

NORTH MACEDONIA

**Election observation Mission 2024
Preliminary Report**

Introduction

We are pleased to present this preliminary election observation report, which offers a snapshot of our key findings and observations during the **Macedonian Parliamentary elections and the second round of the Presidential elections on May 8, 2024**. Our mission aimed to assess various aspects of the electoral process to uphold democratic values and ensure a fair and transparent election.

This preliminary report highlights essential elements, such as the opening procedures, challenges related to polling stations, and issues with the counting process. It offers a glimpse into our observations, but it is important to note that this report is not exhaustive, and a comprehensive final report with recommendations on improving the electoral process will be released soon.

Key Findings

Opening Ceremony

In general, the opening procedures went accordingly. At all the polling stations where our observers were present during the opening procedures, all the materials were present and all ballots as well as envelopes were intact. Furthermore, all the serial numbers of ballot box seals were entered correctly and all of Silba's observers were allowed to be present during the opening procedures. At the eight voting stations at which Silba observers were present, partisan observers of different parties were present, with other international observers present at two of these polling stations.

The opening procedures were executed effectively. In the opening observations, 100% of our observers witnessed the Polling Station Officials stamping the ballot papers during the preparation, following legal requirements. Furthermore, all observers confirmed that the ballot boxes were correctly sealed at the opening of the 8 polling stations.

Moreover, a significant majority of 87,5% of the polling stations opened on time at 7:00, with only 12,5% of the eight polling stations we observed experiencing voting delays. This demonstrates that the opening process was well-implemented, secure, and successful in upholding several fundamental democratic principles.

However, there were issues as well. In half of the polling stations, our observers noted that the number of voters in the general voting list was not announced, and in three voting stations the number of ballots was not announced. Nonetheless, the correct number of voters and number of ballots were entered into the protocols at all the polling stations. Finally, minor instances of missing information notices of the candidates and parties for the parliamentary elections were reported.

Voting

Absent and unidentified staff at polling stations: At 16% of observed polling stations across the country, there were issues with polling station staff being absent. This includes polling staff not showing up or leaving the polling station for short periods of time. Another country-wide issue was the identification of polling staff. 19% of the staff did not wear their identification cards correctly with identification either missing or not visible. This is a significant number, as this indicates that a large section of the population have voted in polling stations where there have been issues with absent staff or staff that were not wearing proper identification.

Voter identification: A significant issue was unidentified persons in cars outside the polling stations attempting to identify voters (16%). The aforementioned persons were seen counting the number of voters and keeping track of who had voted. Observers also reported that partisan observers inside polling stations were attempting to identify voters. This is a serious breach of voter confidence and can be interpreted as an indication of voter buying or coercion, which can throw doubt on the results as a whole. All in all, this is indicative of a significant number of voters having voted in a polling station that did not adhere to the standards for elections as identified by the Macedonian government.

Unauthorised persons involved in the voting process: At 3 polling stations there were reports of unauthorised persons involving themselves with the voting process. This was most strongly reported in Kumanovo with 1 report and Shtip with 2 reports.

Police near polling stations: While there was a police presence near the polling stations, in most cases, the police presence fell within acceptable parameters. In 3% of the cases where police presence was reported, was the police presence inappropriate. We observed one instance of police entering the polling station uninvited and one instance of a police officer taking notes of the people who had voted. One case of inappropriate behaviour by an international observer was also reported with an OSCE observer taking pictures within the polling station.

Insufficient layout inside polling stations: Several issues with the layout and availability of information were also reported. 19% of the polling stations observed were not accessible for people with disabilities. In 9% of the polling stations, the voting booths were placed too close to each other with instances of dysfunctional light sources also reported. The availability of voting materials in minority languages was reported as missing in 18% of the polling stations where it was supposed to be present.

Varied training of polling station officers: The training of the polling station officers was conducted in wildly varying ways, with different moments, time periods and intensities of training. In one polling station an official was being trained during the conduct of the vote. However, the PSOs expressed that they were satisfied with the training received at all but one of the polling stations.

Involvement of partisan observers: Several instances of violation of the procedures were identified where partisan observers involved themselves with the voting process (4%) such as telling voters how to fold their ballots. There were also cases where partisan observers were unduly friendly with polling station staff (3%). On the other side of the spectrum, an instance of yelling between partisan observers and polling staff was also reported. There were also small technical issues with the biometric devices for voter identification. This led to voter exclusion once.

Voter identification: The voters' identification was consistently checked across all the polling stations. Even in cases where the biometric scanner did not operate appropriately, the polling station staff resolved the situation adequately and in line with the procedures. Across all polling stations, the ballots were stamped appropriately.

Attitude towards international observers: In general, the polling station staff was friendly to international observers and understood the tasks of the international observers. The voting was mostly peaceful with only reports from Kumanovo indicating unrest.

Closing Ceremony

Unused ballots not consistently destroyed: During the closing ceremony of the elections, four observer teams reported that the unused ballots were secured while five reported that the ballots were destroyed. This inconsistency can point to either a lack of uniformity in polling station official training or a lack of clear definition in the procedures. Either way, this is a significant issue as unused ballots need to be prevented from being used to add extra votes after the ballot boxes are opened. Any lack of uniformity in the procedures is a significant issue as it can throw doubt on the results.

Ballots not consistently invalidated and separated: There was one report of suspicious voting being accepted and there were two reports of invalid votes separated insufficiently. Although the observers reported that this situation did not appear to favour one party or candidate, the inconsistent invalidation and separation of the invalid ballots pose a risk to trust in the count and the integrity of the vote.

More frequent invalidation of Presidential Ballots: In the Butel district in Skopje and Kumanovo, our observers reported that there were two reports of a high number of invalid ballots cast for the presidential election while the number of invalid ballots for the parliamentary election was within regular bounds. This could indicate that voters were encouraged to receive the ballots for the presidential election, but not vote for either candidate.

No significant indications of ballot box stuffing: During the counting and the opening of the ballot boxes, no indication of ballot box stuffing was observed. In one case, in the Saraj district in Skopje, the observers were unable to observe the procedures clearly due to one polling station official blocking the view of the ballot box. In all other cases, the observers reported that no indications were found.

Counting Procedures largely adhered to: When the cast ballots were counted, the president of the polling station should show the ballots to everyone present. In one polling station, this was not correctly adhered to, resulting in decreased transparency in the counting and the aforementioned problem with verifying the lack of ballot box stuffing. The problems with incorrectly invalidated ballots and the assignment of positions too far to observe notwithstanding, this transparency is very much needed and necessary to ensure public trust in the results.

No indications of false reporting: During our observations, no indications of improper reporting of the results were observed. While in two cases observers found persons present to immediately make phone calls, they were unable to ascertain whether this was to report the results or for other means. In addition, at two polling stations, the results were not publicly posted.

Methodology and Deployment

International observers play a crucial role in safeguarding the integrity and transparency of elections. Their presence is instrumental in ensuring that the electoral process is fair, free, and free from irregularities. Our observers help build public confidence in the electoral system by providing an impartial, third-party assessment of the entire election cycle.

Within Silba, we have developed a comprehensive election observation methodology that enables us to conduct our observations as international observers in a highly professional manner.

This methodology is based on the OSCE's comprehensive handbook on election observation and leverages the Okutool App to collect real-time field observations from our observers. This methodological foundation, combined with the IT tool, ensures that our observers are well-prepared to assess elections thoroughly and efficiently. All of our observers have received certification beforehand for completing OSCE/ODIHR short election observation training, ensuring that they are well-prepared and equipped to carry out their roles effectively in upholding the highest standards of election observation. Before and during deployment they are further trained in the context of North Macedonia.

In line with best practices in election observation, **Silba covers all electoral procedures, from the opening of polling stations to the closing and vote counting.** This approach provides a comprehensive and well-rounded assessment of the election day. It encompasses the evaluation of election officials' performance, the conditions at polling stations, the processing of voters, adherence to general electoral procedures, and oversight of the transmission of polling station results.

Our observers strictly adhere to a code of conduct that underscores the importance of impartiality and non-interference in the electoral process. **Silba firmly believes that upholding these methodologies is essential for promoting democratic values and transparency in electoral processes worldwide.**

Deployment Plan

We had a team of 17 Silba observers. These observers came from various European countries, such as Denmark and Italy. Our mission was supported by five coordinators, including the Head Coordinator, Kerwin Kouw; the Finance Coordinator, Henrik Koch; the Press Coordinators, Daniela Lange Andersen and Stijn van der Veen; and the Logistics Coordinator, Katie Toth.

Our teams were deployed in four locations across the country: **Skopje(1), Tetovo(2), Kumanovo(3), Štip (4)**. In Skopje we deployed 11 observers to various districts, while we deployed two observers in Tetovo, Kumanovo and Štip each. Additionally, four coordinators observed the voting process once each throughout the day in Skopje, with one coordinator present at the counting process at one polling station in Skopje.

In total, we **visited 86 polling stations across North Macedonia**, with a strong focus on Skopje. However, we made efforts to diversify our coverage by extending our observation to other areas of North Macedonia, providing us with a comprehensive understanding of how polling stations were operating and the overall election atmosphere. We aimed to spread our observation locations across cities with varying expected election outcomes and differences in ethnicities and religions as well as encompassing both smaller and larger cities.

Our observations included eight at the opening of polling stations, 69 general observations throughout the day, and nine closing observations.

Okutool App

For reporting by our observers, we have utilised the Okutool app, developed by our Kyrgyz partners, the Kloop Media Foundation. In contrast to traditional paper forms that require filling out, collecting, handing over, or even faxing to headquarters, this app enables us to gather data in real-time. We can promptly verify the information and, when necessary, request our observers to clarify the data provided, with the results displayed on a live dashboard. This real-time approach allows our headquarters, both in Skopje and Denmark, as well as any interested parties, to access and view the results of the Election Observation Mission (EOM) in real-time.

Additionally, it permits us to share any problems or points of interest encountered by other observers with the team.

The Kloop Media Foundation also provided us with two on-call programmers, responsible for both the app's backend and the dashboard, available from 6:00 CET to 1:00 CET the following morning. Given the time difference, this was a major commitment on their end. Because of Kloop's groundbreaking app, we also were able to share preliminary findings on the opening procedures shortly after the polling stations had opened.

About Us

Silba - Initiative for Dialogue and Democracy is a Danish non-profit, non-governmental, youth-led organisation dedicated to upholding democratic values, fostering engagement, and dialogue, and defending civil liberties and equality through national engagement, international partnership projects, and election observation. Over the past 20 years, Silba has conducted over 55 election observation missions in over 20 countries.

Learn more by visiting silba.dk

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