vote and then do nothing for us”.

What do you think that political parties should take into consideration when communicating with persons with disabilities/ when searching for supporters/ voters with disabilities?

Focus group participants say that political parties should above all establish contact with them, ask them directly what they need, involve them in the process of planning and preparation of programmes and fulfil their promises.

Participants with physical disabilities recommend to political parties: “They should have patience in hearing us out”, “They should not see us as a number, but as persons who can give their own contribution to society”.

Participants with hearing impairment recommend: “It is important for every party to present what they offer”, “All parties should provide for translation so that I could decide on my own” and “Firstly, they should know sign language”.

Participants with intellectual disability point out that political parties should fulfil their promises in terms of: “They should employ us”; “They should give us free-of-charge tickets”; “They should fulfil the things they promise”; “Parties should be told not to say that they would do something and then not fulfil what they had promised”. They also emphasise the need for parties to organise more frequent meetings with them.

Recommendations for improvement of inclusiveness of the electoral process

Focus group participants had the opportunity to propose solutions on their own, as well as possible improvements of inclusiveness of the electoral process and the voting process itself:

How can the electoral process itself and the voting be improved?			
General recommendation			
Institutions and political parties should establish practices of direct communication and consultations with persons with disabilities regarding all social questions, and especially for the questions of particular interest to persons with disabilities. In fact, according to the motto of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities – “Nothing About Us Without Us”.			
Recommendations to the State Election Commission and other competent public institutions			
Persons with physical disability	Persons with visual impairment	Persons with hearing impairment	Persons with intellectual disability
Provide full physical accessibility of polling places Provide accessible voting booths Pens in the voting booth should be secured with a longer string Ballot boxes should be positioned at an adequate height for persons using a wheelchair Establish a system of electronic voting	Provide ballots in tactile format with larger letters Provide ballots written in Braille alphabet Registration of blind voters at the polling place should be performed by facsimile or digital footprint The ballot should be available electronically on the Internet Use special voting machines with earphones Voting boards should get acquainted in detail with the voting procedure for persons with an escort	Provide explanations and information about the voting process in sign language Provide information about the results of the voting process in sign language	Continue the use of symbols of political parties on the ballot Use photographs of the candidates on the ballot
Recommendations to political parties			
Persons with physical disability	Persons with visual impairment	Persons with hearing impairment	Persons with intellectual disability
Full physical accessibility of party offices	Provide election party materials in larger letters and written in Braille alphabet	Use sign language interpreters during media appearances of parties and in direct communication with voters	Present party commitments by easy-to-read materials

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