

Викторија Скот: Добар ден, почитувани гости. Јас се викам Викторија Скот и сум постар истражувач во Меѓународната фондација за изборни системи, или ИФЕС, со седиште во Вашингтон. Со задоволство се придружувам на моите колеги денес да ви посакам добредојде, и се заблагодарувам на нашиот партнер ИНКЛУЗИВА што ме покани да се обратам виртуелно ова попладне.

Под покровителство на Конзорциумот за избори и зајакнување на политичките процеси, или ЦЕППС, ИФЕС се здружи со ИНКЛУЗИВА во програмата за грантови на ЦЕППС за да даде поддршка на политичкото учество на долгорочно маргинализираните популации во изборните процеси. Во рамките на оваа грант програма, партнерите на ЦЕППС — ИФЕС, Меѓународниот републикански институт и Националниот демократски институт ги поддржуваат локалните и регионалните граѓански организации на глобално ниво преку проекти кои имаат за цел да го зајакнат учеството на членовите на традиционално маргинализираните заедници, вклучително и лицата со посебни потреби, во политичкиот живот. Оваа програма е овозможена со дарежлива поддршка на американскиот народ преку Агенцијата на САД за меѓународен развој (УСАИД).

Според овој проект, целта на ИНКЛУЗИВА беше да се зголеми достапноста на изборите и вклучувањето на лицата со посебни потреби во изборните процеси. Во текот на проектот, ИНКЛУЗИВА обезбеди обука и поддршка на членовите на Државната изборна комисија и нејзините избирачки одбори, организираше мисија за набљудување на пристапот за време на избори, спроведе едукација на гласачите и обучи претставници на политичките партии за изборните права на лицата со попреченост и организирање на достапни и инклузивни политички кампањи.

Мисијата за набљудување на изборите на ИНКЛУЗИВА - која обучи и распореди повеќе од 40 акредитирани изборни набљудувачи со посебни потреби на 200 избирачки места низ целата земја - беше прва од ваков вид во балканскиот регион. Покрај нивното раководство во овој простор, ИНКЛУЗИВА успеа да добие поддршка од различни засегнати страни, вклучително и Државната изборна комисија, која ги поздрави обуките за вработените и придонесот од ИНКЛУЗИВА.

Кога се соочивме со извонредниот предизвик за имплементација на проектот среде глобална пандемија, ИНКЛУЗИВА се покажа како прилагодлива и одговорна организација, модифицирајќи ги тренинзите да се испорачуваат виртуелно - нова вештина што тимот брзо ја стекна и ја практикуваше при промената во онлајн средина на предвидените активности за едукација на гласачите за лица со хендикеп.

Покрај имплементацијата на проектот на ИНКЛУЗИВА, тие учествуваа во робустен пакет активности за зајакнување на капацитетите со ИФЕС, вклучително обука и градење вештини за финансиско управување, развој на бизнис, дизајнирање и управување со проекти, мониторинг и евалуација и ангажирање на млади.

Задоволство беше да се соработува со тимот на ИНКЛУЗИВА во текот на овој проект. Ви благодарам и сега дозволете ми да го вратам виртуелниот микрофон назад за ИНКЛУЗИВА да ги презентира постигнатите резултати во рамките на оваа програма.

I am Blagica Dimitrovska, president of the Association Inkluziva and mother of a voter with a disability. Today I have the special honor to greet you and thank you for taking the time to attend the Final Event of the project INCLUSIVE ELECTIONS - Enabling an inclusive electoral environment for voters with disabilities, supported by the International Foundation for Electoral Systems.

Before we start with the official part, I want to share with you that I became active in the civil sector exactly 30 years ago, in the distant 1990, and activism has become my only profession since 2005.

The Association Inkluziva was established in 2008 and is recognized as a leader in advocating and supporting people with disabilities in exercising their human rights and involvement in all social processes.

Vision: A society where is respected the diversity of every citizen.

Mission: Contribution in the creation of conditions for an inclusive society through activities and projects that will influence for people with disabilities to have equal opportunities to exercise and respect their human rights.

Inkluziva works on 3 key programs that are certified according to the ISO 2015 quality standard: The programs are in the following order:

Participation of persons with disabilities in the political and electoral process,

Access to public information and communication with persons with disabilities, and

Development and management of social, health and educational services for persons with disabilities at the local level.

Since 2016, we have been continuously implementing the program - Participation of persons with disabilities in the political and electoral process, with financial support from several donors, who to our satisfaction are with us today.

We first conducted a research through which we received relevant data on the current situation regarding the (non) inclusion of persons with disabilities in the political life. The analysis identified a number of problems, difficulties and limitations that prevent persons with disabilities to be involved in these processes in a quality and comprehensive manner. According to the latest statistics from the World Health Organization, 15% of the total population are persons with disabilities, and in correlation with the latest data from the voters list that is approximately 270,000 voters whose right to participate in the election process, as voters, observers, candidates, was either taken away, they were unable to exercise it or it was difficult to do so.

In 2017, Inkluziva and the State Election Commission, the most relevant institution for organizing and conducting the election process, started cooperating, and in 2018, they formalized this cooperation by signing a Memorandum of Cooperation for creating inclusive election processes. Efforts by both sides have contributed to the preparation of additional resources to support persons with disabilities in exercising their right to vote, (Braille letter template for visually impaired voters, signature border for all voters, illustrations of the voting process and a series of trainings for access and communication with persons with disabilities for the professional service in the State Election Commission and all municipal election commissions).

In order to encourage people with disabilities to participate directly in all political processes in society and to establish an inclusive monitoring system, during the referendum process in 2018, Inkluziva became for the first time an accredited monitoring organization with observers with disabilities, but still many challenges for this category of citizens remained unsolved.

In March 2019, Inkluziva began implementing the Project: INCLUSIVE ELECTIONS - Providing an inclusive electoral environment for voters with disabilities, supported by the International Foundation for Electoral Systems. The project activities were supposed to be completed on February 28, 2020, but due to the organization of early parliamentary elections, we received a two-month extension. In March 2020, due to the COVID-19 pandemic and the state of emergency in the country, all election activities were suspended, and the project's duration was postponed until August 31, 2020.

Through this project, activities were realized before, during and after the presidential elections in three specific aspects:

Providing support to the election administration to enable a more inclusive election process;

Providing education to voters with disabilities to strengthen political activism.

Education of political parties.

In the first part of the project, the activities were aimed at eliminating several challenges that achieved the following results.

Support to the election bodies - 5 trainings, with 96 representatives from MECs and EBs, whose skills have been strengthened for communication with persons with disabilities at the polling station and proper use of resources to support them.

Capacity building of political parties - In a one-day workshop, 16 politicians worked to reduce prejudice and stereotypes, as well as to raise their awareness of the potential of people with disabilities and to include people with disabilities on the candidate lists for MPs and councilors.

Monitoring of the 2019 presidential election from the perspective of disability – the election monitoring conducted by an organization for people with disabilities, provided an opportunity to collect data on the barriers faced by people with disabilities, and to make recommendations to election stakeholders on how the election process may be more inclusive. It also demonstrates the leadership of people with disabilities in their communities and breaks down the social stigma of the general population.

Result - 40 observers with disabilities were trained, accredited and monitored the presidential elections. They prepared report with recommendations, which was presented at a press conference at the State Election Commission, which was attended by 46 representatives of institutions, international organizations, political parties and NGOs.

Voter education for people with disabilities:

Before the pandemic: 3 informative workshops with 46 people with different types of disabilities. The workshop participants received information about their rights and improved their knowledge regarding the political participation and civic activism.

During a pandemic: 3 informative workshops with 35 people with different types of disabilities: The trainings were implemented online, and in this way the participants gained skills for using online tools. In addition to strengthening the skills for participation of persons with disabilities in the political and electoral process, health protocols and measures for protection at polling stations were developed.

Education for people with visual disabilities: 3 trainings with 38 participants who are blind and have poor eyesight. During the trainings, the participants gained skills to use the Braille Template for voting, a signature border as well as how to exercise their voting right independently and secretly. They also received information on the right to vote with the support of a COMPILER and to vote at home.

Social Media Campaign - The focus of the campaign was to motivate, inform and strengthen the active participation in the election and political process of a large number of voters with disabilities, and the ways for protection from COVID-19.

Three infographics were designed for the campaign, which reached a range of 42,000 followers.

Prepared materials and resources: Video for political parties made according to accessibility standards in Macedonian, Albanian and English. Manual for election bodies for organizing elections with appropriate accession. Audio manual for voters with visual disabilities in Macedonian and Albanian. Monitoring report. 3 Infographics, 6 training modules.

Most important achievements: On the initiative of Inkluziva, the State Election Commission changed the way for selection of members for election bodies. Prior to the 2019 presidential election, the commission announced a public call for training of certified trainers. In the team of certified trainers were selected 3 people with disabilities, 2 of which from Inkluziva. Resources were provided to reduce the physical inaccessibility (assembly ramps and electric transporters), the commission introduced a free telephone line, where all citizens could ask questions and leave comments on election irregularities and problems, and citizens who are deaf or hard of hearing for the first time could ask questions and receive answers from the commission, via video call in sign language.

In recent years, there have been major improvements in the suffrage of voters with disabilities, but there are many challenges and barriers, and we still have a long way to go to find solutions to overcome them.

Challenges: Electoral legislation is not in line with the provisions of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. Lack of architectural accessibility of election institutions, political parties and polling stations (76%), Difficult access to information (institutions, political parties, media), There is stigma and prejudice among the general population, electoral bodies, political parties, the media and NGOs regarding the opportunities and abilities of persons with disabilities.

Opportunities: UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, signed and ratified by the Assembly of the Republic of North Macedonia, Electoral Legal Framework (amended), Strong civic sector/NGO network advocating for the inclusion of persons with disabilities in political life.

My name is Daniela Stojanovska-Dzingovska and I have a degree in special education and rehabilitation. Since December 2018 I am employed in the Health Insurance Fund of the Republic of North Macedonia in the position of Advisor to the General Directors in the field of orthopedic devices.

I am a member of the Association for Promotion and Development of Inclusive Society - Inkluziva from Kumanovo (I have been with them since their establishment and before that with Blagica and Tanja we fought together for the rights of people with disabilities) and Certified Trainer of the State Election Commission as part of the team of trainers who conducted the

education of the municipal election commissions and election boards for the parliamentary elections in 2020.

As part of the monitoring team of Inkluziva I must emphasize that for the third time I was an observer starting from the Referendum 2018, then the presidential elections in April/May 2019 and the parliamentary elections in 2020, and my personal perception of what it means to observe the elections in terms of disability, but precisely by people with physical and sensory disabilities, has an impact in three important segments:

1. Participation in the electoral process from the position of "small but significant distribution of power in the electoral process" encouraging real political activism
2. Changing the perception of the social community towards people with disabilities and raising awareness that they are not just voiceless, invisible or insufficiently recognized passive voters waiting for their representatives to be elected so they would exercise their rights.
3. Opportunity for direct influence in creating conditions for exercising the right to vote equally as all other citizens.

In accordance with the above segments, I can freely point out that no matter how small and insignificant the influence of persons with disabilities as observers may seem, it is still the biggest step that resulted in other activities for direct participation of persons with disabilities in the election process.

What are the most important positive aspects of monitoring the activities of the State Election Commission as the most relevant institution in terms of disability that can be singled out as positive examples

As a novelty for ensuring full physical access to the polling station, the State Election Commission in 2019 for the presidential elections procured 300 portable, mounting ramps and 4 electric motor transporters for wheelchairs LIFTKAR-caterpillars with which it is possible to fully lift the wheelchair and smoothly execute stair movement.

Sign language interpreters attended the State Election Commission press conferences in these elections as well

☐ Also on the voting day, there was an open line for people with hearing impairments who could directly receive information about their remarks or questions interpreted in sign language via video call.

☐ The education team, consisted of certified persons who participated in training for trainers organized by the State Election Commission and who obtained certificates for trainers of the State Election Commission, includes persons with disabilities.

What is still missing? The physical inaccessibility of the facilities, to and from the polling stations remains present.

The issue of mandatory and proper use of materials intended for persons with disabilities remains relevant again: Despite all the trainings, the awareness of the members of the election boards for the use of the materials is at a very low level.

It may be necessary to consider an amendment to the Electoral Code and instead of "random" electing members of election boards from the public and state administration, to make an optional choice, on the principle of voluntary registration. This will open the opportunity for persons with disabilities to express interest in membership in the election boards, which will achieve equal and equitable representation of all.

Despite all the conditions created by the State Election Commission as a competent institution for providing conditions for exercising the right to vote of persons with disabilities and the Association Inkluziva "Macedonian society has shown a high degree of disability due to the burden of stereotypes and prejudices".