

Democracy Navigator Monitoring & Analysis
Local Elections 2025 in North Macedonia

LESSONS NOT LEARNED



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All findings, statements, reports, analyses, and assessments presented in this publication are based on systematic election monitoring, field observation, verified reports, and documented sources collected during the 2025 local elections in North Macedonia. The publication is intended to contribute to public understanding, democratic accountability, and informed policy dialogue on electoral integrity.

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FOREWORD

TRUST AS THE FOUNDATION OF DEMOCRATIC ELECTIONS

Elections are not democratic because they are held. They are democratic because they are trusted.

Elections exist for citizens, not the other way around. They are not rituals designed to legitimize power, but democratic instruments through which individuals and communities express their free will, priorities, and expectations. At their core, elections are a collective act of political self-determination — a mechanism through which citizens temporarily entrust authority, set direction, and hold power accountable.

This understanding places a clear obligation on the state. Democratic institutions are not merely tasked with administering elections efficiently, but with guaranteeing that every voter and every vote is respected, protected, and meaningfully reflected in the process. The integrity of elections is measured not only by orderly procedures, but by whether each citizen can participate freely, without fear, pressure, or manipulation, and with confidence that their choice carries equal weight. When this obligation is fulfilled, elections serve their democratic purpose. When it is neglected, elections risk becoming detached from the very citizens they are meant to serve.

Finally, elections do not begin on Election Day — and they do not end when polling stations close.

Trust as the precondition of democratic elections

Free, fair, and democratic elections are not sustained by procedures alone. They rest, above all, on trust — trust in institutions, trust in rules, trust in information, and trust in the integrity of outcomes. Without this trust, elections risk becoming formal exercises — a theatre — devoid of democratic substance, regardless of technical compliance with legal or procedural standards.

Trust is not a matter of sentiment or political preference. It is a systemic condition produced by consistent institutional behavior, equal application of the law, transparent decision-making, credible information, and the absence of fear, pressure, or coercion in political participation. When citizens trust that electoral rules apply equally to all actors, that their vote is protected, and that outcomes reflect genuine choice, elections fulfill their democratic purpose. When these attributes of the process are absent or under threat, elections devolve into a procedural farce.

In recent years, this condition has come under increasing strain. Electoral processes now unfold in environments marked by deep political polarization, erosion of media independence, misuse of administrative resources, selective enforcement of legislation, and the growing influence of disinformation and hybrid operations, increasingly enhanced through strategic — though often opaque — uses of artificial intelligence. These pressures do not always manifest as overt violations. More often, they operate through the normalization of unequal conditions, informal coercion, and the manipulation of perception.

Under such circumstances, procedural correctness alone is insufficient. Elections may be administered efficiently yet still fail to command public confidence. Democratic legitimacy, therefore, cannot be measured solely by compliance with rules, but by whether electoral processes are trusted by citizens as fair, inclusive, and free from undue influence. In this context, election observation reports have increasingly emphasized overall administrative and procedural correctness while giving less attention to assessing the democratic character of the process. While such assessments may be formally accurate, the reduction of elections to administrative operations risks creating an “administrative blanket” that conceals deeply rooted non-democratic practices.

Election observation plays a crucial role in this context. It does not replace institutions, nor does it adjudicate political outcomes. Rather, it serves as a democratic safeguard — documenting risks, identifying patterns of concern, and reinforcing public trust by making the electoral process visible, accountable, and subject to independent scrutiny.

Elections are not democratic because they are held. They are democratic because they are trusted.

Comprehensive observation as a response to trust erosion

Building trust takes years. Losing it takes minutes. Trust cannot be manufactured through algorithmic manipulation or public-relations campaigns, although it can be distorted, redirected, or eroded by political cultures of coercion and by sustained propaganda operations.

Because trust is shaped over time, election observation must extend beyond Election Day. Many of the most consequential distortions of electoral integrity occur well before voters reach polling stations and continue after results are announced. These

include legislative changes adopted close to elections, imbalanced media environments, blurred boundaries between state and party, and sustained pressure on voters, public administration employees, and political competitors.

CIVIL – Center for Freedom applies a long-term, comprehensive election observation model precisely in response to these challenges. This approach is grounded in the understanding that electoral integrity is cumulative and contextual. It reflects not only what happens on Election Day, but how political competition is structured, communicated, and enforced throughout the electoral cycle.

Comprehensive observation is also a response to contemporary hybrid threats. Elections increasingly take place within information ecosystems shaped by coordinated disinformation, foreign influence operations, and algorithmically amplified — AI-assisted — narratives designed to polarize societies and undermine confidence in democratic institutions. These dynamics cannot be adequately captured through short-term or event-focused monitoring alone.

By observing elections as a process rather than a single event, CIVIL’s methodology seeks to identify structural imbalances, recurring patterns, and systemic vulnerabilities. This allows for a more accurate assessment of whether elections provide a genuine opportunity for free political choice and whether the conditions for democratic competition are effectively protected.

Methodological framework and observation phases

The findings presented in CIVIL’s election reports and analyses are based on a multi-phase observation framework that covers the entire electoral cycle.

CIVIL conducts long-term monitoring of the political, legislative, and media environment for at least two months prior to the official

start of the election campaign. This phase focuses on identifying early-warning indicators, including changes to electoral legislation, the use of public resources for political purposes, media behavior, public rhetoric, and emerging narratives that may influence voter perception.

The official election campaign period, lasting three weeks prior to Election Day, is observed with particular attention to campaign conduct, equality of opportunity among contestants, media coverage, respect for fundamental freedoms, and the conduct of public authorities.

In the case of local elections involving two rounds of voting, CIVIL also monitors the inter-round campaign period, a phase often characterized by intensified political pressure and reduced transparency.

Election Day observation encompasses not only voting and counting procedures, but also the overall conduct of political actors and institutions, as well as instances of coercion and other categories of irregularities occurring both around and beyond polling stations. Observation also extends to the days immediately preceding voting, when last-minute inducements, pressures, and violations frequently occur.

Following the elections, CIVIL continues monitoring the post-election period for at least two weeks, focusing on complaint mechanisms, institutional responses, public communication, and the broader impact of electoral outcomes on public trust and social cohesion.

An integral component of this framework is citizen-based observation. Throughout the observation period, CIVIL receives information from citizens, whistleblowers, journalists, public administration employees, and individuals affiliated with political parties. These inputs often occur through informal and confidential channels, reflecting both civic responsibility and limited confidence in existing protection mechanisms.

Citizen-provided information is treated as an analytical layer within a broader verification process. All inputs are handled with strict confidentiality and subjected to triangulation through field observation, media monitoring, and additional data sources. This approach strengthens methodological credibility while protecting sources and reinforcing ethical responsibility.

In this sense, trust is not only the subject of observation — it is also a methodological condition. Without citizen trust, comprehensive observation would be impossible. Without observation, trust would lack an independent anchor.

Elections do not begin on Election Day — and they do not end when polling stations close.

Cooperation with international missions and partners

CIVIL's election observation is conducted in alignment with international standards and in continuous dialogue with international missions and partners. At the same time, it is grounded in a methodological approach that emphasizes flexibility, comprehensiveness, and adaptability, allowing observation practices to respond effectively to local circumstances and contextual specificities.

Cooperation with international missions, particularly the Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR), constitutes an important element of this framework. This cooperation is based on complementarity rather than duplication. CIVIL's long-term, citizen-centered observation contributes locally grounded insights that enrich broader international assessments, while international methodologies provide essential reference points for consistency, comparability, and credibility.

Information exchange and methodological alignment strengthen the overall ecosystem of election observation and support a

shared understanding of risks, challenges, and good practices across different electoral contexts.

Citizen observation as democratic responsibility

At its core, election observation is an expression of democratic responsibility. Democracy does not belong exclusively to institutions or political elites; it depends on the active engagement of citizens who demand accountability and resist the normalization of abuse.

In an era marked by democratic backsliding, external interference, disinformation, and erosion of public trust, citizen observation functions as a form of democratic self-defense. It reinforces transparency, counters the normalization of abuse, resists manipulation of perception, and preserves the space for genuine political choice.

CIVIL's reports and analyses, together with the strategic recommendations derived from this work, are presented in this spirit. CIVIL does not seek to replace institutional mechanisms, but to strengthen them by contributing to public trust, informed debate, and democratic resilience. Through monitoring, constructive critique, and proposals for improvement, CIVIL positions itself as an ally of democratic institutions committed to upholding the rule of law and the spirit of democracy.

Ultimately, democracy survives not through silence or procedural formality, but through participation, vigilance, and the willingness of citizens to defend the principles upon which free societies depend.

Xhabir Deralla

President of CIVIL – Center for Freedom

ABOUT THE PROJECT

This election monitoring and analytical report was produced within the framework of **Democracy Navigator 2025 – A Strategic Response to Disinformation and Hybrid Threats**, a comprehensive civic monitoring and early-warning initiative implemented by CIVIL – Centre for Freedom.

Democracy Navigator 2025 focuses on strengthening democratic resilience and countering disinformation, information manipulation, and hybrid threats affecting democratic processes in North Macedonia and the wider Western Balkans. The project places a particular emphasis on safeguarding electoral integrity and combines long-term and short-term election observation, field monitoring, media and information-space analysis, civic engagement, and policy-oriented research.

The project is supported by the **Federal Foreign Office of the Federal Republic of Germany**.

Implementation is carried out in cooperation with partners within the **Defending Democracy Global Initiative** (DDGI) and the **Westminster Alliance for Ukraine** (WA4U), including **Media Dialogue**, **Youth4Media**, **the New European People's Forum** (Germany), the **Jean Monnet Association** (France), **Centro Studi Internazionali** (Italy), and other international and regional partners.

The views and findings expressed in this report are those of CIVIL and do not necessarily reflect the positions of the donor or partner organizations.

METHODOLOGY AND SCOPE OF OBSERVATION

CIVIL – Center for Freedom conducted election observation of the 2025 local elections in North Macedonia using a long-term, multi-phase, and citizen-centered methodology designed to assess not only procedural compliance, but the substantive integrity of the electoral process as a whole. This approach reflects CIVIL's long-standing commitment to democratic accountability, transparency, and the protection of citizens' political rights, and builds on the analytical framework developed through its broader work on defending democracy against systemic erosion and hybrid threats.

Scope of observation

The observation covered the entire electoral cycle, including the pre-election period, the official election campaign, both rounds of voting, and the post-election phase. Monitoring began two months prior to the official start of the campaign and continued for two weeks following the completion of the second round of elections. The scope of observation included political and institutional developments, legislative and regulatory changes, media and information environments, campaign conduct, Election Day procedures, and post-election institutional responses.

Geographically, CIVIL deployed 60 accredited observers to a representative sample of polling stations across the country, covering ~17% of all polling stations. This physical coverage was complemented by nationwide citizen reporting, media monitoring, and desk research, allowing CIVIL to assess trends and patterns beyond locations with a direct observer presence.

Phases of observation

The methodology was structured around the following phases:

- **Pre-election monitoring**, focusing on the political, institutional, and media environment, early warning indicators, legislative changes, and emerging narratives.
- **Campaign monitoring**, including equality of opportunity among contestants, use of public resources, media coverage, and respect for fundamental freedoms.
- **Inter-round monitoring** (for local elections), a period often characterized by intensified pressure and reduced transparency.
- **Election Day monitoring**, encompassing voting, counting, ballot secrecy, accessibility, observer access, and conduct of election boards.
- **Post-election monitoring**, focusing on complaints, appeals, institutional reactions, public communication, and broader societal impact.

Data collection and sources

CIVIL's findings are based on multiple data sources, including:

- reports from long-term and short-term observers;
- structured inputs from citizens, whistleblowers, journalists, public administration employees, and political party affiliates;
- media and social media monitoring;
- analysis of official documents, decisions, and public statements;
- CIVIL's own published reporting and analytical outputs during the observation period.

Citizen-provided information played a crucial role in identifying pressures, irregularities, and patterns that are often invisible through formal observation alone. Such inputs were received through confidential and informal channels, reflecting both civic responsibility and limited trust in institutional protection mechanisms.

Verification, analysis, and ethical standards

All information was subjected to verification and triangulation, combining field observation, media analysis, and additional independent sources. No single input was treated as conclusive without corroboration. Strict confidentiality protocols were applied to protect sources and prevent retaliation, in line with CIVIL's ethical standards and human rights principles.

Cooperation and methodological alignment

CIVIL conducted its observation in alignment with international standards and in dialogue with international missions and partners, particularly the Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR). This cooperation was based on complementarity rather than duplication, combining CIVIL's locally grounded, citizen-centered insights with internationally recognized methodological frameworks.

Limitations

As with all election observation efforts, the methodology faced limitations, including restricted access in certain locations, fear of reporting among affected citizens, institutional opacity, and the impossibility of direct observation at all polling stations. These constraints are acknowledged transparently and do not diminish the validity of observed patterns, which consistently emerge across multiple sources and phases of the electoral process.

PART I:

**CORE FINDINGS
AND ASSESSMENT
OF THE ELECTORAL
PROCESS**

GENERAL ASSESSMENT OF THE ELECTORAL PROCESS 2025: A FORMAL PROCESS WITHOUT SUBSTANTIVE INTEGRITY

Surface stability and substantive deficits

According to CIVIL's observers and analytical team, the 2025 local election process unfolded in formal procedural order, yet was burdened by serious systemic and institutional shortcomings that substantially undermine public trust in the electoral system. While the elections were conducted without major security incidents, their overall integrity was compromised by long-standing structural deficiencies, weak institutional accountability, and entrenched political practices that continue to erode democratic standards.

Although Election Day in both rounds passed without significant incidents, the outward appearance of calm and administrative discipline concealed deep-seated weaknesses within the electoral environment. Behind the punctual opening of polling stations and the orderly performance of formal procedures lay persistent politicization of institutions, institutional inertia, and a broad tolerance of unlawful practices. The elections were marked by widespread and blatant violations of election silence, sustained pressure on voters, indications and allegations of vote buying, as well as discrimination and violations of ballot secrecy at multiple polling stations. These phenomena were neither isolated nor incidental; they formed part of a broader pattern that raises serious concerns about the substantive democratic character of the process.

One of the most alarming indicators of institutional failure remains the outdated and unreliable Voters Register, which continues to include the names of deceased persons. This deficiency is not a technical anomaly but a chronic problem that directly undermines electoral credibility and public confidence in election outcomes. At the same time, fingerprint identification devices once again caused technical malfunctions and delays, contributing to confusion, frustration, and unequal voting conditions. Despite repeated warnings and experience from previous election cycles, institutions have failed to ensure a reliable, transparent, and fully functional system. In parallel, the accessibility of polling stations for persons with disabilities remains a persistent and unresolved issue, effectively denying equal electoral rights to a significant number of citizens.

Beyond procedural and technical shortcomings, the elections were also characterized by an intensification of nationalist narratives and ethnic mobilization. Instead of focusing on local governance, public services, and accountability, political competition shifted toward identity-based, national, and even geopolitical themes. Such narratives deliberately exploited ethnic divisions and collective fears, fueling polarization rather than offering policy-based visions for local development. This practice not only distorts the purpose of local elections but also deepens social fragmentation and weakens the foundations of democratic dialogue.

Taken together, these findings indicate that while the 2025 local elections met minimal procedural requirements, they fell short of ensuring substantive electoral integrity. The absence of major incidents should not be mistaken for democratic health. On the contrary, the persistence of systemic weaknesses, tolerated violations, and manipulative political practices signals a democracy that functions increasingly as form rather than substance — orderly in appearance, yet fragile in trust, accountability, and legitimacy.

Structural roots of recurrent electoral failure

Formally, the 2025 local elections appeared calm, orderly, and procedurally regular. Polling stations opened on time, election boards generally followed prescribed steps, and citizens were given the formal opportunity to express their electoral will. Yet both election days — in the first and second rounds — were accompanied by fundamental deficiencies that call into question not the organization of voting itself, but the democratic integrity of the process as a whole.

This contrast between outward order and inner weakness is not incidental. Behind the administrative discipline and the appearance of procedural normality lie deep structural flaws, persistent politicization of institutions, and institutional inertia that continue to erode citizens' confidence in the electoral system. The state once again demonstrated that it lacks a fully functional, transparent, and trustworthy electoral mechanism capable of ensuring elections that genuinely meet democratic standards — not only in form, but in substance.

At the heart of this problem lies a pattern of legislative instability and instrumentalization. The Electoral Code, first adopted in 2006, has been amended numerous times over the past two decades. Despite this frequency of changes, it has never undergone a comprehensive, principled reform aimed at strengthening integrity, transparency, and equal electoral conditions. Instead, revisions have too often been reactive, selective, and politically negotiated, addressing immediate pressures rather than structural deficiencies.

Particularly concerning is the repeated practice of adopting amendments late in the electoral cycle, including changes introduced shortly before elections — in direct contradiction to long-standing recommendations by the OSCE/ODIHR to refrain from altering electoral legislation at least six months prior to elections. Such untimely revisions undermine legal certainty,

weaken public trust, and place additional strain on institutions responsible for implementation. They also raise legitimate concerns that electoral rules are adjusted not to improve democratic quality, but to accommodate short-term political interests.

This pattern creates a legislative loop: formal compliance with procedural requirements is maintained, while substantive problems remain unresolved. Each election cycle exposes the same deficiencies — an unreliable Voters Register, ineffective safeguards against pressure and vote buying, weak enforcement of campaign rules, and insufficient protection of electoral rights — yet legislative responses remain partial, delayed, or symbolic. The result is a system that appears continuously “reformed” on paper, while remaining fundamentally stagnant in practice.

In such a context, elections risk becoming administrative exercises rather than democratic processes. Procedural correctness is emphasized, while the deeper conditions required for free and fair competition — equality of opportunity, genuine voter autonomy, institutional accountability, and effective remedies — are treated as secondary. This dynamic aligns with a broader transformation identified in this report: the reduction of elections to technical operations, shielded by what can be described as an administrative blanket that conceals persistent non-democratic practices.

The absence of major incidents on Election Day should therefore not be misinterpreted as evidence of democratic health. Calm procedures cannot compensate for systemic weaknesses that distort political competition and undermine voter confidence. When electoral rules are unstable, institutions are politicized, and enforcement is selective, democracy is reduced to ritual — orderly in appearance, yet fragile in legitimacy.

This structural disconnect between form and substance provides the necessary context for the detailed findings that follow in this

report. The deficiencies observed during the 2025 local elections are not isolated anomalies, but manifestations of a system that has prioritized procedural manageability over democratic credibility. Addressing these challenges requires more than technical adjustments; it demands political will, institutional accountability, and a genuine commitment to restoring trust as the foundation of democratic elections.

THE VOTERS REGISTER: A CHRONIC SOURCE OF DISTRUST

The most striking and persistent example of institutional failure in the 2025 local elections is the outdated, unreliable, and insufficiently maintained Voters Register. Far from being a technical database, the Voters Register is the backbone of electoral integrity. When it is inaccurate, every stage of the electoral process — from turnout figures to the credibility of results — is called into question.

CIVIL's monitoring once again confirmed that the Voters Register contains the names of deceased persons, while simultaneously excluding eligible voters. At polling station no. 2479 in the municipality of Gazi Baba, 20 out of 399 registered voters were deceased, representing five percent of the entire list. This is not a marginal discrepancy, nor an isolated error. It is a grave institutional failure that directly undermines confidence in the electoral process and raises legitimate concerns about the accuracy of voter data nationwide.

An even more telling case was recorded in the municipality of Šuto Orizari, at polling station 2957/1 at the "26 July" Elementary School. There, a grandfather and grandson bearing the same surname appeared in opposite roles within the system: the deceased grandfather remained listed as a voter, while the living grandson was absent from the register. Such cases go beyond administrative error. They expose a system incapable of reliably distinguishing between life and death, eligibility and exclusion — a failure incompatible with the basic requirements of democratic elections.

These examples might appear absurd, even surreal, but they reflect a deeply troubling reality. They reveal a state administration that treats electoral integrity as a formality rather than as a foundational democratic obligation. When errors of this magnitude persist across election cycles, they cease to be anomalies and become indicators of systemic neglect.

The persistence of an unreliable Voters Register also fuels public suspicion and conspiracy narratives, whether justified or not. When citizens encounter deceased persons on voter lists or find themselves missing from the register, trust in institutions is not merely weakened — it is actively damaged. In such an environment, even well-conducted procedures on Election Day cannot restore confidence in outcomes that rest on flawed foundations.

Particularly concerning is the lack of transparency and accountability surrounding institutional efforts to address this problem. In May 2025, the State Election Commission established a working group tasked with reviewing the Voters Register, formally described as an initiative to “engage staff in a working group” for data processing (Frontline, May 22, 2025). However, to date, the public has received no meaningful information regarding the group’s mandate, methodology, procedures, timelines, or the funds allocated for its work.

This opacity raises serious questions about whether the initiative was designed to produce substantive reform or merely to signal activity without accountability. The absence of clear results, measurable improvements, or public reporting deepens the perception that negligence — rather than responsibility — governs one of the most critical pillars of the electoral system.

The failure to establish and maintain a reliable Voters Register is not a neutral administrative shortcoming. It is a structural democratic deficit. Without accurate voter data, elections cannot guarantee equality of suffrage, transparency of participation, or

credibility of outcomes. Left unaddressed, this failure perpetuates a cycle in which every election begins under a cloud of doubt, regardless of how calmly it unfolds on Election Day.

In this sense, the Voters Register is not merely a technical issue awaiting correction. It is a test of institutional seriousness, political will, and democratic maturity. As long as it remains unresolved, claims of electoral integrity will continue to rest on unstable ground.

MORE THAN TECHNICAL FAILURES: A WIDESPREAD CULTURE OF INCOMPETENCE

The fingerprint identification devices, introduced with the stated aim of increasing trust, security, and efficiency in the voting process, once again proved to be the weakest visible link in the electoral mechanism. Yet the failures observed during the 2025 local elections point to a problem that extends far beyond technology. Rather than reinforcing confidence in the integrity of elections, the repeated malfunctioning of the devices exposed persistent and widespread shortcomings in institutional capacity, including inadequate planning, insufficient testing, weak implementation, and a lack of clearly assigned responsibility.

During both rounds of voting, CIVIL observers recorded breakdowns, delays, and long queues at polling stations in multiple municipalities across the country. In numerous cases, voters were forced to wait extended periods due not only to technical failures, but also to improper handling of equipment and the absence of clear, consistently applied procedures for responding to malfunctions. Instead of trust and efficiency, the technology generated confusion, frustration, and, in some instances, public ridicule — undermining the very purpose for which it was introduced.

In the second round of elections, the number of reported technical malfunctions was lower. This reduction, however, should not be interpreted as evidence of systemic improvement. It was largely the result of greater individual effort by election boards and the fact that voting took place in only one-third of the municipalities. The underlying problems observed since the

introduction of fingerprint devices in 2021 — inadequate preparation, insufficient training, lack of contingency planning, and weak institutional oversight — remain unresolved. The repeated recurrence of the same failures across multiple election cycles demonstrates not accidental error, but an institutional failure to learn from experience, despite repeated warnings and documented deficiencies.

Technical shortcomings were further compounded by violations of ballot secrecy, recorded at numerous polling stations. CIVIL observers documented cases in which voters' names were read aloud, voting booths were improperly positioned, and election board members directly or indirectly influenced voters by suggesting how they should vote. Such practices strike at the core of electoral integrity. Ballot secrecy is not a procedural detail; it is a fundamental democratic safeguard designed to protect voters from pressure, intimidation, and retaliation.

In addition, CIVIL registered arbitrary and inconsistent interpretations of electoral procedures and laws by members of election boards. In several cases, these interpretations resulted in the obstruction of the lawful work of accredited observers and journalists, despite their credentials being duly issued by the State Election Commission. Observers were questioned without justification, restricted in their movement, or prevented from performing their monitoring role, while journalists faced undue interference while reporting from polling stations. These actions directly undermine transparency and accountability — essential conditions for credible elections.

Taken together, these incidents cannot be dismissed as isolated mistakes or individual lapses. They reflect a widespread culture of unprofessionalism and negligence that spans multiple levels of election administration. This culture is sustained by weak training standards, insufficient supervision, blurred lines of responsibility, and a persistent lack of effective accountability mechanisms. It is further reinforced by institutional impunity, as

violations and failures rarely result in meaningful consequences for those responsible.

When technical tools are introduced without robust institutional capacity, when procedures are applied selectively or inconsistently, and when oversight is treated as an inconvenience rather than a democratic obligation, elections risk becoming exercises in damage control rather than expressions of free and equal choice. In such an environment, technology does not strengthen democracy — it exposes the fragility of institutions entrusted with protecting it.

PRESSURE, CLIENTELISM, AND VOTER DEPENDENCE

The 2025 local elections once again unfolded in an atmosphere marked by pressure, fear, and entrenched clientelist relations, in which dependence on political centers of power systematically undermines the free will of voters. While numerous reports of such practices emerged across municipalities, only a limited number could be formally verified – not because these practices are exceptional, but because they are deeply normalized, shifted into informal practices, and embedded in unwritten practices intentionally designed to evade documentation and legal proof.

Institutional favoritism toward large political actors further reinforced this imbalance. Despite a last-minute legal amendment that formally lowered the threshold for independent candidacies — allowing individuals to register with as few as two supporting signatures — CIVIL observed that independent candidates were effectively excluded from meaningful competition. Structural barriers to visibility, unequal media access, lack of institutional neutrality, and the absence of protection from political pressure rendered formal eligibility largely symbolic. Legal openness did not translate into practical competitiveness.

This asymmetry was compounded by the convergence of clientelism with other manipulative practices. Pressure and conditioning were frequently intertwined with ethnic mobilization, nationalist rhetoric, anti-Western narratives, and, in some cases, overt hate speech and threats. Misuse of state services and institutions – including selective inspections, administrative delays, and informal signaling by officials – further reinforced the perception that the state itself was aligned with particular political interests.

Taken together, these dynamics reveal an electoral environment shaped not only by rule violations, but by a normalized system of political control in which the state functions as the primary distributor of opportunity and punishment. In such a system, elections become moments of renegotiation of dependency rather than exercises in democratic choice. Political competition is reduced to access to power, not accountability for its use.

Clientelism in the electoral context operates as a form of political corruption that extends well beyond the exchange of money. It is rooted in the abuse of public authority and public resources for partisan gain, within a broader political culture in which electoral victory is widely understood as granting control over institutions, employment, public finances, and access to opportunity. In this system, elections function less as mechanisms of accountability and more as moments of redistribution of power, loyalty, and dependency.

Across multiple municipalities, citizens reported frequent visits by party officials, directors of public enterprises, and politically affiliated intermediaries who “encouraged” voters to demonstrate loyalty. These interactions were often framed as “friendly visits,” “consultations,” or “courtesy calls,” yet their underlying message was clear and unambiguous: continued access to employment, social assistance, public services, or local benefits depends on political obedience. Such practices rarely require explicit threats; they operate through shared understanding and accumulated experience.

This dynamic exploits the structural vulnerability of large segments of the population, particularly public-sector employees, recipients of social assistance, and residents of economically dependent communities. The fear of losing one’s job, social support, or institutional goodwill creates a climate in which formal electoral choice is overshadowed by informal coercion. In such conditions, voting ceases to be an expression of political preference and becomes an act of calculated self-preservation.

CIVIL observers documented cases at several polling stations where party activists kept records of who voted and who did not – a direct violation of voter privacy and electoral integrity. These activities were often linked to broader networks of vote buying, financed through party resources and coordinated by intermediaries operating at the local level. The use of intermediaries is not incidental; it is a deliberate strategy that allows political actors to maintain effective control while preserving plausible deniability.

In addition, CIVIL recorded instances of “a job for a vote,” targeted distribution of social aid packages, and material assistance directed at specific households or communities. Pre-election promises of infrastructure projects were frequently announced immediately before or during the campaign period and presented as benevolent initiatives. In reality, such promises functioned as transactional incentives tied to electoral support, representing a direct misuse of public funds and a systematic blurring of the boundary between governance and campaigning.

In the post-election period, CIVIL also collected multiple serious and mutually consistent testimonies indicating a significant escalation of vote-buying practices during the second round of voting. According to these accounts, the price of a single vote in some municipalities reportedly exceeded €100 per voter. While these testimonies could not be formally verified through institutional or judicial procedures – due to fear of retaliation, lack of material evidence, and the inherently informalized nature of such transactions — their convergence, contextual credibility, and consistency with patterns observed in previous election cycles point to a deeply entrenched and normalized phenomenon.

At this scale, vote buying cannot be understood as sporadic criminal misconduct. It reflects the monetization of electoral choice within a clientelist political system, where elections are treated as investments and voters as transactional assets. The

absence of effective investigation, prosecution, or deterrence mechanisms further entrenches this practice, allowing it to function as an open secret rather than an exceptional violation. When votes acquire a market price, democratic participation is reduced to economic exchange shaped by inequality, dependency, and fear – hollowing out the very substance of electoral choice.

These practices reflect a broader and deeply entrenched condition in which the division between political parties and the state is persistently blurred. Public institutions, local administrations, and state-owned enterprises are perceived – and often experienced – as extensions of party power. Citizens are treated not as rights-bearing participants in democratic governance, but as clients whose access to opportunity is contingent on political loyalty. In this sense, the entire country risks functioning as a client of the ruling political structures at the national level.

Taken together, these patterns confirm the existence of a controlled democratic environment in which party loyalty is rewarded, political independence is discouraged, and dissent carries tangible social and economic risks. Political competition under such conditions is fundamentally distorted – not through overt repression, but through systematic dependency, inducement, and institutional favoritism toward dominant actors.

Vote buying and voter pressure are therefore not peripheral violations; they are structural elements of the political system. They form part of a broader mechanism that transforms electoral participation into an instrument of control rather than an expression of democratic choice. As long as clientelism, abuse of public resources, and the culture of “winner takes all” remain embedded in political practice, elections will continue to reproduce existing power relations rather than enable genuine democratic accountability.

INACCESSIBILITY AS DISCRIMINATION: SYSTEMATIC EXCLUSION FROM THE ELECTORAL PROCESS

The 2025 local elections once again confirmed systemic discrimination against elderly persons and persons with disabilities, revealing a persistent failure by the state to ensure equal access to the electoral process. Despite repeated recommendations, legal obligations, and prior warnings, accessibility remains treated as a secondary concern rather than as a fundamental democratic requirement.

In many municipalities, polling stations were located on upper floors without elevators, had inaccessible entrances, or lacked properly designed voting booths. In several cases, booths intended for persons with disabilities were removed, blocked, or set aside entirely. As a result, the state effectively denied hundreds of citizens the practical ability to exercise their right to vote.

This is not a technical omission — it is an act of discrimination. When failures of this kind recur across election cycles and affect the same groups of citizens, they can no longer be treated as accidental or merely technical. They constitute a pattern of discriminatory practice embedded in the administration of the electoral process.

This failure persists despite clear institutional guidance. According to a report by the Commission for Prevention and Protection from Discrimination (CPPD), prepared ahead of the elections, numerous recommendations concerning the

accessibility of polling stations for persons with disabilities remain unresolved. These recommendations have been repeatedly postponed by responsible institutions, without transparent justification or effective remedial action (CivilMedia.mk). The continued neglect of these findings reflects not a lack of awareness, but a lack of political and institutional will.

CIVIL's own archive data further confirm the structural nature of the problem. In previous election cycles, more than half of polling stations were set up in ways that rendered them physically inaccessible to voters with disabilities (CivilMedia.mk). The recurrence of the same deficiencies in 2025 demonstrates that institutional actors have failed to learn from past elections or to implement even minimal corrective measures.

During the 2025 elections, CIVIL observers once again reported polling stations without ramps, with stair-only access, or with voting booths positioned in ways that made independent voting physically impossible for persons with mobility impairments. In several cases, presidents of election boards stated that they were “not aware” of whether their polling stations met accessibility standards — a statement that itself illustrates the depth of institutional negligence and the absence of accountability mechanisms.

Accessibility is not a matter of convenience or infrastructure alone. It is a legal and democratic obligation, grounded in constitutional guarantees of equality, as well as in international human rights standards protecting the political participation of persons with disabilities and elderly citizens. When the state fails to ensure accessible voting conditions, it does not merely inconvenience voters — it violates their fundamental rights.

This pattern of inaccessibility reflects a broader structural problem: the normalization of exclusion within the electoral system. When certain citizens must rely on assistance, forgo

secrecy, or are prevented from voting altogether due to physical barriers, the principle of equal suffrage is undermined. Elections conducted under such conditions cannot be considered fully free or fair, as they systematically privilege some voters while marginalizing others.

In legal and democratic terms, inaccessibility is not an isolated administrative flaw or a logistical oversight. It constitutes a form of institutional discrimination that systematically excludes certain groups of citizens and, in doing so, erodes democratic legitimacy itself. When polling stations remain physically inaccessible, when adaptive voting arrangements are absent or improvised, and when these failures recur across election cycles, the message conveyed to affected citizens is clear: their participation is conditional, secondary, or expendable.

Democratic elections cannot be considered free or equal if access to the ballot depends on physical ability, age, or personal assistance negotiated on the spot. Until accessibility is treated as a non-negotiable component of electoral integrity—embedded in planning, budgeting, accountability mechanisms, and enforcement—rather than as an optional accommodation, elections will continue to reproduce social inequality instead of correcting it. In such circumstances, exclusion is no longer accidental; it becomes normalized, predictable, and institutionally sustained, with lasting consequences for trust, representation, and democratic inclusion.

MASSIVE AND BLATANT VIOLATION OF THE ELECTION SILENCE

The most visible and flagrant breach of electoral rules during the 2025 local elections was the massive and brazen violation of the election silence. Instead of serving as a period of reflection and calm, the silence period was transformed into a day of intensified propaganda, demonstrating a profound disregard for the law and for the democratic principles it is meant to protect.

Almost all actors—political parties and candidates, party activists and supporters, and media outlets, particularly online platforms with partisan or opaque commercial ties—openly ignored the legal ban, effectively reducing the election silence to an empty formality. CIVIL’s monitoring registered hundreds of cases of illegal agitation, including coordinated activity on social media, disguised media content, and public appearances by candidates and party officials on Election Day itself.

Numerous online portals published party logos, images of marked ballots, and direct calls to vote—actions that constitute clear and direct violations of the Electoral Code. Television and online programs aired under the guise of “news coverage” were, in reality, extensions of campaign messaging. Political parties actively used their official pages and affiliated fan groups to disseminate propaganda content, which was then amplified through organized activist networks, indicating a deliberate and systematic strategy rather than spontaneous misconduct.

Despite the scale and visibility of these violations, institutions once again failed to respond effectively. As in previous election

cycles, enforcement was sporadic and selective. The detention of a small number of individual offenders cannot be interpreted as evidence of a functioning system; on the contrary, it exposes the state's inability—or unwillingness—to ensure lawful and equitable conduct of elections. In practice, the law applied primarily to ordinary citizens, while political actors and influential media centers operated with impunity.

The failure to enforce election silence is not merely an operational weakness; it reflects a deeper institutional pathology. Regulatory bodies, prosecution services, and media oversight institutions possess sufficient legal authority to act, yet consistently refrain from doing so in a timely and effective manner. This pattern suggests not a lack of capacity, but a lack of political will or, at minimum, a tolerance for interference and informal pressure. When enforcement bodies internalize the expectation that violations will go unpunished, legal norms lose their binding force and become performative rather than regulatory.

This pattern sets a dangerous precedent, transforming election silence from a safeguard of voter free will into yet another tool of manipulation. When legal prohibitions are ignored en masse and consequences are absent, illegality becomes normalized and embedded in electoral practice.

From the perspective of democratic rights, the systematic erosion of election silence has a direct impact on voter autonomy. Continuous exposure to last-minute propaganda, emotional manipulation, and coordinated messaging deprives citizens of the legally guaranteed space to reflect free from pressure. This disproportionately affects undecided voters, marginalized groups, and citizens with limited media literacy, thereby reinforcing structural inequalities in political participation.

Beyond its legal and ethical dimensions, the mass breach of election silence also carries serious informational and security

implications. Social media platforms and online outlets were not merely channels of party agitation; they also served as vectors for disinformation, manipulative narratives, and coordinated psychological operations exhibiting the hallmarks of hybrid influence.

CIVIL's analysis identified content circulated during the silence period that was identical or closely aligned with narratives traced to Serbian and Russian propaganda sources, pointing to the existence of a structured media ecosystem linking domestic political actors with external influence operations. These findings are further documented in CIVIL's analysis "*Russian Influence on the 2025 Local Elections: Pro-Russian Parties, Moscow-Linked Financiers, Russian Propaganda in the Media*" ([CIVIL Today](#), October 22, 2025).

In this context, the election silence was not merely violated—it was systematically exploited to distort public perception, deepen polarization, and erode trust in democratic institutions. This constitutes a clear warning that the information security of the electoral process is severely compromised. Democracy cannot be safeguarded through formal prohibitions alone, but only through consistent enforcement of the law, institutional accountability, and genuine media transparency.

OBSTRUCTION OF OBSERVERS AND MEDIA

Although the majority of election boards performed their duties conscientiously, CIVIL recorded several cases of obstruction of the work of accredited observers and journalists, constituting a serious blow to the transparency and credibility of the electoral process. Independent observation and free media reporting are not auxiliary elements of elections; they are essential democratic safeguards designed to ensure accountability, deter abuse, and reinforce public trust.

At a number of polling stations, CIVIL observers were unjustifiably challenged, questioned, photographed, and, in some cases, removed from the premises, despite holding valid accreditation issued by the State Election Commission (SEC). Such actions represent a direct violation of the rights of observers and undermine the legal framework that guarantees independent oversight of elections.

These actions are in direct contradiction to the Electoral Code and to binding instructions issued by the State Election Commission, which explicitly guarantee accredited observers and journalists the right to be present at polling stations and to perform their duties without interference. They also run counter to international standards, including OSCE/ODIHR commitments, which recognize citizen observation and media freedom as essential components of free and fair elections. Failure to uphold these guarantees constitutes not only a procedural violation, but also a breach of democratic obligations voluntarily assumed by the state.

In several locations, members of election boards wrote down observers' personal identification numbers, photographed their credentials, and claimed—without legal basis—that observers were “not authorized to observe.” These practices have no grounding in electoral law and constitute clear breach of transparency principles. Moreover, they create an intimidating environment that discourages oversight and compromises the ability of observers to perform their mandate freely and effectively.

Beyond the immediate incidents, such practices produce a chilling effect, discouraging observers, journalists, and citizens from exercising their rights in future electoral processes and weakening the culture of civic oversight essential to democratic accountability.

CIVIL registered multiple cases of harassment and obstruction of media crews reporting from the field and publicly condemned these practices in real time, including during its live press conferences on Election Day in both the first and second rounds of voting. Journalists were verbally attacked by party activists and, in some instances, directly hindered in carrying out their reporting activities at or near polling stations. Such incidents contribute to an atmosphere of fear and self-censorship, directly violating the constitutionally guaranteed freedom of the media and the public's right to timely, accurate, and independent information about the electoral process.

The obstruction of observers and media cannot be dismissed as isolated lapses or misunderstandings. Rather, it reflects a broader culture of non-transparency, politicization, and resistance to scrutiny. When those responsible for administering elections perceive oversight as interference rather than as a democratic obligation, the foundations of electoral accountability are weakened.

The failure of institutions to respond decisively to such violations sends a troubling message: that accountability and independent scrutiny are treated as threats rather than as integral components of democratic governance. In the absence of clear sanctions and corrective measures, such practices risk becoming normalized, further eroding public trust and narrowing the space for democratic participation and informed public debate.

These practices must be understood within a broader pattern of disregard for—and obstruction of—the work of civil society organizations and independent media in the country. CIVIL has documented similar patterns of obstruction of observers and media in previous election cycles, indicating a recurring and systemic failure to respect citizen observation as a legitimate democratic function. This persistence reflects not merely individual misconduct, but an institutional inability — or unwillingness — to provide conditions for transparency, scrutiny, and the effective exercise of fundamental rights. In this sense, obstruction of oversight is not only an electoral issue, but a broader human rights concern that directly undermines democratic accountability.

NATIONALISM AS A SUBSTITUTE FOR GOVERNANCE: ETHNIC MOBILIZATION AND THE EROSION OF LOCAL DEMOCRACY

Nationalist narratives and ethnic mobilization once again dominated the 2025 local elections, which systematically displaced genuine local issues from the center of political competition. Rather than serving as forums for debating public services, urban development, environmental protection, municipal accountability, or local economic priorities, election campaigns were transformed into arenas of identity politics, fear-mongering, and polarization.

National and ethnic themes – particularly along the Macedonian–Albanian divide – were deliberately and strategically exploited to mobilize voters through emotional appeal rather than policy substance. Political actors framed electoral choices not in terms of programs or competence, but as matters of collective survival, ethnic loyalty, or existential threat. In doing so, they reduced complex social and governance challenges to simplistic identity-based binaries.

Instead of a contest of ideas and visions for local development, citizens were subjected to symbolic and emotional manipulation, in which historical myths, ethnic symbols, and narratives of grievance were weaponized for political gain. These narratives were amplified through affiliated media outlets and online platforms, creating an atmosphere in which rational debate was crowded out by fear, resentment, and mutual suspicion.

Beyond coded messaging, the campaign period witnessed a visible resurgence of open ethnic hatred in public space and on social media. CIVIL documented instances of explicit hate speech, dehumanizing language, and glorification of violence directed at entire communities, as well as the normalization of genocidal slogans and songs chanted by organized hooligan groups at sports events. Particularly alarming were incidents in which such chants occurred in the presence of senior state officials – including the Prime Minister, the Deputy Prime Minister, the Minister of Interior, and a leader of a governing coalition partner – without any public condemnation or institutional reaction. Silence in such contexts functions not as neutrality, but as tacit acceptance.

In many municipalities, nationalist mobilization functioned as a primary campaign strategy, deliberately cultivating artificial tensions to consolidate electoral bases and divert attention from governance failures and accountability.

Political elites and aligned media outlets used ethnic rhetoric as a tool of political control, often echoing or amplifying narratives promoted by regional propaganda centers that emphasize notions of “threatened identity,” “national betrayal,” or zero-sum competition between communities. What is particularly alarming is that such narratives are no longer marginal or fringe. They have become institutionalized, embedded in political discourse, and normalized within the media landscape.

This normalization created conditions in which ethnic hostility circulated more broadly across the electoral landscape.

While nationalist mobilization was most visibly articulated along the Macedonian–Albanian divide, CIVIL’s monitoring indicates that ethnic hate and exclusionary rhetoric circulated in multiple directions across the electoral landscape. Although not symmetrical in scale or political centrality, such expressions

contributed cumulatively to an environment of intolerance and normalized hostility.

Particularly alarming were instances of extreme hate speech directed at Roma communities, including against a mayoral candidate. These attacks went beyond political contestation and entered the realm of dehumanization and social exclusion, reinforcing long-standing patterns of marginalization. The absence of institutional reaction to such incidents signals a broader failure to protect vulnerable groups and to uphold the principle of equal political participation.

CIVIL also noted the use of coded ethnic language, open hate speech on social media, and extremist chants at public and sports events, some containing genocidal or eliminationist rhetoric. Such expressions were not isolated acts of individual misconduct, but part of a permissive environment in which hate speech was tolerated, relativized, or ignored – including in the presence of senior public officials – thereby reinforcing the perception that ethnic hostility carries no political or legal consequence.

The 2025 local elections also saw the deliberate injection of anti-Bulgarian rhetoric and hostility toward Bulgarian citizens and identity into local campaign narratives – often articulated from the position of central government authority. This form of externalized nationalism, directed at an EU member state and its citizens, was instrumentalized to project strength, deflect criticism, and reinforce a siege mentality, despite having no relevance to municipal governance. The use of such narratives in a local electoral context represents a profound distortion of democratic debate and a dangerous escalation of identity politics.

Ethnic mobilization also functions as a mechanism of evasion. By framing elections around identity, party elites deflect scrutiny from persistent governance failures – including corruption,

clientelism, institutional dysfunction, social inequality, and the erosion of the public interest. Nationalist rhetoric thus serves as a substitute for accountability, allowing political actors to rule through division rather than performance.

While this phenomenon is not new, the 2025 elections demonstrated a higher level of organization, coordination, and cynicism in its use. Instead of building trust across communities, political actors erected walls of fear, transforming local elections into referendums on ethnic dominance rather than opportunities for democratic self-governance.

This model of “nationalized” local elections carries profound consequences. It empties local democracy of substance, freezes political pluralism, and entrenches citizens’ dependence on party structures that distribute resources and opportunities along ethnic lines. The logic of ethnic bargaining spills into all areas of public life – from employment and public procurement to education and cultural policy – reinforcing patterns of exclusion and loyalty-based governance.

In such an environment, democracy is reduced to ethnic arithmetic, and society becomes hostage to its own insecurities. Local elections, which should empower citizens to shape their immediate communities, instead become symbolic battlegrounds for national agendas disconnected from the realities of everyday life. The result is not democratic choice, but managed polarization – a condition that weakens institutions, corrodes trust, and leaves local governance increasingly hollow.

FOREIGN INFLUENCE CHANGES HOW POLITICS WORKS: INFORMATION MANIPULATION AND THE WEAPONIZATION OF ELECTORAL VULNERABILITIES

This chapter examines how foreign-aligned information operations no longer merely influence narratives, but actively reshape political incentives, behavior, and competition in North Macedonia.

Beyond domestic institutional and political weaknesses, the 2025 local elections were also accompanied by systematic foreign influence operations and coordinated information manipulation, originating primarily from Russia and Serbia and channeled through a combination of domestic political actors, media outlets, online networks, and influential religious structures.

In particular, segments of the religious sphere functioned both as a conduit for Serbian and Russian ideological narratives and as an active legitimizing force for the ruling political establishment at the central level. Through symbolic authority, value-based messaging, and selective moral framing, religious actors contributed to the normalization of identity-based politics, geopolitical alignment cues, and resistance to democratic scrutiny — extending foreign-aligned influence beyond the media space and into the cultural and societal domain.

Such influence operations are not new. CIVIL has documented their presence over multiple election cycles and political developments. However, during the 2025 local elections, these

operations appeared more synchronized, more strategically integrated, and more difficult to detect. Rather than relying on overt propaganda, foreign influence increasingly operated through indirect amplification, local intermediaries, and narratives carefully adapted to domestic political and cultural contexts.

The situation in the country has evolved. Despite continued denial by parts of the expert, civil society, media, and political communities, foreign influence is no longer an abstract risk or external hypothesis. It is empirically observable — and it now restructures political behavior. Rather than merely shaping narratives or opinions, foreign-aligned influence increasingly alters the incentives, strategies, and conduct of domestic political actors. It rewards escalation over moderation, identity conflict over policy debate, and polarization over governance, thereby reshaping the practical logic of political competition itself.

CIVIL's investigations identified several narratives circulating during the campaign that originated from pro-Russian and pro-Serbian sources. These narratives promoted themes such as "traditional values," "defense of national and religious identity," and alleged "threats from the West, the European Union, and NATO." While framed as cultural or ideological positions, these messages served a clear strategic purpose: to reframe local elections as geopolitical confrontations and to delegitimize democratic institutions and Euro-Atlantic integration.

Once integrated into domestic political discourse, these narratives diverted public attention away from local governance, accountability, and service delivery, redirecting it toward existential fears and identity-based mobilization.

Crucially, the function of these influence operations extends beyond the dissemination of narratives. By consistently privileging identity-based conflict, geopolitical framing, and existential threat rhetoric, foreign-aligned messaging recalibrates

the political agenda itself. Actors who amplify polarizing, nationalist, or confrontational discourse are systematically rewarded — through media dynamics and platform amplification — with visibility, attention, and mobilized support, while policy-oriented, reform-focused, and moderation-driven voices are marginalized. In this environment, political success becomes increasingly tied to radicalization rather than governance, and emotional mobilization replaces substantive debate. Foreign influence thus reshapes political incentives, not merely public opinion — rewarding escalation, punishing restraint, and distorting the conditions of democratic competition.

The repeated invocation of external threats and internal betrayal did not merely shape rhetoric, but reinforced the very incentive structure described above — privileging fear-based mobilization over governance and consolidating a political environment in which polarization becomes electorally advantageous.

A key feature of these operations was the role of media outlets with opaque ownership structures and unclear sources of financing, particularly online portals. These platforms distributed content originating from Serbian or Russian propaganda centers, often disseminated through social media and messaging applications linked to domestic political structures. Presented as “analytical pieces,” “commentaries,” or “alternative viewpoints,” such content in reality reproduced foreign disinformation narratives aimed at undermining trust in democratic institutions and discrediting Euro-Atlantic values.

In many instances, CIVIL documented identical or near-identical content being amplified simultaneously by party networks, affiliated fan pages, and individuals connected to specific political circles. This pattern strongly suggests coordination rather than coincidence, pointing to an organized communication ecosystem rather than spontaneous expression of opinion.

Through these mechanisms, the propaganda logic of Belgrade and Moscow is effectively imported into the domestic information space, while maintaining the appearance of local authenticity. This creates an illusion of indigenous legitimacy for narratives that are, in substance, directed against the country's democratic development, institutional resilience, and strategic orientation.

This phenomenon is particularly dangerous because it unfolds in the absence of clear regulation, transparency, or institutional response. CIVIL has repeatedly warned that such forms of foreign influence constitute a direct assault on electoral integrity and national security. Yet the lack of meaningful engagement by regulatory bodies, public institutions, and much of the media sector indicates a troubling normalization of hybrid interference.

These influence operations are not confined to the media sphere. Their broader objective is to erode public trust, weaken democratic institutions, demoralize pro-European and reform-oriented actors, and cultivate cynicism toward democratic participation itself. By exploiting existing societal divisions and institutional weaknesses, foreign actors magnify the impact of domestic dysfunction.

When institutions fail, oversight is obstructed, voters are pressured, identities are weaponized, and the information space is compromised, foreign influence does not need to break in — it is invited in. This dynamic does not absolve domestic actors of responsibility; rather, it underscores how internal institutional weaknesses and political choices create the conditions in which external interference becomes effective.

The absence of systematic institutional acknowledgment or countermeasures reveals the depth of the problem: foreign influence has become embedded in everyday political and media discourse, treated as background noise rather than as a strategic threat. As long as these patterns of foreign propaganda, domestic politicization, and media manipulation remain

unaddressed, democratic processes will continue to operate under conditions of informed deception rather than informed choice.

In such an environment, elections may proceed formally and peacefully, but their capacity to reflect the genuine will of citizens is progressively undermined. The defense of democratic elections therefore cannot be separated from the defense of the information space, institutional accountability, and societal resilience against hybrid threats.

Read more:

Information Warfare and Propaganda Ecosystem in North Macedonia

<https://civil.today/information-warfare-and-propaganda-ecosystem-in-north-macedonia/>

BATTLEFIELD OF NARRATIVES: Russia's Hybrid Operations in North

Macedonia

<https://civil.today/battlefield-of-narratives-russias-hybrid-operations-in-north-macedonia/>

THE FRACTURE LINE: Russia's Hybrid Strategy in the Western Balkans

<https://civil.today/the-fracture-line-russias-hybrid-strategy-in-the-western-balkans/>

POST-ELECTION PERIOD: COMPLAINTS, CIVIC TESTIMONIES, AND THE CLOSURE OF ACCOUNTABILITY

The 2025 local elections in North Macedonia generated a notable number of formal complaints; however, none resulted in substantive corrective measures such as annulments, recounts with legal effect, or repeated voting based on established irregularities.

This outcome reflects a persistent and well-documented pattern in electoral adjudication: complaints are processed procedurally, but rarely lead to remedies capable of addressing structural deficiencies or restoring public confidence.

Most formal complaints (57 in total) concerned procedural irregularities at polling stations, vote-counting and tabulation discrepancies, and alleged violations related to special voting procedures. A significant proportion were rejected on formal grounds without substantive examination. Where complaints were reviewed on their merits, they were typically dismissed based on a narrow interpretation of the requirement that irregularities must demonstrably affect final results.

The adjudication process remained highly formalistic and reactive. The State Election Commission relied primarily on documentation produced by election boards and did not engage in proactive verification, field checks, or investigative follow-up.

The recurring application of the “no impact on results” standard sets an exceptionally high threshold for redress, particularly problematic in low-turnout elections and closely contested municipal races.

Post-election field engagement and civic testimonies

Beyond formal adjudication mechanisms, CIVIL extended its monitoring into the inter-round and post-election period through targeted field engagement and civic dialogue. Citizen Forums were organized in four municipalities – Kumanovo, Tetovo, Veles, and Shtip – bringing together representatives of civil society organizations, local media, community leaders, and political party representatives.

Participants reported a wide range of issues experienced during the electoral process, including pressure on voters, misuse of administrative resources, vote-buying, violations of election silence, unequal media exposure, and deficiencies in polling-station conduct. These forums provided structured space for collective reflection and revealed patterns that were consistent across municipalities, reinforcing the conclusion that observed violations were systemic rather than incidental.

In parallel, CIVIL remained open to citizen reports following election day and conducted more than 20 field verification visits, including individual interviews with eyewitnesses and the collection of firsthand testimonies. While many of these reports did not enter formal adjudication channels — due to fear of reprisal, lack of legal awareness, or limited confidence in institutional remedies — they constitute a substantial body of qualitative evidence pointing to unresolved systemic problems.

Institutional closure without substantive resolution

Despite this breadth of information, institutional responses remained limited. Legal avenues for appeal formally exist, yet they are slow, highly technical, and rarely result in effective remedies. This reinforces long-standing perceptions that

electoral accountability mechanisms prioritize procedural finality over substantive electoral integrity.

The gap between citizens' lived experiences and institutional responses remained largely unaddressed. Civic testimony collected in the post-election period was not meaningfully integrated into institutional learning or corrective action. As in previous election cycles, closure was achieved administratively rather than democratically.

Implications for democratic resilience

While the elections may meet formal legal standards, the handling of complaints and the limited responsiveness to post-election civic testimony expose structural weaknesses that continue to undermine public trust and democratic resilience. In a context of growing hybrid threats, disinformation, and political polarization, the absence of visible, corrective adjudication mechanisms risks normalizing procedural deficiencies and further weakening confidence in electoral institutions.

Key conclusion

The post-election complaint and adjudication system functions primarily as a procedural safeguard of results rather than as an effective instrument for protecting electoral integrity. The persistent gap between formal legality, civic experience, and institutional responsiveness remains one of the most critical vulnerabilities in North Macedonia's electoral framework.

ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE AND ELECTORAL VULNERABILITY: LESSONS FROM THE 2025 LOCAL ELECTIONS

The 2025 local elections in North Macedonia took place within a highly complex and contested information environment. This environment was shaped by a wider European security crisis, Russia's ongoing war of aggression against Ukraine, persistent foreign influence in the Western Balkans, and the rapid diffusion of new digital and artificial intelligence-based technologies into political communication.

Artificial intelligence did not dominate the electoral information space. However, it was systematically present and played a visible and increasingly consequential role in several areas of political communication—particularly in disinformation practices, synthetic media production, and algorithmic content optimization. While these developments were not, in themselves, transformative, they signaled a critical shift: AI has begun to augment, accelerate, and normalize existing ecosystems of information manipulation.

During the campaign period, AI appeared in multiple, interconnected forms. These included the use of synthetic media, most notably deepfakes; automated tools for captioning, engagement optimization, and algorithmic amplification; rapid translation and localization of foreign-origin narratives through AI-assisted rewriting; and, in a positive and transparent manner, the use of AI by CIVIL in the production of civic-education materials and public-interest content.

North Macedonia's experience illustrates both the heightened vulnerability of smaller democracies to emerging forms of AI-assisted manipulation and the potential for ethical actors to deploy AI responsibly in support of democratic resilience. The same technologies that enable rapid disinformation production can also, when governed by transparency and human oversight, strengthen public understanding and media literacy.

Key takeaway: AI was not a dominant force in the electoral information environment during the 2025 local elections. However, it was used consistently and strategically in key areas—particularly synthetic media, algorithmic boosting, and rapid narrative localization—making it an increasingly relevant factor in both disinformation efforts and civic-education initiatives.

Why this report matters

North Macedonia is situated on a critical democratic frontline. The country operates within a region exposed to Russian hybrid warfare, influenced by Serbian political and media networks, and marked by persistent foreign-aligned information operations. At the same time, it is experiencing democratic backsliding, institutional fragility, and rising political and social polarization.

The 2025 local elections demonstrate that the use of AI in political and electoral contexts is no longer theoretical. It is operational across the full spectrum of political communication—from satire and engagement optimization to coordinated narrative amplification and cross-platform manipulation.

The Western Balkans increasingly function as an early testing ground for hybrid tactics. The normalization of synthetic media and AI-assisted propaganda carries significant risks, particularly by accelerating distrust in institutions, blurring the boundary

between authentic and artificial political communication, and deepening citizen skepticism toward democratic processes.

At the same time, CIVIL's experience shows that civil society actors can—when supported by donors and international partners—use AI constructively to enhance media literacy, civic education, and early-warning capacity. The challenge is therefore not whether AI will shape future elections, but who will shape its use, under what norms, and to what ends.

The findings presented in this briefing offer relevant insights and early-warning signals for European and international stakeholders. They can inform the evolution of EU and OSCE/ODIHR election observation methodologies, guide donor programming focused on democratic resilience, and contribute to regional cooperation aimed at detecting and countering hybrid threats before they become structurally embedded.

Documented and likely uses of AI in the 2025 local elections in North Macedonia

Artificial intelligence did not dominate the information environment during the 2025 local elections in North Macedonia. Its presence was neither overwhelming nor uniformly visible to the general public. However, CIVIL's monitoring indicates that AI was used consistently, across multiple layers of political communication, in ways that were strategically relevant and increasingly normalized. Rather than appearing as a disruptive novelty, AI functioned as an accelerant and amplifier of existing patterns of disinformation, propaganda, and attention manipulation.

One of the most visible manifestations of AI use during the campaign was the appearance of AI-generated deepfakes. These were widely circulated on social media platforms, though most did not take the form of large-scale, deceptive

misinformation campaigns. Instead, they were typically short, stylized, or humorous videos and images designed to attract attention, provoke emotional reactions, and circulate virally. Their prevalence nevertheless marks an important shift: the normalization of synthetic media as a routine element of political communication.

Deepfakes were frequently used as tools of mockery and reputational discreditation. CIVIL observed AI-generated content in which the faces or voices of political figures were distorted, candidates were placed into fabricated or humiliating scenarios, and statements or behaviors were implied that had never occurred. While such content was often framed as satire or humor, its primary function was not entertainment but ridicule, delegitimization, and symbolic degradation. The impact of these materials lies less in factual deception than in their ability to erode dignity, undermine credibility, and shape emotional perceptions of political actors.

In parallel, some political campaigns used AI-generated content to boost candidate visibility in more “playful” or stylized ways. Candidates were presented through futuristic aesthetics, humorous exaggeration, or novelty formats designed to appeal to younger audiences, particularly on platforms such as TikTok and Instagram. While these practices may appear benign, they contribute to the gradual erosion of boundaries between legitimate creative campaigning and manipulative synthetic representation. The line between harmless digital experimentation and deceptive political communication is becoming increasingly blurred, raising significant risks for future electoral cycles.

Beyond content creation, AI played a significant role in algorithmic manipulation and attention optimization. CIVIL’s analysis indicates a shift from simple message dissemination toward systematic “attention engineering.” Political and propaganda actors used AI-assisted tools to test and refine

captions, slogans, hashtags, and emotional framing, tailoring content to platform-specific algorithms on Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, X, and Telegram. The goal was not merely to convey messages, but to maximize reach, engagement, and emotional resonance.

This process was further reinforced through AI-enabled cross-platform synchronization. Single narratives were rapidly transformed into multiple formats—short videos, reels, static posts, and visual assets—allowing coordinated networks to maintain coherence and visibility across platforms. Such workflows increased the resilience and adaptability of disinformation ecosystems, enabling narratives to persist even when individual posts were removed or deprioritized.

A particularly concerning development was the use of AI-assisted commenting and micro-influence techniques. CIVIL documented patterns suggesting the use of automated or semi-automated tools to generate large volumes of comments that mimicked organic public engagement. These comments reinforced dominant narratives, attacked opponents, and created artificial impressions of consensus or popular momentum. In this context, the threat does not lie solely in the content itself, but in the algorithmic amplification produced by adaptive, AI-driven engagement strategies.

Large Language Models (LLMs) were also used in the production of political propaganda. CIVIL observed “analysis-like” texts published on low-credibility portals and partisan platforms, often imitating expert commentary or journalistic analysis. These texts exhibited notable patterns, including near-identical messaging across different outlets, unusually rapid production cycles, and linguistic uniformity inconsistent with human authorship. Such characteristics strongly suggest scalable, low-cost generation of political narratives, allowing actors to flood the information space with superficially credible but substantively manipulative content.

AI-driven translation and localization further expanded the reach of foreign-origin narratives. Tools such as automated translation and LLM-assisted rewriting enabled rapid adaptation of Serbian and Russian talking points into Macedonian and Albanian. These translations were often polished, contextually adjusted, and blended with local grievances, making externally generated narratives appear domestically rooted. This localization process significantly increases the effectiveness of foreign influence by masking its origin and embedding it within familiar cultural and political frames.

In addition to textual content, AI was widely used in visual propaganda beyond deepfakes. AI-assisted imagery enabled the rapid production of visually appealing or provocative memes, reinforcement of nationalist symbolism, subtle manipulation of photographs to imply scandals, and near-real-time reaction to campaign developments. The speed, emotional impact, and low production cost of such visuals significantly enhanced their circulation and persuasive power.

Finally, CIVIL documented AI-enabled violations of election silence. AI tools allowed for instant regeneration of removed content, synchronized posting across multiple pages and networks, and algorithmic boosting during the legally mandated silence period. These practices indicate a systematic effort to circumvent regulation rather than isolated violations, further undermining the integrity of electoral safeguards.

Taken together, these findings demonstrate that AI did not redefine the 2025 elections on its own, but it increasingly structured how political messaging was produced, amplified, and normalized. AI has become an embedded component of the information ecosystem—one that accelerates manipulation, rewards attention-driven strategies, and challenges the capacity of institutions, media, and citizens to distinguish between authentic political communication and engineered influence.

Positive and responsible use of AI: The example of CIVIL

AI was not used exclusively for manipulation or disinformation during the 2025 local elections. CIVIL applied artificial intelligence in a responsible, transparent, and explicitly ethical manner, demonstrating that the same technologies exploited by malign actors can be redirected toward strengthening democratic resilience, public understanding, and civic participation.

Throughout the electoral cycle, CIVIL used AI tools to support civic education and media literacy initiatives aimed at helping citizens better understand democratic processes and recognize information manipulation. AI-assisted workflows contributed to the production of clear, accessible explainers on voting procedures and electoral rights, as well as practical guides designed to help citizens identify disinformation, synthetic media, and deepfakes. In addition, AI supported the development of scenario-based educational materials used in trainings for youth, election observers, and civic activists, enhancing both reach and adaptability while remaining firmly grounded in human oversight.

AI was also employed in the creation of visual content intended to improve public access to information. CIVIL used AI-assisted design tools to produce clean, accessible illustrations and infographics that summarized monitoring findings, highlighted key electoral risks, and supported public communication efforts. These visual materials were designed to clarify complex information rather than to persuade or mobilize politically, serving an informational and educational purpose in line with CIVIL's mandate.

Crucially, all AI-generated or AI-assisted content produced by CIVIL was subject to strict ethical safeguards. Outputs were reviewed and approved by human editors, avoided partisan or political messaging, and were transparently acknowledged as AI-assisted where appropriate. The use of AI was framed as a

technical and communicative support tool, not as a substitute for human judgment, analysis, or accountability.

CIVIL's experience underscores an important conclusion: ethical and transparent use of AI can strengthen democracy rather than undermine it. However, this potential will remain unrealized unless civil society organizations are equipped with adequate resources, skills, and institutional support to remain competitive in an information environment increasingly shaped by technologically sophisticated malign actors. Without such support, the asymmetry between those who manipulate and those who defend democratic integrity will continue to grow.

Foreign influence dimensions: Converging Serbian and Russian narrative ecosystems

CIVIL's monitoring indicates that AI-enabled disinformation during the 2025 local elections did not operate in isolation, but was embedded within broader foreign influence ecosystems originating primarily from Serbia and Russia. These ecosystems did not function as separate or competing channels; rather, they increasingly converged in narrative content, messaging strategies, and modes of dissemination, forming a mutually reinforcing information environment tailored to domestic vulnerabilities.

Serbian-origin information networks played a particularly visible role in amplifying identity-based and nationalist narratives within the domestic information space. Operating through a constellation of online portals, social media pages, and informal digital communities, these networks disseminated content that framed political competition through ethnic loyalty, historical grievance, and cultural threat. AI-assisted tools were used to accelerate this process, enabling rapid content generation, visual adaptation, and stylistic localization that made externally sourced

narratives appear native, familiar, and socially embedded. Through algorithmic amplification and coordinated sharing, such content reached wide Macedonian audiences while retaining the appearance of organic grassroots discourse.

Parallel to this, Russian-origin narratives circulating across Europe were systematically adapted and localized for domestic consumption. CIVIL observed repeated patterns in which talking points aligned with Kremlin-aligned messaging were translated, linguistically refined, and culturally adjusted using AI tools, allowing them to blend seamlessly with local grievances and political anxieties. These narratives rarely appeared in their original geopolitical form. Instead, they were reframed as commentary on values, morality, sovereignty, or social decay, thereby obscuring their origin while preserving their strategic intent.

Recurring themes included portrayals of the West as morally corrupt or decadent, NATO as a destabilizing force rather than a security framework, growing “fatigue” with Ukraine and international solidarity, and appeals to “traditional values” positioned in opposition to democratic pluralism and human rights norms. When combined with local socio-economic frustrations and identity-based politics, these narratives gained emotional resonance disproportionate to their factual basis.

What makes this convergence particularly effective is not merely the content itself, but the way it reshapes the information environment. Serbian and Russian narratives increasingly functioned as complementary layers of influence: Serbian networks provided regional legitimacy and linguistic proximity, while Russian narratives supplied ideological framing and geopolitical direction. AI-enabled translation, rewriting, and visual production served as the connective tissue between these layers, allowing influence operations to scale rapidly and adapt continuously.

Through this mechanism, foreign influence did more than introduce external viewpoints into domestic debate. It altered the structure of political communication by privileging polarizing identity frames, rewarding confrontational rhetoric, and marginalizing policy-based discourse. In this sense, Serbian- and Russian-aligned information flows did not simply shape opinions; they recalibrated incentives within the political system itself, reinforcing actors willing to amplify division while weakening those advocating moderation, reform, or democratic accountability.

This convergence illustrates how modern foreign influence operates less as direct propaganda and more as strategic integration into domestic discourse. By embedding itself within local narratives, languages, and media ecosystems, foreign-aligned messaging becomes difficult to isolate, regulate, or counter—especially in environments where institutional responses remain fragmented or hesitant. As a result, elections may proceed formally and peacefully, while the informational foundations of democratic choice are progressively hollowed out.

Impact on election integrity: Informational distortion without technical disruption

CIVIL's monitoring indicates that artificial intelligence did not directly affect the technical administration of the 2025 local elections in North Macedonia. Voting procedures, ballot handling, tabulation, and the formal mechanics of election day were not compromised through AI-enabled interference. However, this absence of technical disruption should not be mistaken for an absence of impact. On the contrary, AI exerted a significant and increasingly decisive influence on a different dimension of electoral integrity: the information environment in which voters formed their choices.

The most immediate effect of AI was a substantial increase in both the volume and velocity of disinformation circulating throughout the campaign and election period. Automated content generation, rapid rewriting, and algorithmic optimization enabled political and propaganda actors to disseminate emotionally charged narratives at a scale and speed that far exceeded the capacity of traditional media oversight, fact-checking initiatives, or institutional response mechanisms. As a result, misleading or manipulative content often reached large audiences before corrective or contextual information could gain visibility.

A particularly consequential development was the normalization of synthetic media. The repeated presence of AI-generated images, videos, stylized deepfakes, and manipulated visuals gradually eroded the distinction between authentic and fabricated content. Even when individual pieces were not overtly deceptive, their cumulative effect weakened citizens' ability to assess credibility, intent, and source reliability. This erosion of epistemic certainty — of knowing what can be trusted — represents a serious threat to informed democratic decision-making.

In such an environment, voters faced growing difficulty in judging the authenticity of political messages, the sincerity of candidates, and the reliability of information circulating online. AI-enhanced content blurred the boundaries between satire, propaganda, misinformation, and legitimate political expression, producing confusion rather than clarity. This ambiguity disproportionately benefited actors willing to exploit emotional triggers, identity-based fears, and sensationalism.

At the same time, AI-driven disinformation reinforced existing polarization. Algorithmic amplification consistently favored content that provoked anger, fear, or resentment, deepening social and political divides and crowding out deliberative, policy-oriented discourse. Rather than facilitating pluralism and

informed debate, the information ecosystem increasingly rewarded extremity and confrontation.

Finally, the use of AI widened the technological asymmetry between malign actors and democratic institutions. While coordinated networks, political operatives, and propaganda actors adopted AI tools rapidly and flexibly, public institutions, election bodies, and regulatory authorities largely lacked the capacity, expertise, or mandate to respond effectively. This imbalance left democratic actors structurally disadvantaged in the information domain.

The 2025 local elections thus mark a critical threshold: the first electoral cycle in North Macedonia in which AI was not peripheral, experimental, or incidental, but systematically embedded in the political information ecosystem. While its effects were indirect rather than technical, they were nonetheless profound. Elections conducted in a compromised information environment may remain procedurally orderly, yet progressively lose their capacity to reflect the genuine, informed will of citizens.

Strategic risks for 2026 and beyond: From experimental use to systemic threat

The 2025 local elections marked a transitional moment in the use of artificial intelligence within the political information space. While AI-enabled manipulation remained relatively contained, fragmented, and unevenly deployed, the trajectory ahead is clear. Without timely safeguards, institutional adaptation, and societal resilience, the risks posed by AI to democratic processes are likely to intensify significantly in future electoral cycles — particularly in national elections and high-stakes geopolitical contexts.

One of the most acute emerging risks is the evolution of political deepfakes from marginal or humorous content into sophisticated

instruments of deception. Future campaigns may feature convincingly realistic synthetic speeches attributed to political leaders, fabricated audio “leaks” designed to simulate private conversations, or last-minute scandal videos released strategically to evade verification before voting. Such content does not need to persuade a majority to be effective; its power lies in creating doubt, confusion, and hesitation at critical moments. In polarized societies, even limited exposure can shift turnout, suppress participation, or delegitimize outcomes after the fact.

Equally concerning is the growing capacity for highly targeted manipulation. AI enables micro-targeting of specific demographic and identity-based groups at an unprecedented level of precision. Ethnic communities, diaspora populations, and younger voters can be addressed with tailored narratives adapted to their language, cultural references, grievances, and media habits. This form of personalized influence undermines the very notion of a shared public debate, replacing it with fragmented and invisible persuasion environments in which different groups receive fundamentally different political realities.

Such targeting is particularly dangerous in the Western Balkans, where unresolved identity tensions, transnational media ecosystems, and foreign influence networks already intersect. AI-enhanced targeting allows malign actors to exploit these vulnerabilities simultaneously and discreetly, reducing the likelihood of detection while amplifying impact.

Over time, the cumulative effect of these practices threatens to erode democratic trust itself. As synthetic media becomes normalized and manipulation grows more sophisticated, citizens may increasingly struggle to distinguish authentic political communication from fabrication. This uncertainty risks fostering cynicism toward all political messages, weakening confidence in institutions, media, and electoral processes alike. When voters begin to assume that “everything could be fake,” democratic

engagement gives way to disengagement, apathy, or radicalization.

The danger, therefore, is not limited to individual disinformation incidents, but to a broader erosion of democratic credibility. AI-driven manipulation accelerates polarization, rewards extremity, and undermines the foundations of trust upon which democratic governance depends.

Without proactive investment in detection capacities, ethical standards, regulatory adaptation, and public resilience, the use of AI in future elections risks shifting from an auxiliary tool of manipulation to a systemic threat. The experience of the 2025 local elections should thus be understood not as an endpoint, but as an early warning — a preview of challenges that will define the democratic battlefield in 2026 and beyond.

Strategic recommendations: Responding to AI-enabled disinformation and hybrid influence

The findings of this Special Analytical Briefing confirm that AI-enabled disinformation is no longer a hypothetical or future concern. It is an emerging and operational reality that is already reshaping electoral information environments. Responding effectively requires coordinated, multi-level action — nationally, regionally, and internationally — and a clear distribution of responsibility among state institutions, independent regulators, digital platforms, media actors, and civil society.

AI-assisted manipulation operates across borders, adapts rapidly to regulatory and informational countermeasures, and exploits structural weaknesses in democratic systems. Fragmented, reactive, or purely national responses are therefore structurally insufficient. What is required is a strategic approach that treats

the information space as an integral component of electoral integrity and democratic security.

1. Strengthening monitoring, early warning, and detection

A first priority is the development of robust monitoring and early-warning capacities capable of detecting AI-enabled disinformation and coordinated manipulation in real time. This includes establishing or supporting a regional AI Disinformation Observatory for the Western Balkans, built around national monitoring nodes and shared analytical standards. Such a structure would enable systematic tracking of narrative transfers, cross-platform amplification, and coordinated inauthentic behavior that routinely crosses national borders.

AI-related indicators — including synthetic media use, algorithmic amplification patterns, and coordinated content regeneration — should be integrated into existing early-warning systems related to elections and democratic integrity. Particular attention should be paid to cross-border information flows linked to Serbian- and Russian-origin networks, which CIVIL has documented as persistent vectors of influence.

Effective monitoring also depends on improved access to platform data and transparent cooperation with digital service providers. This must be pursued in line with EU standards, fundamental rights, and data-protection principles, ensuring that independent monitoring is possible without undermining freedom of expression or privacy.

2. Building institutional and societal capacity

Technological asymmetry currently favors malign actors. Addressing this imbalance requires sustained investment in institutional and societal capacity. Election administrations, media regulators, and relevant public institutions should receive **mandatory, structured training** on AI-related disinformation

risks, including synthetic media, algorithmic amplification, and coordinated manipulation techniques.

At the same time, journalists, fact-checkers, and civil society organizations require targeted capacity-building in areas such as deepfake detection, OSINT and digital forensics, algorithmic analysis, and ethical AI use. Without such expertise, democratic actors will remain structurally disadvantaged in the information domain.

AI and media literacy must also be integrated into formal and informal education systems, with a particular focus on youth and first-time voters. In an environment saturated with synthetic and emotionally optimized content, the ability to critically assess authenticity, intent, and source credibility is no longer optional — it is a prerequisite for meaningful democratic participation.

3. Modernizing legal and regulatory frameworks

Regulatory vacuums allow AI-enabled manipulation to operate with minimal consequence. National legislation should therefore be aligned with evolving EU standards on digital political campaigning, transparency, and accountability. This includes introducing clear disclosure requirements for AI-generated or AI-assisted political content, enabling citizens to understand when and how synthetic tools are being used to influence them.

Legal responsibility for the use of synthetic media in political communication must be clearly defined, including sanctions for deceptive practices that intentionally mislead voters. At the same time, regulation must be carefully designed to protect freedom of expression and legitimate political debate, focusing on coordinated, manipulative, and inauthentic abuse rather than content policing.

4. Adapting election observation and oversight

Election observation methodologies must evolve to reflect the reality that elections no longer take place solely at polling

stations. The information space has become a decisive arena of electoral competition and must be treated as such.

Domestic and international observation missions should integrate AI-related threat assessments into their frameworks, supported by standardized indicators for synthetic media use, algorithmic manipulation, and coordinated inauthentic behavior. Closer cooperation is also required between election management bodies, media regulators, and cybersecurity institutions during election periods, enabling faster detection, attribution, and response to information-based threats.

5. Safeguarding the information space and media integrity

AI accelerates disinformation, but weak regulation and politicized media ecosystems amplify it further. Strengthening the independence, professionalism, and effectiveness of media regulators — particularly during election periods — is therefore essential.

Professional and ethical standards for election reporting should be actively promoted, including responsible handling of deepfakes and manipulated content. Sensationalist amplification of synthetic media can unintentionally serve the objectives of disinformation actors. Digital platforms, for their part, should be encouraged — and where appropriate required — to enforce policies against coordinated manipulation consistently and transparently, rather than selectively or reactively.

6. Supporting ethical and pro-democratic use of ai

AI should not be monopolized by manipulative actors. Democratic resilience depends on actively supporting ethical, transparent, and pro-democratic uses of AI. This includes funding and scaling AI-driven civic-education tools, fact-checking initiatives, and voter-information platforms that strengthen public understanding rather than exploit emotional vulnerability.

Civil society initiatives using AI for democratic purposes should be supported through sustainable funding, skills development, and institutional recognition. At the same time, publicly funded civic projects should be subject to ethical review and public acknowledgment of AI use, reinforcing transparency and accountability.

7. Strengthening international and regional cooperation

AI-enabled disinformation must be treated as a shared democratic and security challenge, not a purely domestic issue. Hybrid threats exploit weak links across borders, jurisdictions, and institutional capacities. Resilience must therefore be collective.

Regional knowledge exchange, joint training, and shared analytical frameworks should be actively supported, particularly in the context of EU enlargement, security cooperation, and democracy-support policies. Integrating AI-disinformation resilience into broader European strategies is essential to preventing the normalization of synthetic manipulation in emerging democracies.

8. Implementation priority and strategic outlook

AI-enabled disinformation operates at machine speed, while democratic responses remain slow, fragmented, and under-resourced. Delaying action until large-scale electoral disruption occurs would mean responding too late. Institutions must treat AI-assisted manipulation as an immediate democratic risk and act accordingly — through enforceable regulation, sustained investment in monitoring capacity, and genuine partnership with civil society.

The cost of inaction will not be measured in technological failure, but in eroded trust, normalized deception, and diminished democratic choice.

Conclusion

The 2025 Local Elections in North Macedonia were not defined by artificial intelligence. However, this Special Analytical Briefing demonstrates that AI was consistently present and increasingly influential in shaping the electoral information environment. Its role was neither marginal nor decisive, but indicative of a structural transition: AI has begun to embed itself into the mechanics of political communication and influence.

Malign actors used AI to enhance disinformation through deepfakes, algorithmic boosting, rapid translation, and localized propaganda. While these tools did not fundamentally alter voter behavior on their own, they significantly increased the speed, volume, and sophistication of manipulation, making false or misleading narratives harder to detect, counter, and attribute. In a polarized and institutionally fragile environment, even limited AI-enabled interference carries disproportionate impact.

At the same time, CIVIL and other democratic actors demonstrated that AI can be applied transparently and ethically to strengthen civic education, media literacy, and public-interest communication. This contrast underscores a defining reality of the current democratic moment:

AI can support democratic resilience or accelerate democratic erosion — depending on who uses it, and for what purpose.

Where institutional credibility is already strained, enforcement inconsistent, and trust in political communication low, AI accelerates erosion. Where democratic safeguards, oversight mechanisms, and public awareness are actively reinforced, AI can enhance resilience and accountability. The decisive factor is not the technology itself, but governance, institutional responsibility, and democratic values.

The 2025 election cycle therefore represents both a warning and an opportunity. Without early investment in monitoring capacity, ethical standards, and civil society competence, AI-enabled manipulation risks becoming normalized and structurally embedded. With timely action, however, democracies can prevent synthetic deception from becoming routine and preserve the integrity of political choice.

International cooperation, technical assistance, and sustained investment in local capacity are essential — not as a future contingency, but as an immediate democratic necessity — to protect electoral integrity in North Macedonia, the Western Balkans, and across Europe.

RECOMMENDATIONS OF CIVIL: RESTORING ELECTORAL INTEGRITY AND DEMOCRATIC TRUST

The findings presented in this report confirm that the challenges affecting electoral integrity in North Macedonia are neither isolated nor incidental. They are systemic, recurrent, and deeply institutionalized. Addressing them requires more than technical adjustments, procedural formalism, or declarative commitments. It demands a comprehensive, coordinated, and sustained reform effort grounded in democratic principles, institutional accountability, and the protection of citizens' political rights.

The following recommendations are structured in two interlinked categories:

- I. General and structural recommendations
- II. Recommendations arising directly from the 2025 Local Elections

Together, they aim to restore public trust in elections and strengthen the democratic capacity of institutions and society.

I. General and structural recommendations

1. Restore electoral integrity as a democratic priority

Electoral integrity must be treated as a core democratic obligation, not merely as an administrative or logistical task. State institutions must explicitly recognize that procedural compliance alone is insufficient. Public trust, equality of

participation, and substantive fairness are essential criteria of democratic elections.

This requires a clear, sustained, and cross-institutional political commitment to:

- zero tolerance for electoral manipulation, pressure, and abuse of public resources;
- consistent, impartial, and timely enforcement of electoral laws;
- accountability for violations at all levels of authority, without exception.

2. Comprehensive reform of the Electoral Code

The Electoral Code requires substantive and holistic reform, not fragmented, last-minute amendments driven by short-term political interests. Legislative changes should:

- be adopted well in advance of elections, in line with ODIHR and international standards;
- address structural vulnerabilities rather than isolated symptoms;
- be developed through inclusive, transparent consultation with civil society, independent experts, and election stakeholders.

Frequent late-stage amendments undermine legal certainty, institutional preparedness, and public trust.

Selective communication and the exclusion of relevant civil society organizations and experts based on political convenience must cease. Electoral reform processes must be open, expert-driven, and accountable.

3. Professionalization and accountability of election administration

Election administration bodies at all levels must be professionalized, depoliticized, and held accountable for both action and inaction.

Key measures include:

- standardized, mandatory, and recurring training for all election board members;
- clear operational protocols for technical failures, irregularities, and crisis situations;
- effective disciplinary mechanisms for misconduct, negligence, or abuse of authority.

Impunity must be replaced by predictable, transparent, and enforceable accountability.

4. Protection and recognition of citizen observation

Citizen observation must be formally recognized, protected, and respected as a democratic safeguard.

Institutions must:

- ensure unobstructed access for accredited observers and journalists;
- provide clear, binding instructions to election boards on observers' rights and obligations;
- sanction any obstruction, intimidation, or harassment of observers and media representatives.

The Electoral Code already clearly defines citizen observation as a legitimate democratic activity conducted by civil society organizations with a proven human-rights mandate. This provision must be consistently implemented in practice.

Respect for scrutiny is a prerequisite for democratic legitimacy.

5. Safeguarding the information space

Electoral integrity cannot be separated from the integrity of the information environment.

Authorities must:

- strengthen qualitative—not merely quantitative—oversight of media and online platforms;
- enforce election silence and political advertising rules consistently and without exception;
- address coordinated disinformation and foreign influence operations through lawful, transparent, and rights-respecting mechanisms.

Media regulators must act independently and predictably, not selectively or symbolically.

The current model of state financing for excessively costly and weakly regulated campaigns should be reassessed, as it distorts fair competition and enables structural media dependence.

II. Recommendations arising from the 2025 Local Elections

6. Urgent reform of the Voters Register

The Voters Register must be treated as a foundational element of electoral trust.

Immediate actions must include:

- a comprehensive, transparent, and independent audit of the register;
- clearly defined institutional responsibility with binding timelines for corrections;

- public disclosure of methodologies, procedures, and outcomes.

The continued presence of deceased persons and the exclusion of eligible voters are unacceptable in any democratic system.

7. Reassessment of fingerprint identification technology

The repeated malfunctioning of fingerprint identification devices requires an evidence-based reassessment of their continued use.

Institutions must:

- conduct an independent, public evaluation of the technology;
- significantly improve testing, training, and contingency planning;
- ensure that technology enhances—rather than obstructs—equality, efficiency, and trust.

Technology cannot compensate for weak institutions or inadequate preparation.

8. Effective enforcement of Election Silence

Election silence must be restored as a meaningful democratic safeguard.

This requires:

- clear and enforceable monitoring mechanisms;
- accountability for political parties, candidates, and media outlets;
- sanctions that are timely, proportionate, and consistently applied.

Selective enforcement erodes both legality and legitimacy.

9. Combating pressure, clientelism, and vote buying

Voter pressure and vote buying must be acknowledged as systemic challenges, not marginal deviations.

Measures must include:

- proactive investigations by prosecution and oversight bodies;
- effective protection for whistleblowers and affected citizens;
- strict separation of social assistance, employment, and public services from political influence.

Elections cannot be free where fear, dependency, or coercion shape voter choice.

10. Ensuring accessibility and equality of participation

Accessibility for persons with disabilities and elderly citizens is a legal and democratic obligation.

Institutions must:

- ensure that all polling stations meet accessibility standards;
- assign clear responsibility for compliance;
- treat repeated failures as discriminatory practices subject to sanction.

When inaccessibility persists across election cycles, it is no longer a technical issue—it is systemic discrimination.

11. Countering nationalist manipulation and identity politics

Political actors and institutions must take responsibility for curbing the instrumentalization of ethnic and nationalist narratives.

This includes:

- strengthening ethical standards for political campaigning;
- consistent responses to hate speech and incitement;
- promoting issue-based debate focused on governance, accountability, and public interest.

Democracy cannot thrive where fear and division replace responsibility and policy.

12. Addressing foreign influence and hybrid threats

Foreign influence operations targeting elections must be treated as a matter of democratic resilience and national security.

The state must:

- formally acknowledge the existence of coordinated influence campaigns;
- strengthen institutional capacities for detection, analysis, and response;
- cooperate systematically with civil society and international partners.

Internal institutional weaknesses create openings for external interference.

Implementation priority note

The implementation of these recommendations cannot be postponed or selectively applied without further erosion of democratic legitimacy.

Institutions bear a legal and constitutional responsibility to act on the documented findings of this report. Failure to initiate measurable reforms—particularly regarding the Voters Register,

election administration accountability, enforcement of election silence, and protection of observers—will constitute not a lack of capacity, but a lack of will.

Electoral integrity is not an abstract principle; it is a test of institutional credibility.

Each subsequent election conducted without addressing these failures deepens public distrust and normalizes democratic decline. Immediate, transparent, and verifiable action is therefore not optional—it is a democratic obligation.

PART II

SPECIAL THEMATIC REPORTS

POLITICIZATION OF PUBLIC SPACE, CULTURE, AND LAW: EARLY AND INDIRECT CAMPAIGNING

During the pre-election period, CIVIL's long-term monitoring identified multiple instances of indirect and early campaigning conducted outside the formally regulated campaign period. These activities, while presented as cultural, patriotic, or civic initiatives, exhibited clear political characteristics and raised serious concerns regarding the circumvention of legal safeguards intended to ensure equal conditions for electoral competition.

One illustrative example was a touring music initiative publicly promoted as a "Concert Caravan," held between late August and late September. The initiative was advertised through vague promotional materials lacking essential information about organizers, locations, or sources of funding, and was framed as a "patriotic mission" and a "sound of national unity." The timing of the events, the profiles of the performers, and the messaging used strongly resembled patterns observed during previous election campaigns.

Notably, the majority of performers associated with the initiative had previously appeared at campaign events and political rallies of a single political party. Despite repeated public inquiries by CIVIL regarding financing, sponsorship, and organizational responsibility, no clarification was provided. This lack of transparency, combined with the political symbolism and strategic timing of the events, suggests an attempt to bypass campaign finance rules and initiate electoral mobilization prior to the legally prescribed campaign period.

Such practices undermine the principle of equal opportunity among electoral contestants and erode public trust in the fairness of the electoral framework. When cultural or patriotic narratives are instrumentalized for political mobilization without clear accountability, the boundary between legitimate civic expression and covert campaigning becomes dangerously blurred.

Instrumentalization of identity and national narratives ahead of elections

Long-term monitoring further revealed a renewed escalation of nationalist rhetoric and ethnic polarization well before the official start of the election campaign. Historical grievances, identity-based narratives, and sensitive interethnic issues were repeatedly reintroduced into public discourse, often amplified by political actors and social media ecosystems.

Statements by high-ranking government officials in the period preceding the elections contributed to heightened ethnic tensions, particularly around interpretations of the 2001 conflict and the Ohrid Framework Agreement. While formal commitments to coexistence and European values were reiterated at official events, these messages were contradicted by confrontational rhetoric that fueled polarized reactions among party supporters and online communities.

The absence of timely and responsible political restraint allowed inflammatory narratives to circulate unchecked, resulting in waves of hate speech and ethnic antagonism on social media platforms. This pattern reflects a broader strategy of mobilizing voters through fear, identity, and perceived existential threats rather than through substantive debate on local governance, public services, and accountability.

Such dynamics are especially damaging in the context of local elections, where democratic competition should focus on concrete community needs. The normalization of nationalist

mobilization distorts the purpose of local democracy and entrenches division as a tool of political control.

Legal uncertainty and institutional barriers for independent candidates

CIVIL's monitoring documented institutional and legislative instability affecting the participation of independent candidates. Despite public declarations in favor of inclusivity, the process of amending the Electoral Code ahead of the elections remained marked by political calculation, procedural inconsistency, and legal uncertainty.

Although proposals were introduced to lower signature thresholds for independent candidates, Parliament failed to adopt the necessary amendments, leaving independent lists in a state of legal ambiguity. While one amendment reducing the required number of signatures was formally accepted, the broader package of changes did not receive sufficient parliamentary support, resulting in an unresolved legal framework shortly before the elections.

In response to this legislative vacuum, the State Election Commission adopted ad-hoc regulatory measures allowing independent candidates to participate with two supporting signatures. While this decision enabled the continuation of the electoral process, it also raised serious questions regarding legal predictability, institutional coherence, and separation of powers.

This sequence of events highlights a systemic problem: instead of stable, clear, and inclusive electoral rules, independent candidates are repeatedly forced to navigate shifting requirements, political bargaining, and last-minute institutional improvisation. Such conditions undermine the constitutional principle of equal political participation and reinforce the dominance of established political parties.

CIVIL reiterates that independent candidates and citizen initiatives are a vital component of democratic pluralism. Administrative or legal barriers restricting their participation constitute a direct limitation of voting rights.

Selective reform and the erosion of legal certainty

The repeated practice of proposing Electoral Code amendments after elections have been called, often under expedited procedures, further undermines legal certainty and public confidence. While some proposed changes were justified as technical alignments with administrative restructuring, others introduced substantive modifications unrelated to electoral integrity, such as the redefinition of online media.

Selective and inconsistent approach to electoral reform, and the failure to fully implement Constitutional Court decisions, creates a regulatory environment characterized by uncertainty, political discretion, and institutional contradiction. This pattern reinforces perceptions that electoral rules are adjusted to serve political interests rather than democratic principles.

All this reveals persistent patterns of politicization of public space, selective application of law, and instrumentalization of culture, identity, and institutions in the pre-election period. Early campaigning disguised as cultural activity, the exploitation of nationalist narratives, and legal uncertainty for independent candidates all contribute to an uneven electoral playing field.

These practices are not isolated incidents but manifestations of a systemic approach to political competition that prioritizes control, symbolism, and institutional maneuvering over transparency, inclusivity, and substantive democratic choice. In such an environment, trust in elections is eroded long before ballots are cast.

MUCH MONEY, LITTLE DEMOCRACY: POLITICAL COMPETITION AND CAMPAIGN FINANCING AHEAD OF THE 2025 LOCAL ELECTIONS

As North Macedonia approaches the local elections scheduled for October 2025, political competition has intensified well ahead of the official campaign period. Major parties have sharpened their narratives and positioned candidates across key municipalities, while civic initiatives and smaller political actors struggle to gain visibility in an environment dominated by entrenched party structures.

Yet beyond electoral rhetoric and local rivalries, a more consequential issue remains largely overlooked: the financing of political parties and election campaigns, and its profound impact on democratic fairness, equality of competition, and public trust.

CIVIL's monitoring and analysis indicate that the problems surrounding political financing are not incidental or election-specific. They reflect systemic weaknesses that persist across electoral cycles, regardless of changes to the Electoral Code or shifts in political power.

Political competition in a structurally unequal environment

The pre-election landscape is characterized by asymmetrical access to resources. Large parties dominate not only the political narrative but also the media space, benefiting from significantly greater financial capacity, access to donors, and state-funded political advertising. Smaller parties, independent candidates,

and civic initiatives face structural barriers that limit their ability to compete on equal terms.

This imbalance is further reinforced by weak oversight of campaign spending, insufficient transparency of donations, and the continued blurring of boundaries between party resources, public funds, and informal support networks. As a result, political competition increasingly reflects financial power rather than programmatic quality or citizen engagement.

Audit findings and the illusion of compliance

Public attention to campaign finance accountability briefly resurfaced following the June 2025 Consolidated Report of the State Audit Office (SAO), which examined campaign financing during the 2024 parliamentary elections. While formally comprehensive, the report largely mirrored findings from previous election cycles, underscoring a troubling reality: despite repeated legal amendments, the same deficiencies persist.

The audit identified:

- incomplete and inaccurate financial records;
- late or unreported donations;
- insufficient documentation of campaign expenditures;
- potential violations of the Electoral Code and the Law on Financing Political Parties.

Paid political advertising was not consistently or transparently recorded, and documentation regarding the allocation of state funds for campaign advertising remained unclear. Several participants continued to receive and report donations even after elections had concluded, while others failed to meet statutory reporting deadlines altogether.

These are not minor technical lapses. They undermine the principle of equal access to resources and create space for undisclosed influence, selective enforcement, and manipulation of the competitive environment.

Structural blind spots: “in-kind” donations and media influence

Particularly concerning is the weak oversight of so-called *in-kind* donations—services, facilities, labor, media exposure, and logistical support provided without clear financial valuation. These contributions often escape effective monitoring, allowing political actors to gain substantial unreported advantages, especially in municipalities with limited media scrutiny.

In practice, this means that campaign finance rules apply unevenly: formally to all, but effectively to few. Larger parties benefit from informal ecosystems of support that remain invisible to regulators and inaccessible to public scrutiny.

State funding and the risk of institutionalized distortion

The audit revealed that during the 2024 parliamentary elections, the total campaign budget amounted to approximately 386.7 million denars, of which over 63 percent came directly from the state budget for paid political advertising. The bulk of these funds was directed to major coalitions, reinforcing existing disparities rather than promoting fair competition.

CIVIL has repeatedly warned that the current model of state-funded political advertising risks becoming a form of legalized corruption of the media, distorting editorial independence and incentivizing partisan alignment rather than public-interest journalism. Instead of strengthening democracy, this system entrenches financial dominance and weakens pluralism.

CIVIL’s monitoring and reform perspective

Political finance has long been a priority area in CIVIL’s election monitoring and reform advocacy. Amendments introduced in 2020 and 2021—particularly those extending the deadline for

campaign account closures to 45 days after final results—have significantly reduced the effectiveness of donation limits and spending controls.

CIVIL’s analyses of campaign financing in previous election cycles identified clear reform paths. However, most of these recommendations were not adopted. Despite CIVIL’s participation in election reform working groups, proposed improvements failed to reach parliamentary debate. Instead, late-stage amendments introduced through expedited procedures preserved existing loopholes, including those related to post-election donations.

Key structural risks identified

CIVIL’s monitoring highlights several persistent risks:

- transfer of funds between regular party accounts and campaign accounts, undermining donation caps;
- lack of standardized, user-oriented reporting formats aligned with institutional needs;
- inconsistent public disclosure of financial reports by political parties;
- absence of comparative balance sheets showing liabilities and obligations across periods;
- weak enforcement mechanisms and absence of meaningful sanctions.

These deficiencies collectively erode transparency, accountability, and public confidence in the electoral process.

CIVIL’s Position: Political Finance as a Democratic Fault Line

Political financing is not a technical side issue – it is a core democratic concern. When money dominates political competition without effective oversight, elections cease to be contests of ideas and become contests of resources.

CIVIL reiterates that:

- campaign financing rules must ensure real equality of opportunity;
- party and state resources must be clearly separated;
- transparency must be enforceable, not optional;
- media financing models must protect editorial independence, not compromise it.

Unless these structural issues are addressed, electoral processes will continue to operate under conditions of distorted competition, where democratic choice is constrained not by voter will, but by financial power.

In such an environment, elections may proceed formally and peacefully—but their democratic substance remains fundamentally weakened.

INFORMATION MANIPULATION AND PRO-KREMLIN NARRATIVES IN PARTS OF THE MEDIA ENVIRONMENT

Manipulative headlines as an influence vector

Monitoring by CIVIL’s Hybrid Threats Monitoring Team (CHTM) recorded an increased presence of pro-Kremlin propaganda narratives in parts of North Macedonia’s online media environment in the period preceding the 2025 local elections. The observed pattern was not limited to editorial bias or sporadic disinformation. Rather, it reflected a recurring method of influence: sensational and manipulative headlines designed to shape perceptions quickly—particularly among audiences who consume news primarily through headlines and short snippets.

A notable example emerged following claims circulated by the Ukrainian mapping project “DeepState” that Russian forces had advanced toward the administrative border of the Dnipropetrovsk region. Several domestic portals amplified these claims with triumphalist or alarmist framing, presenting the development as a decisive breakthrough—even in cases where the article text itself included Ukrainian military statements indicating that the advance had been halted or contested and that active fighting continued.

This approach – headline certainty paired with textual ambiguity – functions as a form of informational manipulation. It is not merely inaccurate reporting. It is an editorial technique that manufactures an impression of Russian momentum, inevitability, and Ukrainian vulnerability, while ensuring that corrections or

context (when included at all) carry far less impact than the initial message.

Coordinated reframing of western reporting

CHTM also identified cases where domestic outlets published content ostensibly sourced from reputable Western media, but with headlines rewritten to match pro-Kremlin messaging.

One example involved articles referencing Sky News reporting on Russia's evolving drone capabilities. While the original framing emphasized the implications for Western preparedness and the need to respond, several domestic portals used nearly identical rewritten headlines presenting the story as Ukrainians "in panic" and Russia as technologically dominant—without the analytical framing and caution present in the source reporting.

This pattern suggests more than casual sensationalism. Identical or near-identical reframing across outlets indicates message alignment, amplifying the Kremlin's preferred psychological effect: confidence in Russia's military capacity and discouragement or fatalism regarding Ukraine's defense—despite the fact that Russia's drone warfare has primarily been directed against civilian infrastructure, residential areas, and non-combatants.

Shifting regional dynamics

For years, pro-Kremlin narrative "peaks" were often associated with distribution chains moving through Serbian media ecosystems and then into neighboring information spaces. CHTM monitoring suggests that, in this period, parts of North Macedonia's online media environment increasingly appeared to serve as fertile ground for direct narrative uptake, at times producing headline framing that was later mirrored elsewhere in the region.

This shift matters in an electoral context: it indicates that the local information environment may be evolving from a passive recipient of regional disinformation into a more active node of amplification—especially for narratives that combine geopolitics with domestic political polarization.

RIA Novosti as a disinformation distributor

A second monitored pattern concerns the recycling of content originating from RIA Novosti, a Russian state-aligned outlet widely regarded as part of the Kremlin's propaganda infrastructure and, in many contexts, restricted or discouraged for redistribution.

Following a major overnight Russian missile-and-drone attack on Kyiv (late August), CHTM observed that parts of the regional media space circulated RIA-linked claims reframing civilian casualties and damage to residential areas as alleged strikes on Ukrainian “command centers” and logistics hubs—sometimes accompanied by insinuations that NATO officers were killed.

The structure of the narrative is consistent:

- a highly destructive strike against civilian areas is recast as a legitimate military operation;
- unverified claims (often attributed to fringe or opaque sources) are presented with a tone of credibility;
- the emotional weight of civilian suffering is displaced by a competing storyline of “hidden military targets,” “foreign officers,” or “mercenaries.”

This is not incidental misinformation. It is a classic propaganda substitution tactic: replacing visible reality with an alternate explanation that absolves the aggressor and shifts blame or suspicion toward the victim and its allies.

Electoral relevance and strategic purpose

The increased circulation of pro-Kremlin narratives ahead of the 2025 local elections should be understood within a wider influence logic. North Macedonia is a NATO member and an EU accession candidate; in such contexts, propaganda ecosystems typically pursue layered objectives:

- portraying the EU as hypocritical, corrupt, or hostile;
- presenting NATO as an “occupier” or destabilizing force;
- cultivating distrust in democratic institutions and procedures;
- deepening polarization and cynicism through hostile identity narratives;
- discouraging reform and weakening support for Euro-Atlantic integration.

These goals align directly with election-period vulnerabilities, when institutions are under pressure, public trust is contested, and political actors may exploit polarizing frames for short-term gain.

Implications

The core concern is not only the presence of propaganda content, but also the conditions that allow it to function effectively: weak accountability, selective enforcement of rules, politicized institutions, and a media environment vulnerable to opaque financing and coordinated amplification.

When oversight is obstructed, voters are pressured, identities are weaponized, and the information space is compromised, foreign influence does not need to break in — it is invited in. This dynamic does not absolve domestic actors of responsibility; it underscores how internal institutional weaknesses and political

choices create the conditions in which external interference becomes effective.

In such an environment, elections may proceed formally and peacefully, but their capacity to reflect the genuine will of citizens is progressively undermined. The defense of democratic elections therefore cannot be separated from the defense of the information space, institutional accountability, and societal resilience against hybrid threats.

CASE STUDY: The Russian propaganda narrative of the “Kyiv Regime” in Macedonian and Serbian media

The Russian propaganda framing of Ukraine’s leadership as a so-called “Kyiv regime” has become increasingly normalized in segments of Macedonian and Serbian online media. As observed by CIVIL’s Hybrid Threat Monitoring Team (CHTM), this pattern reflects a broader, recurring dissemination of Kremlin-aligned narratives across the post-Yugoslav information space.

A recent example involves the circulation of statements attributed to former Polish President Andrzej Duda, under headlines such as *“Duda: Zelensky Wanted to Drag Poland into War with Russia.”* While the headline itself may reflect a literal translation from the Polish weekly *Do Rzeczy*, Macedonian and Serbian outlets inserted editorial reinterpretations absent from the original source. Most notably, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky was repeatedly labeled as the “head of the Kyiv regime,” directly mirroring Kremlin propaganda terminology.

The article first appeared in Serbia’s pro-government daily *Politika*, after which it was transmitted to North Macedonia via the national news agency MIA/Makfax. Several Macedonian portals—previously identified by CHTM for disseminating pro-

Russian narratives—republished the content in full, including the propagandistic designation of Zelensky.

In addition, the republished text included an extra sentence not present in the original Polish article, suggesting that Kyiv was attempting to manipulate regional public opinion amid Europe's divisions over the war. This insertion represents a clear editorial fabrication, aligned with Russian strategic messaging rather than journalistic reporting.

Strategic objectives of intensified russian propaganda

The surge of Russian propaganda narratives in parts of the Macedonian media landscape ahead of the local elections serves multiple objectives within the Kremlin's broader influence strategy in Europe and the Balkans. As a NATO member state and EU candidate country, North Macedonia represents a strategically significant target.

Through receptive media channels, Russian propaganda seeks to portray the EU as hypocritical, corrupt, or hostile, and NATO as an occupying force—undermining public confidence in Euro-Atlantic institutions. The ultimate goal is to cultivate an environment of distrust, political instability, democratic backsliding, and delayed European integration.

Such conditions leave North Macedonia more vulnerable to external influence and geopolitical manipulation, particularly during sensitive electoral periods.

THE LAW ON EQUITABLE REPRESENTATION: SAFEGUARD OR ANOTHER POLITICAL EXPERIMENT?

A delegation of the Venice Commission, led by Vice-President Martin Kuijer, recently visited North Macedonia and met with Constitutional Court President Darko Kostadinovski and Judge Ana Pavlovska Daneva. The discussions focused on Constitutional Court decision U.no.90/2024, which repealed provisions related to the term “community affiliation,” including key elements of the methodology commonly known as the *Balancer*.

The abolition of the Balancer—replaced by a new Law on Appropriate and Equitable Representation—triggered disappointment and concern among large segments of the public. This reaction emerged despite widespread acknowledgment that the Balancer had been systematically abused. The central question remains whether the new law can genuinely fulfill its stated purpose, particularly given ongoing political clashes within the Albanian political bloc, most visibly between the governing coalition VLEN and the opposition DUI.

VLEN vs. DUI: Competing narratives on equitable representation

DUI described the abolition of the Balancer as an “assassination of the foundations of the Ohrid Framework Agreement.” Party Vice-President Arbër Ademi accused the government of violating the political will of Albanians and preparing to undermine the Badinter principle. According to DUI, these moves are not isolated missteps but part of a deliberate strategy to weaken

minority rights and erode the country's multiethnic character. The party further argued that the government had neglected key aspects of the Law on the Use of Languages, reduced the number of municipal councilors, and limited the representation of the Albanian diaspora.

VLEN, in contrast, countered that DUI had exploited the principle of equitable representation for two decades to entrench party control through corruption, political bargaining, and clientelism.

“DUI used the Balancer to employ its loyalists; we are introducing a law that will restore equality and justice,” VLEN stated, insisting that the new legislation would impose clear institutional obligations and rebuild public trust.

Deputy Prime Minister Izet Mexhiti argued that the Balancer was not being abolished but “upgraded” into a more sustainable legal framework, claiming that the previous system had produced counterproductive outcomes. According to Mexhiti, the new law aims to transform public administration into a service for all citizens, based on merit, competence, and integrity rather than party affiliation.

Prime Minister Hristijan Mickoski echoed this position, presenting the law as a new standard in which professionalism and integrity would take precedence over political loyalty, with the stated objective of eliminating discrimination and ensuring equal access for all citizens.

The Balancer: Instrument of equity or tool of abuse?

For years, the Balancer functioned as a mechanism to regulate ethnic representation in the public sector. Its original purpose was to ensure fair access for all communities, but its implementation repeatedly sparked controversy. Initial criticism came from citizens who experienced direct injustices, followed

by sustained warnings from civil society organizations and experts.

CIVIL, through a series of public panel discussions titled “*Whom Does the Balancer Serve?*”, documented systemic flaws in the methodology, highlighting how it enabled abuse and entrenched party-based clientelism. Numerous cases were recorded in which candidates declared “other ethnic affiliation” to gain advantage, while institutions became increasingly politicized.

In this sense, the Balancer often produced outcomes contrary to its intended purpose. Yet for Albanians and smaller communities, it remained the only tangible institutional guarantee of access to public-sector employment. Its removal therefore carries not only administrative but also symbolic and political weight.

A new law: Resolution or the start of new risks?

In June, the government adopted the Draft Law on Appropriate and Equitable Representation, introducing—for the first time—a systemic legal framework governing fair representation. The law obliges all public institutions to respect the principle of equitable representation and establishes a coordination body, chaired by the Deputy Prime Minister, to oversee implementation.

However, with the abolition of the Balancer, institutions are left without a concrete operational mechanism for ensuring proportional representation. The law shifts responsibility toward political discretion, creating space for selective application. This concern is compounded by the fact that VLEN repeatedly claimed the law was “ready” for months, while its drafting was entrusted to controversial figures close to the ruling establishment, including Professor Tanja Karakamisheva. These circumstances raise legitimate doubts about whether the law is designed to promote equality—or to consolidate control by the new political elite.

Equitable representation: Declaration or reality?

Despite official assurances, a fundamental question remains unresolved: will the new law genuinely guarantee equitable representation for all communities, or does it represent another political experiment that removes concrete safeguards while offering only declarative commitments?

Without a clear, enforceable mechanism comparable to the Balancer, the law risks remaining symbolic, vulnerable to selective enforcement and future abuse. While it establishes a formal framework for equitable representation, its real value will be measured exclusively through implementation.

If political will and institutional oversight prove insufficient—or are themselves instrumentalized—the law may remain a paper guarantee, failing to deliver genuine equality or meaningful representation of all communities within public administration.

MANIPULATIVE MISUSE OF THE TERM “HYBRID ATTACKS”: WHEN THE STATE INVENTS ENEMIES

In mid-September, amid a severe wave of wildfires and extreme air pollution in Skopje, senior government officials chose not to present concrete findings, operational assessments, or remedial measures. Instead, the Minister of Interior and the Director of the Directorate for Protection and Rescue publicly claimed that the country was under “hybrid attacks.”

These statements were delivered at an extraordinary late-evening press conference, yet no evidence, indicators, or security analysis was presented to substantiate the claim. The public was offered neither verified intelligence nor institutional assessments. What followed was a series of personal impressions, unverified speculation, and even religious references, replacing facts with belief.

Assertions without evidence

The Director of the Directorate for Protection and Rescue stated that the simultaneous outbreak of multiple fires constituted a “hybrid attack,” clarifying that this was his *personal view* and referring vaguely to unconfirmed claims that individuals had allegedly been paid to start fires. No documentation, investigative findings, or prosecutorial conclusions were provided.

The Minister of Interior went further, stating publicly:

“God cannot convince me that this is a coincidence.”

With this statement, religious conviction was introduced into the domain of national security, effectively substituting belief for

evidence and analysis. Such framing is incompatible with professional crisis management and security governance.

Internal contradictions and narrative inflation

The credibility gap widened when officials acknowledged that while more than 40 individuals had been detained in connection with the fires, no organized structure, network, or coordinated operational framework had been identified.

In other words:

- no chain of command,
- no operational coordination,
- no demonstrated strategic intent.

Yet despite the absence of these defining elements, the term “hybrid attack” continued to be used insistently. This represents a fundamental misapplication of security terminology and a disregard for factual thresholds.

Why this matters: Hybrid threats are real

It is essential to state clearly: hybrid threats should not be underestimated. On the contrary, they are among the most serious contemporary security challenges facing Europe.

Precisely because hybrid operations are real — and documented — they require:

- verified intelligence,
- careful attribution,
- professional communication,
- and institutional restraint.

Even if elements of sabotage or criminal coordination were eventually established, the manner in which senior officials addressed the public — through speculation, personal conviction, and religious references — would still be deeply

problematic. Such communication does not strengthen security; it undermines public trust and institutional credibility.

The risks of conceptual abuse

The reckless use of heavy security terminology carries serious consequences:

1. Conceptual devaluation

A hybrid attack is not a rhetorical device. It refers to coordinated actions — often state-linked — combining cyber operations, disinformation, sabotage, economic coercion, or proxy actors. Reducing the term to a catch-all explanation for governance failures strips it of meaning and operational value.

2. Displacement of responsibility

By invoking “invisible enemies,” attention is diverted from systemic causes: corruption, mismanagement, regulatory failure, institutional inertia, and lack of preparedness. Security language becomes an alibi rather than a diagnostic tool.

3. Public confusion and cynicism

Unsubstantiated claims generate fear in the short term, but cynicism in the long term. When everything becomes a “hybrid attack,” real threats risk being ignored when they actually emerge.

4. Politicization of crisis management

In pre-electoral contexts, the misuse of security narratives risks turning institutions into instruments of political messaging rather than public service. This erodes democratic resilience rather than reinforcing it.

The broader context cannot be ignored

This misuse is especially alarming in the current geopolitical environment. Russia is conducting a full-scale war against Ukraine while simultaneously waging hybrid warfare against Europe through disinformation, cyber operations, sabotage, and

coercion. These are documented, systematic, and externally coordinated operations with tangible consequences.

Against this backdrop, reducing the concept of “hybrid attacks” to a rhetorical cover for domestic governance failures is not merely irresponsible — it is dangerous.

What hybrid attacks actually are

According to EU and NATO security doctrines, hybrid attacks typically include:

- cyberattacks on critical infrastructure,
- coordinated disinformation and propaganda campaigns,
- economic sabotage or coercion,
- use of proxy criminal or paramilitary networks,
- intimidation, destabilization, and strategic signaling.

These actions require organization, coordination, and intent. They cannot be inferred from coincidence or asserted without evidence.

Responsibility over rhetoric

Public officials have a duty to speak with precision, restraint, and accountability. Their mandate is temporary; the institutions they represent must endure and serve the public beyond individual political cycles.

When security terminology is abused, institutions are weakened rather than protected. Trust is eroded, not strengthened. Accountability is replaced by spectacle.

To misuse the term “hybrid attack” at a time when Ukraine is bleeding and Europe is under sustained hybrid pressure is to gamble with public trust, institutional integrity, and democratic resilience.

THE MACEDONIAN POLITICAL BLOC AHEAD OF THE 2025 LOCAL ELECTIONS: EXPANDED AND ESCALATING NARRATIVES

As previously documented by CIVIL, the pre-election political environment in North Macedonia has been shaped by an intensifying clash of narratives between the two dominant parties of the Macedonian political bloc: the ruling VMRO-DPMNE and the opposition SDSM. Rather than centering on local governance, public services, or quality-of-life issues, the campaign discourse has increasingly gravitated toward national, identity-based, and geopolitical themes.

Core narrative axes

In the period leading up to the 2025 local elections, four dominant narrative axes have structured public discourse among the main Macedonian parties:

1. Identity Politics

Framed as a binary division between “patriots” and “traitors,” particularly around constitutional amendments related to the Bulgarian minority and the legacy of the name change.

2. Interethnic Relations

Nationalist narratives targeting ethnic minorities — primarily Albanians and Roma — are periodically activated, especially during moments of political pressure.

3. European Integration

Competing claims over responsibility for the stalled EU

accession process, often instrumentalized for domestic political positioning.

4. **Living Standards**

Economic insecurity, inflation, wages, and social vulnerability, frequently invoked but rarely addressed through concrete local policy proposals.

As election day approaches, these narratives have not softened but instead intensified, supplemented by new discursive fronts designed primarily for mutual delegitimization rather than substantive debate.

Surveillance allegations as a pre-election battleground

One of the most politically charged narratives involved allegations of illegal surveillance within the Agency for National Security (ANB). The Prime Minister publicly claimed that he had been unlawfully monitored while serving as opposition leader, framing the issue as an attack not only against him personally but against democracy and fundamental freedoms.

SDSM responded by demanding the declassification of documents and a formal investigation by the Public Prosecutor's Office, particularly after the former director of the ANB stated publicly that the Prime Minister had *not* been subjected to surveillance during the specified period. This contradiction further fueled public mistrust and reinforced perceptions of institutional politicization.

Rather than clarifying accountability, the episode became another arena for narrative escalation, leaving key questions unanswered: who authorized surveillance, under what legal framework, and with what oversight.

“Hybrid Threats” as a political narrative

The fires at waste disposal sites near Skopje introduced yet another layer of narrative inflation. Senior officials initially described the incidents as “hybrid attacks” orchestrated by foreign centers of power. The Prime Minister echoed these claims without providing attribution or evidence.

Shortly thereafter, the Minister of Interior acknowledged publicly that there was no identified organizational structure, no network, and no proof of coordinated action. This admission directly contradicted earlier claims of externally orchestrated hybrid threats.

The opposition seized on this contradiction, accusing the government of spreading fear and panic for political purposes. The episode exemplified how security terminology was introduced into public discourse without analytical grounding, reinforcing polarization rather than resilience.

Escalation through morbid and inflammatory campaigning

Campaign rhetoric further deteriorated with the appearance of a website featuring violent and inflammatory imagery targeting senior government officials in connection with a tragic incident in Kočani. VMRO-DPMNE described the site as a malicious and orchestrated campaign of political manipulation, accusing opposition-linked structures of responsibility, without presenting evidence.

SDSM dismissed these accusations as an attempt by the ruling party to portray itself as a victim and to distract from governance failures. The exchange deepened public cynicism and normalized extreme rhetorical framing.

Beyond rhetoric, isolated acts of intimidation and property damage were recorded, including the arson attack on the vehicle

of a senior opposition figure in Skopje. These incidents underscore the increasingly hostile atmosphere surrounding the campaign.

The silence on external nationalist influences

Notably absent from the Macedonian political bloc's dominant narratives was any substantive response to the visible presence of Serbian nationalist symbolism and actors in the country during this period. Public appearances by Serbian officials, paramilitary-affiliated groups, and nationalist performances — including events at Kajmakčalan framed as a “Serbian resurrection” — passed largely without reaction or debate from major Macedonian parties.

This silence contrasts sharply with the intensity of internal nationalist rhetoric and raises questions about selective sensitivity and political calculation.

From local governance to geopolitical theater

Despite being formally local, the 2025 elections increasingly resemble a national and geopolitical contest. Everyday issues that directly affect citizens — waste management, public transport, urban planning, air quality, and local infrastructure — have been repeatedly overshadowed by:

- identity-based fears,
- geopolitical alignment narratives,
- symbolic resolutions on EU accession,
- and national “red lines” unrelated to municipal competencies.

Legislative initiatives on national resolutions concerning EU integration were introduced just days before the official campaign period, further shifting attention away from local accountability.

The Trubarevo fire: A case study in narrative displacement

The fire at the electronic waste landfill in Trubarevo exposed thousands of residents to severe air pollution and health risks. While officials debated whether the incident constituted a “hybrid attack,” residents demanded answers to far more immediate questions:

- Who will resolve the landfill crisis?
- Will there be systemic waste management reform?
- Will regional recycling and waste-sorting facilities finally be established?
- Who is accountable for years of environmental neglect?

These questions remain largely unanswered, replaced instead by abstract claims about external conspiracies.

Local Elections at risk of becoming national rehearsals

The cumulative effect of these narrative strategies is clear: local elections risk once again becoming a rehearsal for national power struggles rather than a democratic mechanism for improving everyday life.

When identity battles, security rhetoric, and geopolitical symbolism dominate local campaigns, voters are deprived of meaningful choice on issues that directly affect their communities. This pattern erodes trust, reduces civic engagement, and weakens the democratic function of local self-government.

BETWEEN DEMOCRATIC ALARM AND LIMITED POLITICAL TRACTION: THE OPPOSITION SDSM

The opposition Social Democratic Union of Macedonia (SDSM) has structured its pre-election campaign around sustained criticism of the ruling VMRO-DPMNE, framing the political moment as a turn toward the restoration of authoritarian governance models. According to SDSM, the upcoming local elections represent not merely a contest for municipal power, but a test of democratic resilience and the country's European trajectory.

SDSM consistently warns that VMRO-DPMNE is steering the country toward renewed isolation, deepening political control over public administration, and misusing state power for narrow partisan interests. At the same time, however, SDSM's own rhetoric frequently shifts away from programmatic debate and toward sharp political qualifiers, including warnings about the "capture of the state." While these concerns resonate with parts of the electorate, they also contribute to a broader climate of political alarmism.

The party emphasizes that, both at the central and local levels, VMRO-DPMNE has failed to deliver on promised projects, arguing that citizens have been deceived by unmet commitments and selective governance. SDSM mobilizes its supporters through the message of "defending the European future," positioning itself as a modern, reform-oriented alternative to what it describes as a regressive and increasingly authoritarian government.

In response to VMRO-DPMNE's accusations that SDSM had been politically subordinate to DUI during their years in government, SDSM counters by arguing that the current ruling coalition has granted disproportionate influence to its Albanian partner, VLEN. This criticism is frequently illustrated by developments in the Municipality of Čair, where SDSM claims that Prime Minister Hristijan Mickoski and Interior Minister Panče Toškovski have failed to curb illegal construction and institutional arbitrariness linked to local VLEN officials.

SDSM further accuses the ruling party of plunging the country into heightened economic insecurity, asserting that ordinary citizens bear the cost while oligarchic interests benefit. The party also highlights rising crime, declining public safety, and what it characterizes as an intimidating style of governance, employing stark metaphors to convey a sense of social fear and insecurity.

Despite the intensity of its criticism, SDSM appears insufficiently agile in translating these arguments into effective political action. Its engagement is often limited to brief statements and reactive messaging, rather than sustained initiatives capable of capitalizing on the ruling party's missteps. This passivity is particularly visible in moments when VMRO-DPMNE suffered clear political setbacks—such as the failure of Prime Minister Mickoski's initiative to introduce identity-related issues into the EU's progress report, followed shortly by the removal of references to the Macedonian minority from the U.S. State Department's human rights report on Bulgaria. These developments passed without a strong or strategic response from the opposition.

As election day approached, the dominant narratives were clearly delineated: VMRO-DPMNE presented itself as the force restoring stability, safeguarding national identity, language, and statehood, while SDSM positioned itself as the guarantor of democracy and the European path, which it argued is now under serious threat.

Both major political camps rely heavily on aligned media outlets to disseminate negative narratives, frequently blurring the line between verified facts and speculation. This practice deepens polarization within an already fragmented electorate and further erodes trust in public discourse.

The pre-election environment is increasingly confrontational. Political rallies, media appearances, and especially social media platforms are dominated by sharp exchanges, personal attacks, and coordinated amplification of partisan messaging. Rather than appealing to undecided voters, campaigns primarily focus on mobilizing existing party bases.

Public debate is saturated with insults, labeling, and demonization of political opponents through terms such as “traitors,” “patriots,” “mafiosi,” and “enemies of the state.” Personal disqualification of candidates has replaced substantive debate, fostering hostility rather than competition of ideas.

Hate speech escalates most visibly on social media, where coordinated networks of party supporters and automated accounts amplify aggressive rhetoric, contributing to a disinformation-rich and emotionally charged environment.

Although local elections are formally intended to address municipal governance, they once again function as a national political battleground. Instead of competing visions for local development, the campaign has evolved into a struggle for symbolic dominance, with each side portraying the other as an existential threat. The prevalence of negative campaigning, disinformation, and hate speech undermines public trust and significantly reduces the space for meaningful discussion about the future of municipalities.

THE ALBANIAN POLITICAL LANDSCAPE AHEAD OF THE 2025 LOCAL ELECTIONS: NARRATIVES, FRAGMENTATION, AND PRAGMATISM

Ahead of the local elections scheduled for 19 October 2025, the Albanian political scene in North Macedonia entered the campaign period deeply fragmented, marked by intensified competition not only among long-standing rivals but also among former coalition partners. Old alliances weakened, new alignments emerged, and political pragmatism increasingly replaced ideological coherence.

The most significant shift occurred with the withdrawal of Arben Taravari from the governing coalition VLEN and his repositioning in opposition, reshaping the internal balance of the Albanian political bloc and introducing a new pole of competition. These developments unfolded against a backdrop of heightened rhetorical polarization and recalculated alliances, producing a volatile pre-election environment.

Despite tactical differences, public discourse among Albanian political actors in the months preceding the elections coalesced around three dominant narratives:

1. European integration of the state,
2. Protection of the rights of the Albanian community, and
3. The role of Tirana and Prishtina in domestic political dynamics.

While these themes are not new, their intensity and instrumentalization increased markedly in the pre-election

period, shaping political positioning, coalition strategies, and mutual accusations in the race for voter trust.

EU integration: Between principles and political pragmatism

Following the May 2024 parliamentary elections, the government led by Prime Minister Hristijan Mickoski (VMRO-DPMNE) was formed in coalition with VLEN and ZNAM, publicly declaring a pro-European orientation.

In practice, however, this orientation remained largely declarative. The EU accession process remained stalled, primarily due to the unresolved constitutional amendments related to the inclusion of the Bulgarian minority—an issue the Prime Minister has consistently rejected.

Prior to joining the governing coalition, representatives of VLEN insisted that the constitutional issue would be resolved within the first three months of the new government. This deadline passed without progress and was subsequently extended, further undermining credibility.

The absence of tangible results provided political ammunition to the opposition Democratic Union for Integration (DUI), which positioned itself—despite its opposition status—as the guarantor of both the Ohrid Framework Agreement and the European path.

CIVIL's monitoring indicates that, on the constitutional issue, VLEN has largely remained reactive rather than proactive, often echoing the positions of its dominant coalition partner rather than shaping policy independently. In contrast, Taravari's faction of the Alliance for Albanians, following its exit from government, sharpened its criticism, framing the stalled EU agenda and rule-of-law deficits as evidence of unfulfilled promises.

Rights of Albanians: Mobilization through institutional and symbolic issues

Language rights, institutional representation, and equality mechanisms continued to serve as key mobilizing tools within the Albanian political bloc. DUI consistently employed the narrative of being the “guardian of multiethnicity,” responding to perceived institutional shortcomings and incidents with heightened visibility, particularly when state reactions were slow or ambiguous.

A defining issue in this cycle was the abolition of the so-called “balancer”, an administrative mechanism designed to ensure equitable ethnic representation in public-sector employment, introduced as a direct institutional outcome of the Ohrid Framework Agreement. While the balancer had long been criticized for misuse and clientelism, it remained both a symbolic and functional instrument of ethnic equality.

Its removal by the new government, with the support of VLEN, was widely perceived within the Albanian public as a retreat from the principles of the Ohrid Agreement. Reactions were sharp: VLEN faced accusations of political capitulation and failure to safeguard community rights, while DUI was criticized for having failed to reform the mechanism during its years in power. The episode exposed a deeper dilemma—whether there exists genuine political will to preserve and improve mechanisms of multiethnic balance, rather than dismantling them without credible alternatives.

Tirana and Prishtina: Support, influence, or erosion of autonomy?

Relations with Albania and Kosovo—and perceptions of their influence—remained a sensitive and contested dimension of Albanian politics in North Macedonia. Public messages from Tirana and Prishtina during 2024–2025 were frequently

interpreted through the lens of internal competition between DUI and VLEN.

In many cases, external “interventions” occurred at the invitation of domestic actors, raising questions about whether such engagement reinforces political legitimacy or undermines local autonomy. Symbolic gestures—such as public praise for Ali Ahmeti in Tirana or meetings between VLEN representatives and Kosovo’s Prime Minister Albin Kurti—were amplified domestically as signals of external alignment.

Both governing and opposition Albanian parties used ties with Tirana and Prishtina to claim authentic representation of the Albanian community. This dynamic, while not new, intensified perceptions of “external weighing” in internal political competition, blurring the boundary between solidarity and political instrumentalization.

Arben Taravari: From coalition pillar to independent actor

In May 2025, Arben Taravari’s Alliance for Albanians formally exited the governing coalition, citing unfulfilled commitments—particularly regarding EU integration and the rule of law. This move marked the most serious rupture within the Albanian political bloc since the 2024 elections and institutionalized a lasting split within VLEN.

Following the withdrawal, Taravari adopted a distinctly oppositional profile, escalating criticism toward both the government and former coalition partners. The formation of a separate parliamentary group further reinforced perceptions of a durable political realignment.

At the local level, Taravari’s independent positioning introduced a third competitive pole in municipalities previously dominated by DUI–VLEN rivalry. This fragmentation increased the likelihood of vote dispersion, heightened the importance of second-round

negotiations, and amplified the role of post-election bargaining—particularly in municipalities with narrow margins or significant diaspora influence.

Conclusion: Three narratives, one central struggle – trust

EU integration, the protection of Albanian rights, and the Tirana–Prishtina axis form the framework within which Albanian political actors conducted their 2025 local election campaigns. Yet beyond electoral arithmetic, these narratives revealed a deeper struggle: the contest to establish legitimacy and trust within the Albanian electorate.

In a context of fragmentation, intensified competition, and shifting alliances, the core question was not merely which party would control more municipalities, but which actors could credibly claim to represent the interests, rights, and future orientation of the Albanian community in the next political cycle.

LOCAL ELECTIONS 2025: A “PEACEFUL” ELECTION DAY SHADOWED BY DISINFORMATION, AND INSTITUTIONAL FAILURES (CASES)

Officially, election day passed without major incidents. Yet the broader local election process in North Macedonia in 2025—before, during, and immediately after voting—was marked by cases that undermined public trust: political violence targeting candidates and activists, allegations of coordinated disinformation and negative campaigning, the misuse of children in political promotion, disruptions affecting the public broadcaster, and controversial decisions by election authorities.

The absence of mass incidents at polling stations does not erase the pattern visible throughout the campaign period: intimidation, manipulation, and institutional uncertainty increasingly replaced democratic competition and political dialogue. The cases below are presented as a documented chronology, clearly distinguishing between verified information, public allegations, and official responses.

CASE 1: DEATH OF CANDIDATE AND INDEPENDENT LIST HOLDER IN KAVADARCI

Former Kavadarci mayor and MP Pančo Minov, an independent list holder for Local Elections 2025, has died.

According to the Municipal Election Commission (MEC) in Kavadarci, the commission received confirmed information on the morning of his death and stated it would notify the State

Election Commission (SEC), in line with legally prescribed procedures in cases involving the death of a candidate—especially a list holder. The MEC noted this was the first such case it had encountered and indicated that ballots had likely not yet been printed, pending further guidance from the SEC.

Source: <https://civilmedia.mk/pochina-poraneshniot-gradonachalnik-na-kavadartsi-pancho-minov-nositel-na-nezavisna-lista-za-lokalnite-izbori-2025/>

CASE 2: SHOOTING OF ZEKIRIJA SHAHINI, LIST HOLDER IN LIPKOVO

A shooting in Kumanovo targeted Zekirija Shahini, list holder for the National Alliance for Integration (NAI) in Lipkovo.

Police confirmed to CIVIL that two individuals shot at a vehicle driven by Shahini at an intersection near the Kumanovo municipality building. The Ministry of Interior reported that the incident was registered on 7 October 2025 at 13:54, that the victim sustained injuries and was transported to the Kumanovo hospital, and that police were working to clarify the case. Shahini was later transferred to clinics in Skopje; initial information indicated he was out of immediate danger. Motive and perpetrators were not publicly identified at the time of reporting.

NAI posted on Facebook that Dr. Shahini was in stable condition, accompanied by inflammatory political rhetoric. This episode was reported as the second case of violence against a local-election candidate, following an earlier assault on a council candidate in Vinica (referenced in the original reporting as a prior case).

Source: <https://civilmedia.mk/vo-kumanovo-pukano-vo-zekirija-shahini-nositel-na-listata-na-nai-vo-lipkovo/>

CASE 3: ARREST RELATED TO AN ATTEMPTED KILLING

Police arrested a woman suspected of involvement in the attempted killing of her husband, Z.S., in connection with the Kumanovo shooting.

On 7 October 2025, police in Kumanovo detained A.A. (43) from Tetovo on suspicion of involvement in the attempted murder of her husband Z.S. (43) from Slupčane (Lipkovo municipality). Six individuals were summoned for official questioning, and a search was conducted at the home of B.S. (50) in Kumanovo under a court order.

Authorities stated that after documentation of the case, a criminal complaint would follow against A.A., and—following consultation with the competent Public Prosecutor's Office—a complaint would also be filed against Lj.F. (36) from Gostivar, identified as a suspect who remained at large at the time of the report.

Source: <https://civilmedia.mk/uapsena-zhenata-na-zekirija-shahini-sovetnikot-na-dui-vo-koj-vchera-beshe-pukano-vo-kumanovo/>

CASE 4: ALLEGED POLITICAL VIOLENCE IN KUMANOV INVOLVING ZNAM AND SDSM CAMPAIGN TEAMS

SDSM's mayoral candidate in Kumanovo, Martin Kostovski, alleged that members of his campaign team were attacked by a ZNAM council candidate.

Kostovski claimed the incident involved Samet Salievski, a candidate for councilor from the ZNAM movement ("For Our Macedonia"), and said the case was reported to police. He publicly urged law-enforcement bodies, the State Election Commission, the Public Prosecutor's Office, and the OSCE to act.

The allegation was made in a video posted by Kostovski and recorded outside a police station. The report also noted that a prior police complaint had been filed against the same individual during the 2021 local elections for a separate alleged assault.

Source: <https://civilmedia.mk/politichko-nasilstvo-vo-kumanovo-kandidat-na-znam-napadnal-chlenovi-na-shtabot-na-sdsm/>

CASE 5: DISINFORMATION ALLEGATIONS AND ESCALATING NEGATIVE CAMPAIGNING (VMRO-DPMNE VS. SDSM)

A new round of accusations escalated between the ruling VMRO-DPMNE and opposition SDSM, centered on claims about former PM Zoran Zaev.

The reporting states that Prime Minister Hristijan Mickoski promoted allegations involving “suitcases of money” allegedly linked to a former Bulgarian prime minister and Zaev, followed by claims of a supposed USB stick. VMRO-DPMNE MP Brane Petrushevski called on SDSM leader Venko Filipče to respond to allegations that Zaev had offered wiretapped materials and proposed a scheme to purchase two large companies, including a television outlet.

SDSM rejected the claims, describing them as a continuation of negative campaigning, and argued that the ruling party was diverting attention with “invented affairs.” Filipče also publicly characterized the campaign against SDSM as false and harmful, stating he would focus on citizens’ everyday issues rather than engage in escalating rhetoric.

Source: <https://civilmedia.mk/od-bugarski-kuferi-so-pari-do-usb-stik-novi-lagin-na-vmro-dpmne-za-zaev/>

CASE 6: CHILDREN USED AS CAMPAIGN PROPS

CIVIL’s monitoring team recorded multiple cases of candidates involving children and minors in campaign messaging. The monitoring notes describe patterns across political actors, including examples of public posts in which minors appeared in political promotion—raising concerns about the boundary between private family life and political exploitation. The report cites public reactions in media and on social platforms, including calls for child-protection organizations to respond.

CIVIL emphasized that law, citing Article 12(4) of the Law on Child Protection, and urged institutions to act decisively, including through sanctions, against political misuse of children.

Source: <https://civilmedia.mk/detsata-kako-izboren-rekvizit-politichka-trka-bez-sram-i-granitsi/>

CASE 7: POSSIBLE CYBER INCIDENT AT THE PUBLIC BROADCASTER (MRT)

Macedonian Radio Television (MRT) failed to broadcast several scheduled news bulletins; an investigation was launched into whether this involved an external intrusion.

MRT did not air its central TV news edition at 19:30, nor earlier and later scheduled bulletins. In a public statement, the broadcaster said it was investigating whether the disruption resulted from a deliberate intrusion into its network system, citing suspicions of compromised protective mechanisms and possible external attacks or influence. The broadcaster described the matter as a serious technical problem and stated that relevant state institutions would be involved in clarifying the incident.

During the disruption, entertainment programming reportedly replaced scheduled news and election-related content, including a planned candidate debate slot.

Source: <https://civilmedia.mk/hakeri-ja-srushija-mrtv-namesto-vesti-i-politika-kulinarska-emisija-i-film/>

CASE 8: “EL ČEKA” AUDIO RECORDINGS AND ALLEGATIONS AGAINST KIČEVO MAYOR FATMIR DEHARI

A social-media profile known as “El Čeka” published audio recordings described as compromising, triggering political and public reactions in Kičevo.

According to the report, the recordings were presented online as allegedly featuring the voice of Kičevo’s incumbent mayor and candidate Fatmir Dehari in a conversation with a municipal employee, containing explicit sexual insinuations and

inappropriate remarks. The profile's commentary sparked widespread public condemnation.

VLEn stated it was following the case with concern and framed it as evidence of long-standing political culture problems. VMRO-DPMNE MP Emilija Angelova called for condemnation if the conduct is confirmed and asked whether relevant institutions and party actors would react. DUI responded by warning against premature conclusions and insisted that authenticity must be verified by competent institutions or experts before responsible public judgment. The reporting notes that "El Čeka" has previously published recordings and that prosecutions were pursued in relation to earlier releases. At the time of publication, the report stated there was no official statement or denial from Dehari regarding the new recordings.

Source: <https://civilmedia.mk/el-cheka-frli-predizborna-bomba-objaveni-snimki-so-kompromitirachka-sodrzhina-za-kichevskiot-gradonachalnik-fatmir-dehari/>

CASE 9: PHOTOS OF BRANKO CRVENKOVSKI WITH VMRO-DPMNE AND ZNAM FIGURES FUEL SPECULATION

Two photographs circulated online days before the elections, showing former president and former SDSM leader Branko Crvenkovski with figures linked to VMRO-DPMNE and ZNAM in Ohrid.

The images triggered a wave of commentary and competing interpretations in media and on social networks, including speculation about political coordination. The report states that there were no public reactions from Crvenkovski or others shown in the photos at the time, while SDSM leader Venko Filipčević offered a brief remark referencing a well-known quote attributed to Crvenkovski about party loyalty.

Source: <https://civilmedia.mk/fotografii-od-branko-tsrvenkovski-so-chlenovi-na-vmro-dpmne-i-znam-ja-vzheshtija-politichkata-klima-pred-izbori/>

CASE 10: SEC ANNULS A COUNCIL LIST IN SKOPJE; PARTY CHALLENGES TIMING AND LEGAL SAFEGUARDS

The State Election Commission (SEC) annulled a confirmed council candidate list in Skopje submitted by the Movement for National Unity of Turks (DNET), citing the presence of a deceased person on the list.

SEC Chair Boris Kondarko said votes cast for the annulled list would be treated as invalid and that the case would be forwarded to the Public Prosecutor's Office. DNET stated it learned of the decision through media reports and sought immediate engagement with the SEC. The party argued that the Skopje Municipal Election Commission had previously found no deficiencies, insisted that state institutions are responsible for technical checks, and announced legal steps. DNET also said OSCE/ODIHR representatives were informed.

The report highlights that the SEC decision was delivered late in the day and included no legal instruction on remedy, raising concerns about effective legal protection and equal treatment in the electoral process.

Source: <https://civilmedia.mk/dik-ja-dostavi-odlukata-za-ponishtuvane-na-listata-na-dvizheneto-za-natsionalno-edinstvo-na-turtsite-partijata-bara-ostavki-i-odlozhuvane-na-izborite/>

CASE 11: DISINFORMATION CLAIM BY OUTGOING SKOPJE MAYOR; POLICE DENY RELEASE OF DETAINEES

Outgoing Skopje mayor Danel Arsovska posted that the director of the city's public sanitation enterprise had been released from detention; the Ministry of Interior denied the claim.

Arsovska wrote on Facebook that the director of "Communal Hygiene—Skopje," Sabahudin Rustemi, had been released after only a few hours and implied political motivations. The Ministry of Interior's spokesperson reportedly told CIVIL that no one had

been released and characterized Arsovska's statement as false and manipulative.

The report links the detentions to an investigation initiated by the Public Prosecutor's Office into the enterprise's failure to function, which resulted in large accumulations of garbage in the capital. Detainees were reported to be suspected of an environmental-related criminal offense tied to waste management that can endanger living conditions.

Source: <https://civilmedia.mk/arsovska-shiri-lazhni-vesti-direktorot-na-komunalna-higiena-se-ushte-e-vo-pritvor-i-ne-potpishuval-vo-srtse-i-dusha-sum-vlen/>

CONCLUSION: WHEN ELECTIONS BECOME A RITUAL OF FORMAL COMPLIANCE

The 2025 local elections in North Macedonia unfolded in a generally calm and orderly manner on voting day, with polling stations largely opening on time and no nationwide disruption of the process. However, CIVIL's comprehensive observation across all phases of the electoral cycle demonstrates that this surface-level stability masks persistent and structural deficiencies that continue to undermine public trust and weaken democratic integrity.

While the electoral process formally complied with procedural requirements, its substantive integrity remained deeply compromised. CIVIL documented systemic weaknesses that collectively erode confidence in elections: an unreliable Voters Register, recurring technical failures of biometric identification devices, widespread violations of election silence, pressure on voters, discriminatory barriers to participation, obstruction of observers and media, and the instrumentalization of identity politics and information manipulation. These shortcomings are neither isolated nor accidental. Taken together, they form a consistent pattern reflecting institutional inertia, selective enforcement, and the normalization of practices incompatible with democratic governance.

The elections once again demonstrated that procedural order and administrative discipline, while necessary, are insufficient to guarantee democratic legitimacy. Voting took place, ballots were counted, and results were announced. Yet beneath the appearance of calm and formal correctness lay manipulation, fear, unequal conditions, and widespread disengagement. In

such circumstances, elections risk being reduced to a ritual — performed regularly, but increasingly detached from their democratic purpose.

Responsibility for this condition does not lie with citizens, who continue to demonstrate resilience, civic courage, and a willingness to participate despite adverse conditions. It lies with institutions that fail to reform, political actors who exploit systemic weaknesses for short-term gain, and oversight mechanisms that remain ineffective or selectively applied. When accountability is absent and violations carry no consequences, trust erodes — and without trust, elections cannot function as instruments of democratic self-determination.

Addressing these challenges requires more than declarative commitments to democracy. It demands comprehensive and overdue institutional reform, professionalization of election administration, full implementation of long-standing recommendations, and a decisive break with practices that treat electoral integrity as a formality rather than a democratic obligation. It also requires safeguarding the information space, protecting observers and journalists, and ensuring that every citizen can participate freely, equally, and without fear.

Democracy does not collapse overnight. It erodes gradually — through tolerated violations, normalized exclusion, and the hollowing out of meaning behind democratic procedures. The findings of this report serve as both a warning and a call to responsibility. Restoring trust in elections is not a technical task alone; it is a political and moral imperative. Without it, elections may continue to be held, but democracy itself will remain increasingly out of reach.

CLOSING NOTE

The findings of this report reaffirm a central lesson repeatedly confirmed in North Macedonia’s electoral history: democratic erosion rarely announces itself through chaos, but through normalization of institutional failure. Calm procedures cannot substitute for credibility, and formal order cannot compensate for the absence of accountability.

Elections derive legitimacy not only from the act of voting, but from the conditions under which citizens participate—conditions shaped by trust, equality, transparency, and enforcement of the rules. When these conditions are persistently compromised, elections risk becoming ritualized exercises rather than genuine democratic choice.

CIVIL presents this report not as an endpoint, but as a call to responsibility.

Institutions retain the capacity to act. Whether they choose to do so will determine not only the quality of future elections, but the credibility of democratic governance itself.

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Calm elections do not automatically mean credible elections.

The 2025 local elections in North Macedonia were conducted without widespread disruption – but beneath the surface, long-standing institutional weaknesses persisted. Inaccurate voter lists, selective enforcement of rules, inaccessible polling stations, pressure on voters, and the erosion of election silence continue to undermine public trust.

Based on comprehensive long-term and short-term observation, this report documents not isolated incidents, but systemic patterns. It demonstrates why democratic integrity cannot be measured by appearances alone – and why reform can no longer be postponed without consequence.

**Truth.
Action.
Democracy.**

— *Democracy Navigator 2025*



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