



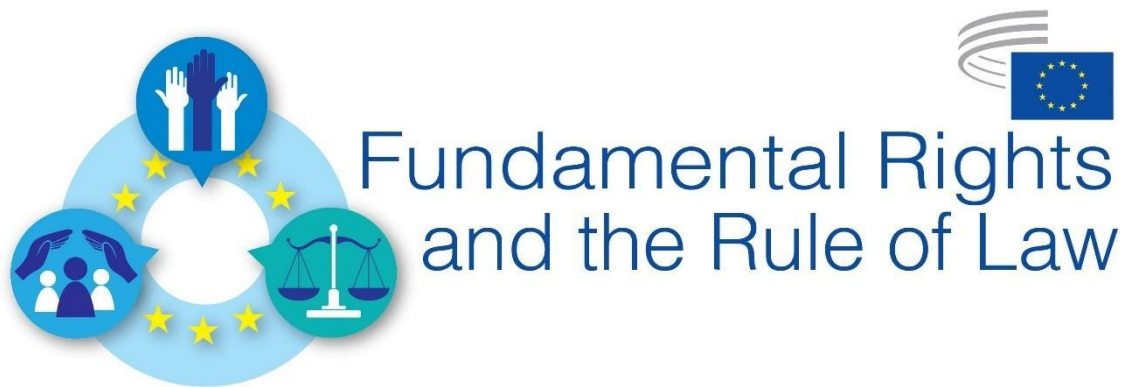
FUNDAMENTAL RIGHTS AND THE RULE OF LAW

Report on the visit to North Macedonia Authorities' observations on the report

10-11 March 2026



European Economic
and Social Committee



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As part of the EESC's efforts to promote fundamental rights and the rule of law, a delegation from the EESC's Fundamental Rights and Rule of Law Group visited North Macedonia on 10 and 11 March 2026. The delegation met with several representatives of civil society, more specifically civil society organisations (CSOs), social partners, the media and the legal professions. A separate meeting was held with the authorities of North Macedonia, during which they had the opportunity to react to some of the points presented to them. The aim of this report is to faithfully reflect the views of civil society.

1. Fundamental rights of social partners

Participants said that law and practice had allowed workers to associate freely in trade unions, and that the country had been going through a period of intensive activity aimed at consolidating and improving the **legal framework**. They welcomed the fact that EU acquis transposition had continued in several sectors, including payment systems and consumer protection, which they viewed as a positive contribution to the rule of law system. Participants noted positively that the Economic and Social Council (ESC) had become more operational, with increased engagement from the government, although they felt its agenda had remained too focused on salary discussions and should address other policy areas such as energy, equality policies and key national documents linked to EU integration (the Reform Agenda, the Growth Plan for the Western Balkans and the National Programme for the adoption of the EU acquis). Participants expressed divergent views regarding consultation practices. Some participants noted improvements, highlighting their involvement in working groups on new laws, including through surveys and other informal feedback channels. However, others reported that amendments to labour legislation had been adopted without adequate consultation of trade unions, despite obligations to discuss such changes within the ESC, and described this as a continuation of negative practices seen under previous governments. The authorities of North Macedonia said they had been working on a new law on labour relations, developed over several years with the involvement of social partners.

Regarding **social dialogue**, participants noted that sectoral collective agreements applied to all companies in the sector. They highlighted an issue of low representativeness for employers' organisations, reporting that, according to non-affiliated employers, the labour law framework regulated most matters, leaving limited scope for such organisations to add value through bargaining. Some participants observed that private-sector collective bargaining had been at a standstill because employers had refused to sign new agreements or prolong existing ones, while they also flagged difficulties in ensuring compliance with agreements in the public sector. According to them, social dialogue had often been formal rather than results-oriented, bringing limited improvements in workers' status, and

participants attributed this to a mix of lack of political will and funding constraints. They reported conflicts over the validity and application of collective agreements among competent institutions (labour inspectorates and courts), and they highlighted disputes over whether agreements should apply only to signatories or also to workers who are not members of unions.

Regarding **working conditions**, participants noted that amendments to the laws regarding public sector workers had removed provisions enabling salaries to be established through collective agreements, which they considered a major setback for these workers' rights. Participants were concerned that some employers had allegedly terminated contracts for a brief period and then re-engaged workers to interrupt continuity and avoid conversion to permanent contracts after five years of uninterrupted service. Some participants cited payroll data indicating that around one third of workers had been earning below the poverty threshold, although they also cautioned that official figures might not have been fully reliable because some employers had allegedly paid part of wages in cash and undeclared. These participants observed that trade unions had demanded an increase in the minimum wage, arguing that it had affected living standards. They referred to recent worker protests on this matter and noted government criticism of unions' request. Other participants described the expectations around the level of minimum wage as too close to the level of the average wage.

Participants considered the '**grey economy**' to be a persistent issue that had been draining the State budget, and they linked it to the exploitative use of legal loopholes and to under-the-table payments. They noted that the practice of using undeclared cash arrangements could later harm both entrepreneurs' and workers' pension entitlements. According to participants, rule-of-law challenges reflected weak implementation of existing rules rather than a legislative gap. Participants mentioned being consulted on processes that had stimulated corruption risks in sectors like agriculture and construction, as well as being invited to contribute to a new lobbying law. However, they regretted that the ESC had never addressed corruption embedded in public services. They expressed concern about clientelism in the business sector, and they considered that political influence over appointments to boards of public institutions had contributed to poor management quality and a negative institutional climate that had challenged trade union work. The authorities of North Macedonia commented that a strategy to address the informal economy existed, with measures across ministries. In the labour field, this included a registration software for daily workers in high-risk sectors, alongside an ongoing awareness campaign.

According to participants, **labour-market challenges** had included skills shortages, emigration and rapid depopulation, while some considered public administrations to be overstaffed and inefficient. Participants explained that Technological-Industrial Development Zones (TIDZs) had provided foreign investors with tax exemptions and subsidies not available to national companies and in their view, workers' rights had been particularly constrained in these zones, since workers had not been allowed to unionise and trade unions had had no access. Participants criticised the gap between the values applied in investors' countries of origin and practices observed locally, and they linked the resistance to minimum-wage increase to preserving a low-wage model that is attractive to investors. According to participants, although women represented around a third of entrepreneurs, mainly in SMEs, women's associations had not been included in government consultations on representation, and policy documents had not supported women's entrepreneurship activities effectively.

2. Freedom of association and freedom of assembly

Participants considered the overall **legal framework** on freedom of association to be strong, but observed that implementation had often been uneven, because crucial by-laws had sometimes been missing or had been adopted through processes that lacked transparency. They said that **consultations** with civil society organisations (CSOs) had been ongoing on several legislative files, including a new law on associations and foundations. Participants thought that transparency in policymaking was present in principle, but found that accelerated parliamentary procedures had reduced meaningful consultation. They noted the absence of a consistent approach to inclusive consultation across ministries, and reported

that these processes tended to be more efficient when international donors or partners had been involved. According to participants, the renewed operation of the Council for Cooperation between the Government and Civil Society after a two-year standstill had been a positive development. However, in their view, the Council had not been sufficiently representative of civil society, and they questioned its ability to respond to marginalised groups, as CSOs working with these groups had been at a disadvantage in a more conservative political climate. Participants perceived that civil society participation had often remained formal rather than substantive and moving towards genuine influence remained challenging. The authorities of North Macedonia said that the upcoming law on associations and foundations would aim to ensure transparent financing measures for CSOs, and added that more draft laws had been available for consultation, with CSOs participating in many working groups.

According to participants, **access to funding** for CSOs remained the most significant current issue. They said that public funding had been very low at both central and local levels, noting that most of it was directed to large humanitarian organisations. Many CSOs were relying on external financing, and participants observed a lack of political will for increasing public funding. They recalled earlier political attacks on civil society, and although similar rhetoric had not re-emerged, participants remained vigilant in relation to funding allocations, fearing that authorities might prioritise funding for CSOs aligned with government preferences. According to them, EU co-funding requirements were adding pressure for smaller CSOs, and potential state support for co-funding EU projects was seen by participants as a positive element. Participants argued that public funding for CSOs should be increased and distributed more transparently, with clearer criteria and oversight. They stressed that funding cuts by international donors had been a key negative development, citing significant reductions in United States Agency for International Development (USAID) support from 2025 and parallel cuts by other donors. In their view, the withdrawal of funding had threatened ongoing programmes on democracy, rule of law, anti-corruption, youth and media freedom. Participants expressed concern that many CSOs would be forced to close if funding gaps persisted. The authorities of North Macedonia mentioned that the Strategy of the Government for cooperation with and development of civil society 2025-2028 included a greater role for the Council in earmarking funds.

According to participants, the legal framework and practice on **freedom of assembly** had generally functioned well. In their view, recent protests linked to a fire in a nightclub in Kočani and minimum wage demands had provided visible examples of the state response to demonstrations. Participants observed that political actors on all sides had attempted to appropriate protests for partisan aims, and in their view, such politicisation had reduced public support for demonstrations. They expressed concern about online attacks against civil society representatives, particularly those visible in protest movements, highlighting that a related hate-speech case was under prosecution.

Participants recalled that many CSOs had mobilised against what they saw as undemocratic practices under the previous government, but underlined that society had become more democratic and CSOs had not faced direct attacks in recent years. Participants denounced the rise of **anti-rights tendencies** linked to religious influences, and believed that trends affecting the operating environment for civil society in the Western Balkans were not separate from those occurring in the EU.

Participants said that **youth participation** remained a persistent gap: despite a dedicated law, by-laws for key mechanisms on youth participation and policies had still not been adopted, so effective implementation was lacking. In their view, youth engagement was not treated as a priority, and participants noted that the number of local youth councils had declined, with only a few municipalities maintaining such structures and consulting youth organisations. According to participants, youth organisations – especially those supporting marginalised young people – had been deeply affected by international funding cuts, and government measures had not sufficiently mitigated these impacts.

3. Freedom of expression and media freedom

Participants thought that the **media freedom** had experienced only limited progress in recent years, driven by partial shifts in regulation rather than comprehensive reforms. According to them, despite an upward trend in international rankings, many structural challenges persisted, including weak financial sustainability of media outlets, poor socio-economic conditions for journalists and systemic links between media outlets and political actors. Participants said that the **legislative framework** formally guaranteed fundamental freedoms and viewed the inclusion of online media in the legal definition of 'media' as a positive development, expected to enhance transparency and accountability. However, they considered the media regulatory system to be outdated, failing to provide sufficient safeguards for journalists and to address issues of media ownership concentration, while being only partially aligned with European standards. They also noted that implementation of existing rules remained weak. Participants mentioned an ongoing reform process supported by the EU, which included the preparation of a national media strategy and a reform of the media framework aimed at aligning national legislation with EU rules. In their view, these laws could offer a potential pathway for improvement, if implemented effectively. The authorities of North Macedonia stated that harmonisation on audiovisual media services had been achieved and further alignment with EU standards would follow in the coming months through relevant laws. The authorities added that the media strategy would be complemented by an action plan with a clear timeline and specific measures.

Participants reported that **funding mechanisms** represented a central challenge, noting that the media market was oversaturated and financially fragile, with many outlets competing for limited resources. They considered that the independence of both the media regulator – the Agency for Audio and Audiovisual Media Services – and of the public service broadcaster remained fragile due to their financial dependence on the State budget. They expressed concern about public funding for political advertising during elections which, in their view, lacked transparency and created risks of misuse and political influence, particularly in online media. According to participants, existing funding schemes did not support improvements in journalistic quality or working conditions. They regretted that quality and original content had declined, with more promotional articles often presented as information, and that indirect censorship was widespread through advertising practices, leading many media outlets to avoid critical news reporting. Participants observed that **media pluralism** was undermined by ownership concentration issues, as many media outlets were often used by their owners as tools to maintain influence and to support their wider business activities. Participants pointed out a concerning decline in local media due to financial problems, which had led to reduced coverage of local issues and the emergence of 'news deserts'. According to them, a media pluralism fund, expected under the future media strategy, could help address geographical imbalances and better support public interest journalism, if it included safeguards to ensure political independence.

Participants believed that limited access to reliable local information had led many citizens to rely on social networks. In their view, this had increased the population's exposure to **disinformation**, which often originated from neighbouring countries and circulated across linguistic boundaries. According to them, a coordinated, society-wide response was needed to strengthen resilience to disinformation, including through media literacy initiatives.

Participants argued that the **socio-economic situation of journalists** remained precarious, as many journalists earned below the national average salary and worked under insecure contractual arrangements. They explained that there were no collective agreements in the private media sector, while only two existed for public service media, both of which had expired, reflecting a lack of willingness to strengthen labour protections for media professionals. They pointed out gender inequalities within the profession, with salary disparities affecting women journalists. In the participants' view, such poor working conditions and job insecurity had weakened journalistic independence. They expressed concern about an increase in attacks against media professionals, including strategic lawsuits against public participation (SLAPPs), warning of a chilling effect on investigative reporting. They observed that hate speech, particularly during election periods, had intensified and mainly targeted ethnic minorities and women journalists. All these pressures resulted in self-censorship by journalists, limiting critical reporting on sensitive issues. Participants welcomed the creation of a working group to develop anti-SLAPP mechanisms, stressing the need for stronger legislative protections.

Participants reported challenges related to **access to information**, saying that the agency responsible for freedom of information had been non-functional for several months, hindering access to public data. They expressed concern about delays in adopting legal amendments to improve access to information, which they attributed to a lack of political will. Participants argued that public authorities were selective in their communication with the media and they flagged two recent positive developments aimed at increasing transparency, namely the opening of public financial data and access to business registries.

4. The right to non-discrimination

Participants reported that the **legislative framework** on non-discrimination was broadly aligned with European standards but considered recent amendments to education laws removing references to gender equality to be a regression. They perceived overall implementation as remaining weak, attributing this to limited coordination between competent institutions, insufficient resources and generally low capacity in institutional bodies meant to protect rights. Participants explained that equality bodies had faced significant operational and credibility challenges, noting that delays in appointing a new Ombudsman had created a sense of impasse, and pointing out that the Commission for Prevention and Protection against Discrimination (CPPD) lacked an independent budget and sufficient staff, and decision-making deadlines had frequently been missed. In their view, appointment procedures for the CPPD had been only formally compliant, civil society's input had not been adequately considered, and they reported a trend of selecting candidates politically close to the ruling party rather than qualified professionals. Participants found it inappropriate that the misdemeanour authority had examined discrimination cases, despite lacking the competence to determine it. According to participants, citizens' trust in these institutions remained low, as protection mechanisms were often ineffective in practice. They advocated a stronger role for the State labour inspectorate, which they described as crucial for detecting discriminatory practices in labour relations. The authorities of North Macedonia said that a recent coordinating body had been tasked with monitoring the implementation of anti-discrimination laws, and acknowledged that resources for the CPPD had been restricted at governmental level.

Participants said that discrimination affecting minority **ethnic groups** remained a complex issue. Although the Constitution recognised five religious communities, secondary religious schools linked with the Orthodox Church and Islamic communities had been recognised at the level of state schools, which participants viewed as conflicting with the principle of secularity and as unequal compared to other communities. In their view, discrimination based on ethnicity had been frequent at local level, and communities were becoming more homogenous, with fewer opportunities for interaction. Participants were concerned that **Roma persons** continued to face discrimination in many areas. They highlighted two landmark cases: a 2024 Supreme Court ruling finding discrimination against Roma children in access to education, and a 2022 European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR) judgment condemning the segregation of Roma pupils in schools. According to participants, discriminatory practices had persisted despite adequate laws, and they called for closer monitoring by local institutions. While noting some improvement in employment levels, participants flagged that the lack of primary education diplomas had remained a key barrier, particularly for Roma women, both for accessing the labour market and for obtaining driving licences. Participants observed that a court case confirmed ethnic discrimination in the registration of previously unrecorded individuals in the birth registry, disproportionately affecting Roma persons and leaving many without adequate personal documentation, increasing the risk of statelessness. More generally, they reported a hostile environment towards Roma persons, including hate speech.

According to participants, **asylum seekers and refugees** faced systemic barriers leading to unequal treatment. They observed that asylum seekers had no access to work and that integration programmes were absent, while administrative procedures were often delayed or prevented access to services, even after refugee status had been granted. In their view, asylum seekers and refugees have been treated unevenly, with those from Ukraine having been received more positively than those from other countries. Participants considered reception centres to be inadequate for unaccompanied minors in

transit, while alternative care mechanisms had not been developed. They reported gender-based disparities in asylum decisions, as single fathers with children had appeared less likely to obtain protection. In the participants' view, the public debate had framed migration mainly as a security issue.

According to participants, **women** continued to face discrimination in employment. They noted that the law allowed employers to end temporary contracts upon their expiration without providing reasons. They believed that pregnancy or plans to undergo in vitro fertilisation (IVF) had led to the non-renewal of temporary contracts for women and called for the adoption of a planned legislative amendment to address these gaps. Participants pointed out specific disadvantages for women registered as agricultural workers, who were not recipients of maternity-related benefits available to other employed women, adding that CSOs were pursuing a lawsuit to change this provision. They expressed concern about the underreporting of sexual harassment at work and about the inadequate institutional response to increasing gender-based violence. Participants attributed shortcomings to low political will and weak institutional practice, including slow judicial proceedings, lack of specialised prosecutor units, lenient sanctions for perpetrators and insufficient compensation for victims. In the participants' view, increased public pressure following recent femicides had led to greater government action on legislative and practical responses, and they advocated for reforms to include free legal aid for gender-based violence victims and better preventive protocols. The authorities of North Macedonia commented that they were finalising the first strategy on gender-based violence, strongly focused on institutional capacity-building, and that the CPPD was preparing a recommendation on women's contracts and maternity rights.

Participants said that **LGBTIQ+ persons**, and transgender individuals in particular, had continued to face serious discrimination and institutional barriers despite formal legal protection. They noted that a legal framework for gender recognition had still not been put in place, impacting negatively on access to healthcare and other services for transgender individuals, despite a 2019 ECHR judgement to establish a clear procedure for changing documents. In their view, hate speech and misinformation targeting LGBTIQ+ persons had intensified, especially on social networks. Participants observed that access to justice had been obstructed by ineffective institutional responses, as cases of discrimination and hate speech had not been consistently investigated by the police and prosecutors, and impunity remained a problem. Participants argued that an expanding anti-rights and anti-gender narrative had contributed to a more hostile environment for human rights defenders and CSOs working on women's and LGBTIQ+ rights, reporting an increase in attacks against these groups. They noted that anti-rights movements were increasingly involved in institutional processes, including consultations by MPs on draft laws, and expressed concern that this influence could expand further.

Participants expressed concern about persistent discrimination against **persons with disabilities** and the lack of effective accessibility. They reported that an elections-related discrimination lawsuit had not led to remedial action by the State. In their view, a methodology for disability assessment, under development by the government with the World Bank's support, had not taken fully into account the input of disability CSOs, resulting in a tool that would discourage employment of persons with disabilities and penalise the use of assistive technology. According to participants, draft legislation on the employment of persons with disabilities included restrictions that would hinder labour market access. They regretted that 'inclusive education' had remained superficial because accessibility had not been adequately funded, citing the absence of accessible textbooks and slow progress on ratifying the Marrakesh VIP Treaty, which aimed to facilitate access to published works for persons with disabilities. They noted delayed disbursement of approved funding to disability CSOs, and flagged loopholes in construction and procurement rules that had not taken accessibility into account.

5. The rule of law

According to participants, the **rule of law framework** was generally adequate, but they reported a systemic failure in its enforcement. Participants observed that legislative changes had been frequent, often driven by the need to satisfy international demands, and had created fatigue and scepticism among

the public regarding their outcome. They noted that domestic criticism was often disregarded, while external assessments, particularly from the EU, had prompted more government action.

Participants expressed concern about widespread **corruption** and the weakness of anti-corruption enforcement mechanisms. They argued that the 2023 amendments to the Criminal Code had weakened the prosecution of corruption, leading to the dismissal of several high-profile cases. According to participants, serious shortcomings in inspection services, licensing systems, oversight by municipality administrations, and police action had undermined the implementation of existing rules. Survey findings indicating reduced resistance to corruption among citizens were viewed by participants as a reflection of resignation rather than acceptance, as citizens felt compelled to engage in corrupt practices to access services or opportunities. They stressed that anti-corruption efforts should be driven from the top down, rather than leaving the burden on the population. Participants reported that members of the State Commission for Prevention of Corruption (SCPC) had been affected by allegations of politicisation, as well as resignations and indictments, which had led to declining credibility and low public trust in this institution. They observed that only a few measures under the anti-corruption strategy had been implemented, that a new strategy was already overdue and that delays at governmental level had affected the adoption of changes to some relevant anti-corruption laws. Participants noted shortcomings regarding asset confiscation, because existing mechanisms focused on minor assets rather than proceeds from serious crime, while new legislation remained largely unimplemented. In their view, political commitment to fighting corruption had remained largely rhetorical, with limited follow-up once in power. The authorities of North Macedonia said that efforts to align with EU standards were ongoing, including through criminal laws, a new anti-corruption strategy and measures to strengthen the prosecution office for organised crime.

Participants expressed concern about the **independence of the judiciary**, arguing that public statements by government officials targeting the Judicial Council and the Council of Public Prosecutors had contributed to the resignation of some members of the judiciary. They observed persistent problems of perceived selective justice and perceived links between political actors and judicial authorities: according to them, prosecutions tended to target former office-holders, while current public officials were rarely investigated. They pointed out a pattern whereby politically connected individuals had been promoted within the judiciary, which had reinforced perceptions of bias. In their view, unequal treatment was also evident in court and detention practices, since more lenient sanctions and alternative measures appeared to be applied to politicians and politically connected persons, while pre-trial detention and harsher sanctions were applied to ordinary citizens. Participants perceived that the judiciary was expected to align with political interests and noted that public trust in the judicial system had declined. The authorities of North Macedonia said that they were working on new laws on the two Councils, in line with EU and Venice Commission recommendations.

Participants reported backsliding in the **efficiency and quality of the justice system**, highlighting an increase in postponed hearings, heavy workloads and a lower number of judgments delivered. According to them, these trends were due to severe understaffing, which was expected to worsen following the suspension of recruitment through the Academy for Judges and Prosecutors. They believed that insufficient budgetary allocations and outdated infrastructure also negatively affected the functioning of the judiciary, stressing that financial independence remained a key issue, as funding remained significantly below the levels required by law. The authorities of North Macedonia acknowledged the capacity constraints faced by the justice system, noting measures to address them, including the implementation of a judicial strategy and the extension of the working age of judges. Participants expressed concern about limited transparency in prosecution and courts, by reporting difficulties in accessing information on ongoing or discontinued investigations, as well as overly formalistic and abstract decisions regarding promotion and disciplinary measures by judicial governance bodies. They pointed out issues in the regulation of lobbying, noting that existing legislation had remained ineffective and that only a very small number of lobbyists were officially registered. Participants said that access to justice had remained limited, as the potential risk of being compelled to cover the opposing party's expenses if the case is lost had discouraged many claimants. They found gaps in legal support for

vulnerable groups, and they reported that general distrust in the judiciary had led citizens to seek trial monitoring from CSOs during court proceedings.

According to participants, **prison conditions** remained problematic for several reasons: overcrowding, inadequate educational services for minors, limited access to healthcare treatments for drug users, and a shortage of medical staff. They noted that the country had recently admitted before the ECHR a breach in prison facilities of its obligations regarding the prohibition of torture. Participants mentioned that many ongoing projects were providing free legal aid to prisoners.

**Authorities' observations
on the report on the visit to North Macedonia
10-11 March 2026**

REPUBLIC OF NORTH MACEDONIA

MINISTRY FOR EUROPEAN AFFAIRS

21st of August 2026

Observations from the Government of North Macedonia on the draft report of the European Economic and Social Committee Fundamental Rights and Rule of Law Group on its visit to North Macedonia on 10-11 March 2026

1. Freedom of Association and Freedom of Assembly

On youth participation, The Ministry of Social Policy, Demography and Youth (MSPDY) has considered stakeholders' views and notes that recent challenges should be considered in the context of the transfer of youth policy responsibilities from the Agency for Youth and Sport to the Ministry of Social Policy, Demography and Youth. The Youth Sector is now fully operational within the Ministry and is exercising its responsibilities in accordance with its legal mandate. The Ministry is progressively aligning the necessary regulatory framework, procedures, and operational mechanisms to strengthen the implementation of the Law on Youth Participation and Youth Policies. Regarding local youth councils, the Ministry shares the concerns raised by participants about their limited coverage and uneven development across municipalities. In response, several measures have already been incorporated into the Draft Action Plan 2026–2027. These include the development of Guidelines for the Preparation of Local Youth Strategies, Guidelines for Local Youth Participation, continuous capacity-building programmes for youth officers and chairpersons of local youth councils, and the organisation of a national conference to facilitate the exchange of good practices. These actions aim to increase the number of functional and active local youth councils through close cooperation with the Association of the Units of Local Self-Government (AULSG) and municipalities. In parallel, a public awareness campaign highlighting the role and importance of local youth councils is planned in partnership with local self-government units.

MSPDY is also mindful of the challenges faced by youth organisations following the withdrawal of several international donor programmes, particularly those supporting marginalised and vulnerable groups of young people. To address these challenges, the Action Plan 2026–2027 foresees a range of targeted measures: support for the diversification of funding sources, mentoring partnerships between established and emerging organisations, priority support for organisations based in rural areas and those working with young people with fewer opportunities, and the introduction of partnership criteria favouring collaboration with smaller organisations within existing grant schemes. Furthermore, the Ministry remains committed to implementing the Programme for Financial Support of Youth Projects, which was adopted in 2025.

In addition, the Ministry, together with its partners, is developing concrete mechanisms for monitoring the implementation of both the Law on Youth Participation and Youth Policies and the National Youth Strategy 2023–2027. These efforts include the regular preparation of annual monitoring reports to assess progress and identify areas for improvement. At the same time, in cooperation with the Council of Europe's European Steering Committee for Youth (CDEJ), the Ministry is implementing a project dedicated to monitoring and evaluating these processes.

This initiative is expected to further strengthen transparency, improve the reliability of data and evidence, and enhance the long-term sustainability of the results achieved.

2. Freedom of Expression and Media Freedom

Regarding the rules **on media ownership concentration**, the Agency for Audio and Audio-Visual Media Services – AAVMU) warned that while it is true that they are outdated and this, in some cases, prevents the consolidation of entities in the media industry, the existing rules are strictly implemented.

Changes in the ownership of the broadcast media cannot happen if AAVMU does not approve of it. Furthermore, as can be verified with [on the AVMU's web site, a detailed updated overview of the ownership structure](#), of all the media that are part of the respective registries administered by the AAVMU, [radio](#), [TV](#), [print](#) and [online](#), is continuously available. The only part of the Macedonian media landscape that is not fully covered are the online media, since this is the only register that is voluntary, so there are no data for the online media that still haven't registered. Also, the agency regularly prepares and publishes annual analyses of the media ownership, which are also [available on its web site](#). As regards the **media regulatory system**, the manner in which some owners misuse their media is not due to the ownership concentration issues, but rather, it is a result of the clientelist relationship they maintain with some of the political parties, which is enhanced by the fact that the electoral paid political advertising is financed from the State Budget. Actually, cases of media ownership concentration are very rare in North Macedonia. AAVMU has warned against this many times and recently submitted to the Ministry of Justice amendments to the Electoral Code addressing this issue, among others. Regarding **functioning of the Agency**, it is now fully operational, following the appointment of a new Director by the Assembly on **8 April 2026**. The newly appointed Director, previously served as Secretary of the Agency, ensuring institutional continuity and drawing on extensive experience within the institution itself.

On **access to information**, a Law on Ratification of the Council of Europe Convention on Access to Official Documents (Tromsø Convention), was adopted, on 13 August 2024, approving the Convention under domestic law. North Macedonia deposited its instrument of ratification with the Council of Europe on 13 November 2024, which is the formal international act making the country a Party to the Convention. The Convention entered into force for North Macedonia on 1 March 2025, and its provisions became legally binding on the country under international law.

In addition, legislative reforms are ongoing. Draft Law amending the Law on free access to public information was published on the Electronic National Register of Regulations (ENER) for public consultation in 2025 as part of the process of aligning national legislation with the Council of Europe Convention on Access to Official Documents (Tromsø Convention) and as well as other EU standards. Following the public consultation, the draft has been undergoing inter-institutional consultations with the competent institutions.

3. The Right to Non-Discrimination

The Ministry of Education and Science remains committed to ensuring **equal access to quality education and addressing discrimination and segregation**, including through the implementation of the ECtHR judgment in *Elmazova and Others v. North Macedonia*. To strengthen the legal framework, amendments to the Law on Primary Education introduced

explicit provisions prohibiting discrimination and segregation, requiring schools to establish school inclusion teams, ensure balanced classroom composition, apply school zoning rules to prevent ethnic concentration, and implement programmes for protection against discrimination and social exclusion. The amendments also introduced additional support measures for vulnerable students, including tutoring and enhanced opportunities for Roma students to study the elective subject “Language and Culture of the Roma”. Regarding the applicants in the *Elmazova and Others v. North Macedonia* case, the Ministry notes that their current educational status varies. Some students have completed primary education, some remain enrolled in the education system, while others have discontinued their education or are no longer attending school. These circumstances have been considered when planning and implementing desegregation and inclusion measures in the schools concerned.

To support implementation, the Ministry issued instructions to municipalities and schools on the application of the new provisions during enrolment and class formation and, in cooperation with the Council of Europe, developed a Feasibility Study on the Desegregation of Schools concerned by the judgment in *Elmazova and Others v. North Macedonia*. Based on these measures and the ongoing optimization of the school network, the Ministry is working on the gradual reorganization of Primary School “Goce Delchev” in Shtip, one of the schools concerned by the judgment. The measure aims to address the ethnic concentration of Roma students and promote a more balanced distribution of students across schools. The transfer of students will be implemented in phases between the 2026/2027 and 2030/2031 school years, accompanied by consultations with parents and support for students and school staff. In parallel, the Ministry and UNICEF are developing a comprehensive transition and adaptation support framework, including teacher training, peer-support activities, psychosocial support, and parenting programmes. The parenting programmes, already implemented in Primary School “Goce Delchev” (Shtip), Primary School “Gjorgji Sugarev” (Bitola) and Primary School “Dobre Jovanovski” (Prilep), are aimed at strengthening parental involvement in children's education, supporting families during school transitions, and reducing the risk of early school leaving. The Bureau for Development of Education has also delivered targeted training on preventing early school leaving in these schools.

Regarding concerns about **Roma women and adults** who have not completed primary education, the Ministry of Education and Science notes that adult primary education is provided free of charge and financed from the State Budget, enabling persons over the age of 15 to complete compulsory education, acquire basic skills, and improve their employment prospects. In parallel, the Ministry continues to support Roma inclusion in education through dedicated budget programmes under the National Roma Strategy 2022-2030, accounting for approximately 40% of the total state budget allocated to Roma-related policies (around 50 million MKD). These measures focus on increasing educational attainment, reducing early school leaving, and facilitating the transition from education to employment.

The Government continues to address the remaining complex cases on an individual basis. In parallel, the Law on Primary Education guarantees access to education for all children, including undocumented children, who are entitled to enroll in school and benefit from educational support measures regardless of their documentation or nationality status. The Government acknowledges that discrimination and social exclusion remain challenges and is committed to strengthening institutional capacities, improving implementation and monitoring mechanisms, and enhancing cooperation with local authorities, independent institutions, and civil society. The authorities maintain a zero-tolerance policy towards discrimination, racism, and hate speech. The implementation of the National Strategy for Equality and Non-

Discrimination, together with the work of the Commission for Prevention and Protection against Discrimination, supports equal opportunities and stronger protection for all citizens, including Roma. The Government considers continued cooperation with civil society and international partners essential for improving policies and ensuring the effective inclusion of Roma. In this context, the Ministry of Social Policy, Demography and Youth coordinates the implementation and monitoring of the Strategy for Roma Inclusion 2022-2030 in partnership with public institutions, local authorities, Roma civil society organizations, and international partners.

The Ministry has also strengthened access to **education in educational-correctional institutions** through amendments to the Law on Primary Education, the establishment of an inter-institutional commission, and the adoption of dedicated regulations and curricula. Particular attention has been given to the Educational-Correctional Institution “Volkovija”, where an assessment identified significant educational gaps among children placed in the institution, including a high number who had not completed primary education. To address these challenges, the institution has been equipped with classrooms and teaching materials, and since October 2025 formal education has been provided by teachers from Primary School “A.S. Makarenko” in Skopje. Currently, 17 students are enrolled, ensuring continuity of education and improved access to learning opportunities for children in institutional care.

The Government also promotes the **labour market inclusion of Roma** through active employment measures implemented by the Employment Service Agency, including training, skills development, employment subsidies, self-employment support, and youth employment programmes. Particular attention is given to increasing the participation of Roma women and young people, recognizing education and employment as key drivers of social inclusion and economic empowerment.

Regarding civil registration and access to personal documentation, North Macedonia has addressed the issue of unregistered persons through the 2023 amendments to the Law on Civil Registration, which introduced simplified procedures for late birth registration, enabled the transfer of persons from the special to the regular birth registry, and allowed the use of alternative evidence where standard documentation is unavailable. These measures have significantly improved access to legal identity and reduced the risk of statelessness, particularly among vulnerable groups, including Roma. Implementation of the amendments has produced tangible results. To date, 526 persons have obtained a Special Birth Registration Document, 461 cases have been resolved, and 257 persons have been registered and assigned a Personal Identification Number (EMBG), while additional cases are being processed through administrative procedures.

As regards the concerns raised about the **Commission for Prevention and Protection against Discrimination**, the Commission continues to operate independently within the framework established by the Law on Prevention and Protection against Discrimination. Efforts have been made to improve its institutional and financial capacity, and discussions on strengthening its resources are ongoing. Concerning the appointment process of the Commission's members, the procedure is conducted in accordance with the legal requirements prescribed by the Law on Prevention and Protection against Discrimination.

Concerning the **legislation framework**, The Ministry of Social Policy, Demography and Youth, with expert support, conducted an analysis of the alignment of national legislation with selected EU directives on equality, non-discrimination, equality bodies, and work-life balance.

The analysis found that the Law on Prevention and Protection against Discrimination and the Law on Equal Opportunities for Women and Men provide a strong basis for transposition. The former establishes broad anti-discrimination protections and enforcement mechanisms, while the latter regulates gender equality, equal opportunities, special measures, and legal remedies. Of the 93 directive provisions relevant for transposition (out of 122 analysed):

- 53 are fully transposed,
- 36 are partially transposed, and
- 4 are not transposed.

This represents an overall 57% rate of full transposition. While the legal framework is substantially aligned with the selected EU directives, further amendments, particularly to the Labour Relations Law and certain sector-specific laws, are needed to achieve full alignment.

As regards the delay in appointing a new Ombudsman, the Assembly of North Macedonia elected the new Ombudsman on 23 January 2026, and he assumed office after taking the oath on 26 January 2026. The Ombudsman institution is therefore fully operational.

In area of **protection of women**, amendments to the Law on Prevention and Protection against Violence against Women and Domestic Violence are currently being prepared as a key first step towards the further implementation of the Istanbul Convention. Following the adoption of these amendments, the process of revising and aligning the relevant by-laws will continue in order to ensure the full and effective implementation of the new legal provisions. The proposed amendments are aimed at significantly strengthening the system for the protection of victims through:

- Faster and more timely responses by competent institutions following reports of violence;
- Improved risk assessment and risk management procedures, enabling the timely identification and prevention of high-risk cases;
- Strengthened mechanisms to prevent the recurrence of violence;
- Placing the safety of the victim at the centre of institutional responses;
- Ensuring immediate intervention in situations involving an imminent threat to the life, physical integrity, or psychological well-being of the victim and members of their family.

Drawing on the experience gained from the practical implementation of the Law, a need has been identified to establish a more efficient and responsive institutional framework. To this end, the proposed amendments introduce shorter deadlines for decision-making and the issuance of emergency and temporary protection measures, allowing for more timely protection of victims and more effective risk management. These legislative changes are expected to create the conditions for the immediate cessation of violence, while ensuring that victims receive timely assistance, support, and protection in line with international standards and the country's commitments in the field of preventing and combating gender-based violence against women and domestic violence.

The Draft National Strategy for the Prevention and Protection against Gender-Based Violence against Women and Domestic Violence 2026–2033, along with its accompanying Action Plan, is currently in the final stage of development.

Concerning **disability**, in accordance with Article 5 of the Law on Prevention and Protection against Discrimination, any discrimination is prohibited on the grounds of race, skin colour, origin, national or ethnic affiliation, sex, gender, sexual orientation, gender identity, membership of a marginalised group, language, citizenship, social origin, education, religion or religious belief, political opinion, other belief, disability, age, family or marital status, property status, health status, personal characteristics, and social status, or on any other ground. The draft Methodology for Disability Assessment, developed under the World Bank-supported project of the Ministry of Social Policy, Demography and Youth, is currently in the testing phase. Data collection has been completed, and the next step is to engage a consultant to analyse and process the collected data. As this is a draft methodology, it is expected to undergo further revisions based on the assessment findings and the resulting analysis. The comments received will be carefully considered and addressed through the analysis of the data gathered during the assessment process.

In area of **migration**, according to the existing legal framework, namely the Law on International and Temporary Protection and the Law on Foreigners, North Macedonia recognizes only the following legal statuses for foreign nationals: refugee, beneficiary of **subsidiary protection, asylum seeker, person under temporary protection, and foreigner with temporary or permanent residence**. The legal status of “**migrant**” does not exist under national legislation. Consequently, persons who do not have a regulated legal status are not entitled to exercise rights provided by law. The Government, together with the competent ministries and institutions responsible for the issues covered in this report, has committed to addressing some of the identified shortcomings through the forthcoming amendments to the **Law on International and Temporary Protection** and other relevant legislation. One of the key measures is the introduction of a **personal identification number** for asylum seekers, which constitutes a fundamental prerequisite for the effective exercise of their social and economic rights. These commitments and the corresponding deadlines form an integral part of the **Rule of Law Roadmap**.

Unaccompanied foreign children are provided with protection in accordance with the **best interests of the child principle** and in line with the procedures established under the newly adopted **Standard Operating Procedures for Unaccompanied Foreign Children and Other Vulnerable Categories of Foreign Nationals**. Each unaccompanied child is assigned a guardian and granted the rights provided under the **Law on Social Protection**. Nevertheless, the lack of capacity to provide an adequate number of foster families remains a long-standing challenge. To address this issue, the Government is working closely with **UNICEF** and **UNHCR** to strengthen the existing protection system.

With regard to the temporary transit centres, the Ministry of Social Policy, Demography and Youth notes that these facilities serve a different purpose and function from the **Reception Centre for Asylum Seekers**. Any person applying for international protection is referred to the Reception Centre for Asylum Seekers in Skopje, which is the only official reception centre of this kind in the country. The Ministry is aware of the existing challenges related to reception capacities and continuously undertakes measures to improve them in line with European and international standards. More broadly, the Government and the Ministry of Social Policy, Demography and Youth remain committed to continuously strengthening institutional capacities, which is also part of the agreed activities implemented in cooperation with the **European Union Agency for Asylum (EUAA)**, **UNHCR**, and the **International Organization for Migration (IOM)**. In the period ahead, these efforts are expected to result in concrete measures aimed at enhancing the socio-economic integration of persons under

international protection. In this regard, the Ministry is actively working on the preparation and adoption of an **Integration Strategy**, the establishment of **Macedonian language courses**, and the creation of conditions that facilitate access to the regular education system, vocational training, and the labour market, in accordance with national priorities and international standards.

4. The Rule of Law

National authorities note that the legislative amendments are not driven solely by external pressure, but primarily by the objective need to align the national legal framework with the EU acquis, international standards and the commitments undertaken within the EU accession process and the Reform Agenda. The adoption of new legislation or amendments to existing laws is an integral part of the harmonisation process with EU standards and reflects the evolving requirements of a candidate country. Each draft legislative initiative is subject to consultation and is shared with the European Commission for review and feedback. Based on the opinions and recommendations provided by the Commission, appropriate adjustments are introduced to ensure compliance with EU requirements and to improve the quality and effectiveness of the legal framework. Furthermore, the legislative reforms are not undertaken merely to respond to external assessments, but as part of a structured process aimed at strengthening institutions, improving legal certainty and ensuring sustainable reforms.

Steps have been undertaken to strengthen the SCPC credibility, independence and effectiveness.

In this regard, the authorities highlighted that a new President of the SCPC has been elected. On **3 December 2025**, the Assembly elected President of the State Commission for Prevention of Corruption, following a public selection procedure.

The preparation of the **new National Strategy for Prevention of Corruption and Conflict of Interest 2026–2030** has been completed. The new strategy is intended to provide a renewed strategic framework for strengthening preventive anti-corruption policies, improving coordination among institutions and addressing identified challenges in implementation. The Strategy has been submitted to the Assembly for further consideration on 22 June 2026, under a regular parliamentary procedure.

In line with the Reform agenda, but also in line with the Strategy for development of the judiciary significant steps have been undertaken to strengthen judicial independence, accountability and transparency.

In particular, the reform of the institutional framework governing judicial management bodies. The Law on the Judicial Council prepared in line with the recommendations of the EU Peer Review Mission of September 2023 and the Venice Commission's recommendations was adopted by the Parliament on 29 December 2025. Furthermore, in line with the Ministry of Justice commented: European Commission's recommendations, amendments to the Law on the Judicial Council were adopted by the Parliament on 11 June 2026, with the aim of further strengthening the Council's independence, accountability, transparency and procedures for decision-making.

In parallel, comprehensive reforms have been initiated in the prosecutorial system. A new Draft Law on Public Prosecution and a new Law on the Council of Public Prosecutors were prepared

as part of the broader effort to strengthen the autonomy, professionalism and integrity of prosecutorial institutions. The texts of both draft laws were shared with the Venice Commission. In October 2025, the Venice Commission gave positive assessment of both the legislative process and the substance of the proposed reforms.

Following this process, on 7 May 2026, the Parliament adopted the Law on the Council of Public Prosecutors. Subsequently, taking into account the European Commission's observations on the procedure for the election of lay members, the Assembly of the Republic of North Macedonia adopted, on 29 June 2026, the Law on Amending the Law on the Council of Public Prosecutors. The procedure for the adoption of the Draft Law on Public Prosecution is currently ongoing in the Parliament. These legislative reforms demonstrate the commitment of the authorities to ensure that judicial and prosecutorial institutions operate independently, and professionally. Continued implementation of the adopted reforms, together with enhanced transparency and public communication, remains essential for rebuilding citizens' trust in the justice system.

As regards the suspension of recruitment through the Academy for Judges and Public Prosecutors, measures have been undertaken to address these concerns and to ensure the continuity of recruitment and professional training processes.

In this regard, a Draft Law on the Academy for Judges and Public Prosecutors has been prepared and is currently undergoing the government procedure. Following the entry into force of the new Law, the Academy for Judges and Public Prosecutors will proceed with the announcement of a new call for admission to initial training. In preparation for this process, the Programme Council of the Academy is working on the updated Entrance Examination Programme and the database of questions for the entrance examination, ensuring a transparent and merit-based selection process for future candidates.

In parallel, immediate measures have been taken to address the increased workload in courts and temporary capacity gaps. Due to the increased caseload and reduced efficiency in certain courts, the Judicial Council adopted a Decision on the temporary assignment of 12 judges to Basic Courts where there was an identified need for additional judicial capacity.

Several of the concerns are being actively addressed through legislative, institutional and operational reforms.

Concerning overcrowding, both infrastructure and policy measures have been adopted aimed at reducing prison occupancy. The Directorate for Execution of Sanctions has launched a public procurement procedure for the construction of new facilities at Idrizovo Prison to increase accommodation capacity. At the same time, efforts have focused on reducing the prison population through greater use of alternative sanctions. During September and October 2025, the Director of the Directorate held meetings with judges, court presidents and judges working in the criminal area in ten courts with extended jurisdiction. Also, the Director of the Directorate, in cooperation with the Director of the Academy for Judges and Public Prosecutors and the President of the Judicial Council, held a joint meeting with all court presidents at the Academy for Judges and Public Prosecutors.

These discussions promoted increased use of probation measures and longer conditional releases as alternatives to imprisonment. According to the Directorate, these efforts resulted in increased application of probation in regions where it had previously been underutilized. This

engagement with the judiciary continued throughout 2026 through additional meetings and round tables, demonstrating a sustained policy commitment to reducing overcrowding.

Regarding inadequate educational services for minors, significant progress has been made following amendments to the legal framework and the adoption of implementing bylaws by the Ministry of Education and Science in June 2025. These reforms enabled the launch of formal education in penal and correctional institutions during the 2024/25 school year. Following coordination meetings between the Ministry of Education and Science, the Directorate for Execution of Sanctions, the State School for Adult Education "A.S. Makarenko", the Bureau for Development of Education and the Tetovo Educational Correctional Institution, primary education commenced in the Tetovo Educational Correctional Institution, with **19 children enrolled**, while **9 children are attending secondary education**. These developments indicate that educational services for minors are being systematically introduced and expanded.

Regarding limited access to healthcare, including treatment for drug users and the shortage of medical staff, the Directorate for Execution of Sanctions has initiated a series of institutional measures in cooperation with the Ministry of Health. Coordination meetings have been held to strengthen healthcare provision in correctional institutions, and the Directorate has requested the establishment of a dedicated department within the Ministry of Health responsible for coordinating prison healthcare. The Ministry is currently amending its internal job systematization to establish and staff this department. Furthermore, with the support of the Council of Europe, assessments have been carried out in Idrizovo Correctional Facility, Štip Penitentiary and Kumanovo Prison to introduce telemedicine services, which would improve prisoners' access to specialist healthcare and alleviate the effects of staffing shortages. These measures demonstrate that the authorities have acknowledged the existing deficiencies and are taking concrete steps to improve healthcare delivery.



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