

# ***Handbook on Election Reporting in North Macedonia***

Tips and Resources

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## **1 Introduction**

### **1.1 Why this Handbook?**

Elections are a test not only of democratic institutions but also of the media's integrity, responsibility, and resilience. In the heat of a political campaign, when emotions run high and public trust is fragile, journalists have the power to either fuel polarization or foster informed participation. This handbook is created as a practical and professional guide for journalists and editors in North Macedonia to support fair, balanced, and ethical reporting during electoral processes, a critical task in upholding democratic values.

The need for this handbook arises from both experience and change. In recent years, North Macedonia has witnessed growing public scrutiny of media performance during elections, along with important legal reforms shaping the regulation of media coverage, political advertising, and the responsibilities of both traditional and digital media actors. At the same time, journalists face intensified pressure, dealing with the spread of disinformation, editorial influence, politically charged rhetoric, and increasingly complex audience expectations. In such a landscape, clear and reliable guidance that combines legal precision, ethical clarity, and practical applicability becomes essential.

This handbook is based on the North Macedonian legal and ethical framework, including the Electoral Code, the Law on Audio and Audiovisual Media Services, and the Law on Media, as well as the by-laws derived from these legal acts. It is informed by key professional standards such as the Code of Journalists of Macedonia, the Guidelines for Ethical Reporting in Online Media, and the Code of Conduct in the Online Sphere during Electoral Processes and Referenda. It also draws from broader efforts to promote media responsibility and self-regulation, developed in cooperation with civil society, regulators, and international partners. Lessons from regional and international practice, including OSCE, International Federation of Journalists (IFJ), and UNESCO, are incorporated to reflect both local contexts and global standards.

The handbook is intended primarily for journalists and editors working in television, radio, print, online, or hybrid platforms, whether in public service or commercial media. It may also be useful for media managers, civil society monitors, journalism educators, and anyone involved in ensuring transparent and responsible election coverage.

Rather than offering abstract recommendations, the handbook follows the rhythm of the electoral cycle, providing phased advice, checklists, examples, and reflections from local and international experience. From planning coverage at the start of the campaign to handling political advertising and silence periods to crafting engaging and inclusive content, the aim is to support the media community with practical tools and ethical guidelines.

In times of democratic transition, responsible journalism is not just a profession but a public service. This handbook seeks to strengthen that service by helping journalists fulfill their roles with clarity, confidence, and integrity.

The handbook is methodologically and substantively based on the “Handbook for election reporting,” published by Mediacentar Sarajevo in 2024, which was the result of years of research and numerous consultations with media professionals in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Recognizing the specificities of the North Macedonian media and political context, this publication adapts and expands that model to address local challenges, while at the same time reaffirming shared regional standards of journalism in the public interest. By aligning local realities with regional standards, the Handbook contributes to safeguarding media integrity and strengthening public trust during elections.

## 1.2 A Brief Overview of Elections in North Macedonia

The Electoral Code serves as the core legal document regulating the conduct of elections and referenda. It is supplemented by the Law on Media, the Law on Audio and Audiovisual Media Services, and bylaws and instructions adopted by regulatory institutions.

The State Election Commission (SEC) is the main authority for organizing and overseeing elections. It manages the Unified Voter List, processes candidate registrations, monitors campaign financing, and oversees the proper conduct of electoral bodies such as municipal election commissions and electoral boards.

The Agency for Audio and Audiovisual Media Services (AVMU, from the Macedonian acronym) monitors broadcasters and ensures fair, balanced, and transparent media coverage during campaigns. Other institutions, including the State Commission for the Prevention of Corruption (SCPC) and the State Audit Office (SAO), are responsible for campaign finance oversight and the use of public funds in elections.

The 2025 amendments to the Law on Media formally extended the legal definition of media to also include online outlets.

The legal framework is reinforced by ethical standards such as the Code of Journalists of Macedonia, the Guidelines for Ethical Reporting for Online Media, and the Code of Conduct in the Online Sphere during Electoral Processes and Referenda.

Within this regulatory and institutional framework, journalists play a pivotal role in upholding the integrity of the electoral process. Professional election reporting is not merely about complying with legal obligations, it involves actively contributing to fair and democratic elections. This includes ensuring equal media access for all electoral participants, delivering accurate and well-

contextualized coverage, and reflecting the diversity of society, especially underrepresented voices. Editorial transparency, the clear distinction between paid and editorial content, and rigorous fact-checking are essential practices that reinforce public trust and support informed civic participation.

Journalists' and media associations have introduced voluntary standards, such as the Guidelines for Ethical Reporting in Online Media. Additionally, the Code of Conduct for Online Behavior During Electoral Processes and Referenda was prepared at the initiative of the AVMU in cooperation with the Association of Journalists of Macedonia, the Macedonian Institute for Media, the Council of Media Ethics of Macedonia, the Institute of Communication Studies, and the “Metamorphosis” Foundation.

## ***2 General Professional Standards for Election Reporting***

### **2.2 Editorial Independence and Integrity**

Editorial independence is a cornerstone of professional journalism. During elections, the pressure on journalists and media outlets to align with political or commercial interests can be intense. Upholding editorial autonomy protects the public’s right to impartial information and strengthens trust in the media.

Journalists and editors must ensure that no external actor, whether a political party, advertiser, media owner, or government institution, influences their editorial decisions or news content.

Journalists and editors should:

- Maintain a clear separation between editorial and advertising departments, particularly during the campaign period.
- Resist any political pressure, including indirect forms such as preferential access, invitations, or gifts that could influence coverage.
- Clearly disclose conflicts of interest, including personal or financial ties to candidates or political parties.
- Establish editorial guidelines and internal procedures that support independence and protect journalists from interference.
- Avoid self-censorship driven by fear of political or economic consequences.
- Work collectively within newsrooms to reinforce editorial solidarity, particularly when covering controversial topics.

## 2.3 Impartiality and Fairness

Impartiality and fairness ensure that all electoral participants are treated equitably, that media coverage is free from political bias, and that voters are presented with a complete and balanced picture of the political landscape.

Unlike mathematical equality, which would require identical airtime or column space, fairness means providing access and coverage proportional to political relevance while ensuring that no candidate or party is privileged or disadvantaged through selective visibility, tone, or emphasis.

In periods of heightened political sensitivity, even subtle imbalances, such as unchallenged claims, loaded framing, or disproportionate focus can unfairly shape public perception. Journalists must therefore apply consistent editorial standards to all electoral subjects.

To ensure impartial and fair coverage, media outlets should:

- Provide all confirmed electoral participants a reasonable opportunity to present their views, respond to criticism, and participate in debates or interviews, regardless of their political power, popularity, or affiliation.
- Apply equal journalistic standards to all parties and candidates, for instance, by scrutinizing campaign platforms, fact-checking statements, and contextualizing claims.
- Avoid preferential treatment in editorial tone, visual presentation, or placement. For example:
  - Do not use more favorable lighting, framing, or editing for certain candidates in broadcast media;
  - Avoid leading headlines that elevate one political actor while minimizing others;
  - Ensure similar prominence is given to equivalent newsworthy events or announcements.
- Disclose editorial criteria used to determine airtime, interview invitations, or debate participation, especially when making decisions about inclusion in prime programming.
- Be especially cautious with live coverage, where imbalance can occur unintentionally due to differing event formats, crowd sizes, or rhetorical skill. In such cases, contextual framing before or after the segment is essential to maintain fairness.

Fairness does not mean offering equal exposure to all political actors at all times, but ensuring that coverage decisions are guided by relevance, consistency, and ethical reasoning, not editorial bias or external influence.

## 2.4 Inclusion and Representation

Inclusive reporting ensures that elections reflect the voices, experiences, and priorities of all members of society, not just dominant political actors or majority groups. Journalists have a responsibility to cover the election as it affects everyone, including those who are often marginalized or excluded from the public discourse.

Underrepresented groups may include women, youth, persons with disabilities, ethnic minorities, rural populations, LGBTI individuals, and the socio-economically disadvantaged. While these groups are directly affected by political decisions, they are frequently invisible in media narratives, particularly during election campaigns. Moreover, when they are mentioned, they are often framed through paternalistic or token narratives, as passive recipients of help or symbolic figures, rather than as agents of change.

By centering inclusion in election reporting, media outlets help expand democratic participation and give visibility to groups that are often left out of campaign promises and decision-making. This strengthens democracy not only by reflecting diversity but by demanding accountability from those who claim to represent it.

To promote inclusion, journalists and editors should:

- Seek diverse sources and interviewees, not only political elites. This includes ordinary citizens, civil society representatives, and experts from underrepresented communities.
- Identify stories that highlight the specific concerns of marginalized groups, such as access to services, participation barriers, or discrimination in campaigning, and give them meaningful space in election coverage.
- Avoid tokenism, where a representative is included only to fill a diversity quota. Instead, ensure their perspective is substantively integrated and respected.
- Use respectful and accurate language and visuals when referring to identity, ethnicity, gender, disability, or religion. Avoid stereotypes or labels that diminish the subject's credibility or dignity.
- Question party platforms and candidate statements about inclusion: Are they addressing gender equality, youth engagement, or minority rights? Are promises backed by measurable plans?
- Challenge exclusionary rhetoric or coded language that frames certain groups as threats, burdens, or outsiders.

Inclusion also means ensuring that media formats are accessible to all. Where feasible, this includes:

- Subtitles, sign language, or easy-to-understand language in broadcasts;

- Publishing stories in multiple languages, especially where minority languages are spoken;
- Accessibility features on digital platforms, such as screen-reader compatibility.

Finally, newsrooms should reflect internally on their editorial decision-making. Are voices from marginalized communities treated as active participants or merely background subjects? Are discussions on inclusion shaped collaboratively, with insights from media professionals who understand the lived realities of underrepresented populations?

## 2.5 Transparency and Accountability

Transparency and accountability are essential to earning and maintaining public trust. Audiences have the right to understand how editorial decisions are made, how content is sourced, and how errors are addressed. Journalists and media outlets must therefore operate in ways that are open, traceable, and responsive.

During elections, when political tensions are high and misinformation is widespread, a transparent approach to reporting is particularly important. It helps distinguish credible media from partisan or manipulative outlets and reinforces journalism's role as a public service.

To promote transparency and accountability, journalists and media outlets should:

- Clearly distinguish between editorial and paid content, including sponsored interviews or campaign materials. Paid political content must be labeled accordingly and presented in a format that prevents confusion with independent journalism.
- Disclose funding sources and editorial policies, especially if there are links to political parties, campaign donors, or other actors in the election process.
- Explain editorial decisions about story selection, airtime, or prioritization, particularly when audiences may perceive bias or exclusion. For example, media can publish statements on the criteria used to select debate participants or allocate coverage.
- Establish visible correction policies and act on them promptly. When an error occurs, especially one that may affect public opinion during a campaign, it should be acknowledged transparently and corrected in a timely and prominent manner.
- Provide contact information or complaint mechanisms for readers, viewers, or listeners who feel misrepresented or harmed by coverage. This is not only a public service, but also a feedback loop that helps improve journalistic standards.
- Avoid hidden influences by clearly identifying sources and interests behind information or commentary. Editorial independence is undermined when audience members cannot distinguish between neutral reporting and hidden advocacy.

Transparency also applies internally. Editors should:

- Promote ethical reflection within newsrooms, discussing difficult decisions and ensuring consistent standards across staff;
- Support journalists who raise concerns about potential violations or unfair practices;
- Participate in self-regulatory bodies and implement their recommendations, especially in the context of elections.

These professional standards apply across all types of media, including public broadcasters, commercial outlets, print and online portals, each of which plays a vital role in enabling transparent and inclusive elections. While legal obligations may vary, the ethical responsibility to inform the public accurately, impartially, and with integrity is shared by all.

### ***3 Rules for Media in North Macedonia***

This chapter outlines the legal and institutional framework regulating the media during election periods in North Macedonia. These provisions aim to guarantee fair, balanced, and impartial media coverage that respects electoral integrity and ensures citizens have access to accurate and diverse information to make informed decisions.

#### **3.1 Rules Applicable to All Media**

The media's conduct during elections is governed primarily by the Electoral Code, but several other legal acts also apply:

- The Law on Audio and Audiovisual Media Services defines standards for radio and TV broadcasters, including rules on editorial independence and prohibitions against hate speech and discrimination.
- The Law on Media ensures the right to reply and correction and provides safeguards for media content accuracy.
- The AVMU issues:
  - [Guidelines for Broadcasters for Presidential and Parliamentary Elections 2024 – Consolidated Text](#)
  - [Guidelines for Paid Political Advertising for Local Elections 2021](#)
  - [Guidelines for Confirming Reports on Broadcasted Paid Political Advertising](#)
  - [Methodology for Monitoring Electoral Media Representation through Radio and Television Program Services During Election Processes](#)<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The methodology is generally adopted once and applies to all electoral processes. However, it may be revised if the Electoral Code is amended. In contrast, other regulations and guidelines are typically updated or newly adopted for each election cycle, as they often depend on variables such as the number of candidates, participating coalitions, and similar contextual factors.

According to Articles 75–85b of the Electoral Code, all media (TV, radio, print, and online) must abide by binding election rules from the day elections are announced through the end of the campaign period.

Key rules include:

**Impartiality and balance:** Media must not favor any political entity. Broadcasters must ensure equal access to all forms of electoral media presentation (Article 75), including news, interviews, debates, and both paid and free political advertising.

**Children’s programming:** Electoral content is prohibited in shows targeting minors (Article 75).

**Ban on media donations:** Media outlets and related entities may not finance or donate to electoral participants (Article 75).

**Editorial transparency:** Media must clearly distinguish between factual reporting and opinion (Article 196).

**Media staff conduct:** Editors, journalists, and presenters must not participate in pre-election activities during the election period. If they choose to engage in such activities, their media engagement must be suspended from the announcement of elections until their conclusion (Article 75).

**Coverage of government officials:** Media reports about the regular activities of state bodies, institutions, or officeholders must not be used to favor any political entity during the election period. Editorial coverage of such activities must remain neutral and should not serve as indirect promotion.

**Archiving requirements:** From the day of the election announcement, all broadcasters are required to record the output signal of their entire program and store the recordings for at least 30 days following the elections. Upon request from AVMU, broadcasters must submit the recordings within 48 hours.

**Poll publication limits:** Results from opinion polls related to electoral participants must not be published within five days before the elections. When publishing such results, media and online portals must disclose the name of the commissioner and funder of the poll, the institution that conducted it, the methodology used, the sample size and structure, and the period when it was conducted. On Election Day, results must not be published before 19:00 (Article 77).

These provisions apply across all stages of the electoral process and help maintain editorial independence, prevent manipulation, and protect citizens’ rights to balanced and accurate information.

Additionally, complaints can be submitted to the State Election Commission (SEC), the AVMU, and self-regulatory bodies such as the Council of Media Ethics of Macedonia (CMEM) and the Council of Honor of the Association of Journalists of Macedonia (AJM), which are tasked with safeguarding professional and ethical journalism.

In June 2025, the AVMU adopted a new Rulebook on the Format and Content of Applications to the Register of Online Media Publishers (Internet Portals). This bylaw was enacted in accordance with amendments to the Law on Media and defines the procedural and documentation requirements for online media outlets wishing to be officially registered. The rulebook outlines mandatory information such as the name and identification number of the publisher, editorial structure, domain name, and proof of professional staff. Entry in this register is voluntary but increasingly significant, as future amendments to the Electoral Code are expected to restrict participation in paid political advertising during elections to only those online media listed in this official register.

### 3.2 Paid Political Advertising in Electronic Media

Paid political advertising during elections is subject to a strict legal framework to ensure transparency, equality, and the proper use of public funds. The Electoral Code sets out detailed rules for radio and television broadcasters, print media, and online portals (Articles 75, 76, 182, and 183).

#### **Registration and Price Lists:**

- All media intending to publish or broadcast paid political advertisements must register with the SEC within three days of the election announcement (Article 75).
- Within five days of the election announcement, print and online media must submit their advertising price lists to the SEC, the SAO, and the SCPC. Broadcasters, in addition to submitting to these three bodies, must also send their price lists to the AVMU.
- These price lists must be publicly announced at least twice before the campaign begins and cannot be altered until the end of the electoral process.

#### **Content Restrictions and Labeling:**

- Paid content must be clearly labeled and visibly distinct from editorial material (Article 76).
- Minors cannot appear in political advertisements (Article 76).
- Advertising is prohibited during news, informative programs, children's shows, and live broadcasts of cultural, religious, or sports events (Article 76).
- The public broadcaster Macedonian Radio Television (MRT) is not allowed to air paid political ads (Article 76).

- Special informative programs must not be used as forms of paid political advertising (Article 76).
- Participants may not place ads with unregistered media or pay them from campaign funds (Article 75).

### **SEC Regulations on Paid Advertising**

*The SEC enforces the Electoral Code’s provisions on campaign advertising. For example, before the 2024 parliamentary elections, the SEC issued a public notice requiring all broadcasters, print, and online outlets to register in the SEC’s media registry and to submit official rate cards for paid political ads. Based on these submissions, the SEC compiles and publicly publishes a register of all media outlets eligible to carry paid campaign advertising.*

### **Monitoring and Enforcement:**

To ensure legal compliance and protect the integrity of electoral media representation, several enforcement mechanisms and sanctions are defined in the Electoral Code.

### **Monitoring Authority and Procedures:**

- The AVMU is tasked with overseeing media conduct during elections. It monitors media outlets from the day of the election announcement until the end of voting (Article 76).
- The AVMU publishes weekly reports during the pre-campaign period and daily reports throughout the official campaign.
- A Temporary Commission for Media Monitoring is formed within AVMU to track compliance with key media-related provisions (Article 196).
- Upon identifying violations, AVMU must initiate misdemeanor proceedings within 48 hours, and courts must issue a decision within another 48 hours. Appeals must be resolved within 24 to 48 hours (Article 76).

**Table: Fines for media violations during electoral processes**

<b>Violation</b>	<b>Fine</b>	<b>Legal Basis</b>
Biased or unbalanced coverage	€4,000	Art. 181
Unmarked paid ads, ads with minors, and ads during prohibited times or in unregistered media	€4,000	Arts. 75, 76, 182, 183
Missing or unpublished official price lists	€4,000	Art. 75
Breach of election silence	€4,000	Art. 76

Unlawful publication of opinion polls	€4,000	Arts. 77, 183
Late submission of advertising contracts to AVMU and SEC	Up to €10,000	Art. 183
Misuse of public funds by officials for campaign ads	€800–€1,200	Art. 181
Penalty for media’s responsible staff	30% of outlet’s fine	Arts. 181–183

### 3.3 Direct Addresses and Announcements by the SEC in Media

Following the Electoral Code, all types of media—broadcast, print, and online—play a crucial role in informing the public about the electoral process. To ensure inclusive and nonpartisan communication, specific provisions regulate how the SEC disseminates official information through these channels.

#### Informational Campaigns:

- The SEC has the right and obligation to conduct public awareness campaigns to educate citizens about their voting rights, procedures, and the importance of democratic participation.
- From the day of the election announcement until the end of voting, MRT, print media, and online media outlets that receive public funds for political advertising are required to broadcast or publish SEC messages free of charge (Article 76).
- These campaigns must be aired or published using accessible formats and languages, including sign language, and must be clearly labeled and separate from other programming.
- Each SEC educational message must have a duration of 30 seconds and must be aired or published at least once every three hours by the respective media outlets receiving state funds for paid political advertising.

#### Content and Oversight:

- The content must not promote or favor any political actor. Its sole aim is to inform the electorate about the process, rights, and duties related to voting.
- The SEC is responsible for producing or authorizing the content, ensuring it is neutral, fact-based, and timely.
- The AVMU monitors whether these obligations are fulfilled and may take corrective or punitive measures in case of non-compliance.

### 3.4 Specific Obligations of Print and Online Media

In addition to the general rules outlined in Section 3.1 and the obligations related to airing SEC announcements described in Section 3.3, print and online media have further responsibilities when they choose to participate in the election campaign through paid political advertising.

#### Registration and Transparency Requirements

- Within three days of the election announcement, all print and online media intending to publish political advertisements must register with the SEC. Unregistered media are not eligible to receive public funds for campaign advertising (Article 75).
- Within five days of the election announcement, they must:
  - Establish and submit official price lists to the SEC, SAO, and the SCPC (Article 75);
  - Publish their price lists at least twice before the campaign begins on their platforms.
  - Once published, price lists must remain unchanged for the duration of the campaign.

#### Allocation of Advertising Space and Funding

- Media must distribute advertising space proportionally, in line with electoral law:
  - 45% to the two largest parties in power;
  - 45% to the two largest opposition parties;
  - 7% to smaller parliamentary parties;
  - 3% to non-parliamentary parties or independent candidates (Article 75).
- One political actor may not spend more than 15,000 EUR on a single print or online media outlet, and the total amount spent on all such media must not exceed 25% of the allocated public funds (Article 76).

#### Documentation and Reporting Obligations

- Media must provide:
  - A detailed report of all published ads, including visible samples with dates;
  - Screenshots of banners or content from their platforms;
  - These documents must be submitted to the campaign client and forwarded to the SEC within five days of the pre-election silence (Article 76).
- Ads must be clearly labeled as paid political content and visibly separated from editorial material.
- Minors must not appear in political advertisements, and such ads must not appear within news, children's programs, or live event coverage.

## Compliance and Penalties

Print and online media failing to fulfill these obligations may face:

- Fines up to 4,000 EUR, with additional 30% personal fines for responsible staff (Articles 181, 182, 183);
- Loss of reimbursement rights for failure to submit required documentation.

## *4 Tips and Guidance for Election Reporting*

This section provides journalists with comprehensive guidance tailored to each phase of the electoral cycle in North Macedonia.

### 4.1 Beginning of the Election Period

#### **Tip 1: Organize bias-awareness and ethics-focused newsroom trainings**

Familiarize yourself thoroughly with the legal and ethical frameworks that govern media conduct during elections. This includes understanding institutional mandates, journalistic responsibilities, and professional standards that ensure fair and impartial coverage.

#### **Tip 2: Encourage short, informal editorial briefings on ethics**

Establish basic preparatory routines in the newsroom to get ready for election coverage. This includes reviewing past practices, assigning key responsibilities to team members, creating an internal editorial guide, and ensuring staff understand the upcoming legal and ethical demands of the campaign period.

#### **Tip 3: Emphasize consistency in framing controversial issues**

Provide practical training for newsroom staff focused on avoiding bias, distinguishing facts from opinions, and responsibly covering sensitive topics such as hate speech and political pressure. These sessions can be short and informal, like a staff meeting or editorial briefing, but should reinforce consistent ethical standards, particularly regarding how to frame controversial issues, how to respond to pressure from political actors, and how to protect the outlet's credibility during intense campaign periods.

#### **Tip 4: Diversify sources and include underrepresented voices**

Compile a broad and inclusive list of sources and institutions that can enrich your election reporting, such as civil society organizations, electoral observers, regulatory bodies, and opinion-makers, and locally trusted voices. Make sure to proactively include voices from underrepresented communities, including women, ethnic minorities, and persons with

disabilities. This helps to ensure pluralism in content and build trust across a wide range of audiences.

#### **Tip 5: Maintain communication with CMEM and AJM for ethical guidance**

Maintain regular communication with the CMEM and the AJM during the pre-election period. These organizations can serve as valuable resources for guidance in navigating ethical dilemmas and resisting pressure from political or business interests. Journalists and editors are encouraged to consult the materials, recommendations, and advisory opinions issued by the CMEM and AJM. Newsrooms are also encouraged to cooperate with the CMEM mediation process when a press complaint is submitted about their reporting. Active engagement in such procedures reinforces transparency and can lead to constructive outcomes that enhance public trust. Participating in their trainings, roundtables, or mediation efforts can also reinforce a culture of ethical accountability.

#### **Tip 6: Monitor early campaigning and blurred institutional appearances**

Monitor early campaigning and public appearances by politicians, particularly in the period before the official start of the campaign. This includes inaugurations, public statements at government events, or institutional advertising that features political figures. While such activities may fall under official duties, they often carry political implications and can blur the line between state communication and campaigning. Journalists should be vigilant in identifying and contextualizing these events, clearly informing the audience when such appearances could be perceived as early campaigning.

When monitoring early campaigning, journalists should consider the following questions to assess whether an event or communication crosses into active campaigning:

- Is the event financed with public resources or held on state premises?
- Are official symbols, government achievements, or national projects being presented in a way that highlights a specific political actor?
- Is there excessive emphasis on the personal role of an officeholder rather than institutional functions?
- Are party colors, slogans, or promotional visuals used, even subtly?
- Was the event timed unusually close to the election announcement, suggesting strategic visibility?
- Is the content genuinely informative and necessary for public interest, or does it frame the official in a favorable light ahead of the campaign?
- Are other candidates or stakeholders given equal opportunity to comment or participate?

Journalists should document these elements carefully and clearly explain them to the audience to help identify potential early campaigning practices and maintain transparency.

**Tip 7: Educate the public on the electoral process and key institutions**

Educate the public early and clearly about how the electoral process works, what rights voters have, and the institutional roles of key bodies such as the SEC, AVMU, and SCPC. Many citizens may not be fully aware of the election timeline, how to verify if they are registered, or what the procedures are for filing complaints. Journalists can play an essential public service role by simplifying this information, using accessible language, and explaining not only what the rules are, but why they matter. Use multimedia formats, social media, and community outreach to engage audiences of different ages, languages, and educational backgrounds.

**Tip 8: Define internal editorial boundaries before the campaign**

Define internal boundaries that will guide newsroom decision-making throughout the campaign. This includes procedures for distinguishing editorial content from advertising, managing conflict-of-interest risks, and clarifying how inclusion in debates and features is determined.

## 4.2 Election Announcement

**Tip 9: Clearly communicate the election timeline and voter rights**

Inform the public about the election timeline, voter eligibility, registration procedures, and rights. This includes communicating key dates such as deadlines for voter registration, the start and end of the campaign, and the beginning of election silence. Use clear and accessible formats, including visuals and multilingual content to ensure that this information reaches all citizens, especially those in marginalized or remote communities.

**Tip 10: Distinguish official communication from campaigning**

Clarify the distinction between official institutional communication and political campaigning. After the announcement of elections, it becomes especially important to identify and label communications by public officials or institutions that could be interpreted as electoral promotion. Journalists should ask, is this message informative and necessary, or does it serve to boost the visibility of a candidate or party? Contextual reporting can help the audience distinguish between public service information and implicit campaigning.

**Tip 11: Explain campaign financing rules and monitor misuse of public resources**

Raise public and editorial awareness of the legal and financial boundaries that govern campaign conduct. Journalists play a crucial role in explaining the rules that safeguard electoral fairness, including limits on donations, restrictions on third-party involvement, and the obligation to

separate state resources from campaign activities. In particular, highlight the provisions of Article 75 of the Electoral Code, which prohibit public officials from using institutional communication, government events, or publicly funded platforms to gain an electoral advantage during the campaign period.

Be proactive in identifying when officials may be blurring these lines, for example, by promoting achievements or inaugurating projects after the election has been announced. Such coverage should be carefully contextualized to avoid reinforcing unfair visibility. Inform audiences about how campaign financing is monitored and what constitutes a misuse of public funds or administrative advantage.

**Tip 12: Be transparent about paid political advertising practices**

Reinforce the importance of transparency by openly communicating your media outlet's approach to paid political advertising. Beyond fulfilling legal obligations under the Electoral Code, publicizing your registration with the SEC and disclosing your advertising rates promotes fairness, clarity, and accountability in a highly competitive environment. Clearly separating paid content from editorial material and applying the same conditions to all political actors not only ensures compliance but signals your newsroom's commitment to equal access and editorial independence. In a context where public trust is fragile and political pressures are common, proactively sharing this information helps prevent misunderstandings, deters accusations of bias, and strengthens your outlet's professional credibility.

**Tip 13: Prevent conflicts of interest in staff political engagement**

Reinforce clear boundaries between journalism and political activism by establishing internal rules on staff participation in election campaigns. According to Article 76 of the Electoral Code, presenters, editors, journalists, and other on-air personnel must suspend their media duties if they choose to support or participate in a political campaign. Newsrooms should communicate this rule clearly before the campaign begins and set expectations internally to prevent conflicts of interest. This safeguard is not only a legal requirement; it is a cornerstone of editorial integrity. When media professionals appear to favor or represent a political actor while continuing to report, it undermines public confidence in the neutrality of coverage.

### 4.3 Start of the Election Campaign

The official campaign period begins 20 days before the election and ends 24 hours before Election Day. During this phase, media coverage significantly influences public opinion. Journalists and editors must apply the highest standards of fairness, professionalism, and legal compliance. This section offers practical tips for maintaining editorial balance and credibility.

**Tip 14: Ensure visibility for all electoral participants**

Ensure meaningful visibility for all confirmed electoral participants. Media outlets should provide balanced and inclusive coverage to all registered parties, coalitions, and independent candidates, regardless of their political weight, popularity, or financial resources. While equality does not mean identical airtime, it demands proportional and editorially justified visibility. This includes fair access to interviews, debates, and feature coverage. Pay special attention to newcomers or smaller actors who may struggle for visibility despite meeting candidacy criteria.

**Tip 15: Apply equal editorial standards to all candidates**

Fact-check campaign promises, scrutinize statements, and provide context equally, whether the candidate is from a ruling party, opposition, or independent background. Avoid double standards when covering policy positions, personal controversies, or public appearances. Impartiality in tone, visual presentation, and story placement is essential to avoid unintended bias.

**Tip 16: Avoid uncritical repetition of campaign materials**

Avoid passive repetition of campaign materials. Political press releases, social media statements, and rally announcements must not be published without verification or editorial oversight. Journalists should question and contextualize political messages, especially those containing accusations, emotional appeals, or unsubstantiated claims. Media should serve as a filter, not a megaphone, for campaign propaganda.

**Tip 17: Maintain a clear boundary between editorial and advertising content**

Ensure that all paid political advertisements are clearly labeled, visually distinct, and never integrated into news or opinion formats. According to the Electoral Code, such content must be marked with the name of the buyer and must not appear during news programs, children's programming, or live cultural, sports, or religious events. Labeling should be transparent to avoid misleading the audience.

**Tip 18: Be transparent about selection criteria for debates and interviews**

When choosing which candidates to invite for interviews, debates, or televised confrontations, clearly define and publicly disclose the editorial criteria, whether based on party representation, public interest, or issue relevance. Explain the rationale if certain candidates are not included, especially when resources limit participation. This builds trust and reduces accusations of bias.

When moderating debates or conducting interviews with candidates:

- Prepare standardized, policy-focused questions to ensure fairness.
- Allocate equal speaking time and apply the same level of follow-up questioning to each participant.

- Challenge misleading or evasive responses consistently and respectfully.
- Be mindful of gender dynamics and avoid interruptions or patronizing tones that may indicate bias.
- Clearly define and publicly share the selection criteria for debates or interview invitations before the event.
- Establish ground rules regarding time limits, turn-taking, and respectful conduct to prevent dominance or unfair advantage.

### **Tip 19: Include perspectives of underrepresented groups**

Proactively seek the voices of women, youth, ethnic minorities, persons with disabilities, LGBTI individuals, and rural or low-income voters. Campaign coverage should reflect the diversity of the electorate, not only the political elite. Balance studio guests and panels to avoid gender or ideological imbalance. Ensure language and ethnic representation are respected throughout the coverage.

### **Tip 20: Monitor and report on misuse of institutional visibility**

Under Article 75 of the Electoral Code, public officials must not receive preferential coverage for performing official duties during the campaign. Be especially alert to public events or government announcements that may serve a dual purpose as campaign promotion. Journalists should clearly distinguish institutional news from campaign messaging and hold officials accountable for using public platforms for electoral gain.

### **Tip 21: Watch for disinformation and online manipulation**

The digital environment can amplify political disinformation, hate speech, and algorithm-driven bias. Media outlets should monitor social media trends and narratives, verify viral content before reporting, and avoid embedding manipulative language or visuals. Use digital verification tools where possible and avoid reproducing misleading claims, even when they come from political actors.

## **4.4 Election Silence**

The 24-hour election silence period, mandated under the Electoral Code, begins at midnight the day before voting and lasts until polls close at 19:00 on Election Day. During this time, all forms of political promotion must cease. The aim is to provide voters with space to reflect without last-minute influence, pressure, or manipulation.

This section outlines clear editorial and ethical guidance to help media professionals comply with silence rules while continuing to inform the public responsibly.

**Tip 22: Respect election silence by suspending campaign content**

Suspend all campaign-related content in news, commentary, and advertising. During election silence, media outlets must not publish or broadcast any campaign material, including candidate profiles, political commentary, sponsored content, or institutional messages that could influence voter opinion. This applies equally to traditional and online platforms. Be especially cautious with automated posts, banner ads, pre-scheduled publications, or reused material from earlier in the campaign that might violate the spirit of the silence rule.

**Tip 23: Moderate user-generated content and interactive features**

Online portals and broadcasters must actively monitor user comments, forums, and social media threads under their control. While spontaneous user activity is not illegal, the platform is legally responsible if it allows election silence violations to persist. Newsrooms should temporarily disable or pre-moderate public comment sections during the silence period and remove any content that could be seen as campaigning.

**Tip 24: Use the silence period for civic-focused reporting**

Shift editorial focus toward public service journalism. Inform voters about logistics - polling station hours, identification requirements, voting rights, and complaint procedures. This is also an opportunity to highlight the importance of voter turnout, democratic participation, and peaceful elections without amplifying political narratives.

During the silence period, media can focus on civic content that informs and empowers voters without influencing their choices. Possible topics include:

- Historical trends in voter turnout, regional participation differences, and why voting matters for community development.
- Clear explainers on how ballots are structured, how votes are counted, and how final results are verified and announced.
- Profiles of election workers, observers, volunteers, and people working behind the scenes to ensure fair and safe elections.
- Success stories of local civic initiatives or grassroots efforts that strengthened a culture of democracy and inspired community engagement.
- Educational pieces on democratic rights and responsibilities, including what makes elections credible and free.
- Short human-interest stories about first-time voters or voters from marginalized groups sharing why they participate.

- Coverage of practical voting logistics: how to access polling places for persons with disabilities, what to do if you face problems on Election Day, or whom to contact with complaints.

**Tip 25: Be alert to indirect campaigning or visual cues**

Avoid symbolic references, colors, slogans, or images that may be associated with specific parties or candidates. Even without explicit connections, visuals can carry political meaning. Headlines, video b-roll, and social media graphics should be reviewed carefully to ensure neutrality.

**Tip 26: Brief your newsroom in advance to avoid unintentional violations**

Create a shared checklist of what is permitted and what is not during silence. Assign a designated editor or coordinator to review all outgoing content, especially last-minute posts or live updates.

**Tip 27: Prepare in advance for enforcement measures**

Violations of the election silence can lead to sanctions under the Electoral Code. The AVMU monitors media compliance throughout the silence period. Prepare in advance to ensure compliance across your editorial, advertising, and technical departments.

## 4.5 Election Day and Vote Counting

Election Day brings a shift in journalistic responsibility, from campaign scrutiny to public service. The media's role is to inform citizens calmly and factually without influencing voter behavior. As already emphasized in Section 4.4, election silence extends until polling stations close. On Election Day, it is critical to maintain this boundary across all platforms, including scheduled or automated content feeds. Reiterating this rule here underscores its importance and ensures full editorial compliance.

**Tip 28: Respect the boundaries of the silence period until polls close**

No political content, including commentary, images, or slogans, may be published or broadcast until polls close. This prohibition includes exit polls, predictions, and indirect campaign messages, even those shared by third parties on media platforms. Editorial staff must strictly monitor all content across broadcast, print, and digital media to avoid accidental violations.

**Tip 29: Provide essential, practical information for voters**

Focus on civic journalism: clearly communicate polling station hours, required documentation, voting rights for persons with disabilities, procedures for filing complaints, and options for voters encountering irregularities. Use official sources, primarily the SEC, and make content accessible through visual formats, plain language, and multilingual reporting.

**Tip 30: Report Election Day events calmly and neutrally**

Approach election-day reporting with neutrality and composure, avoiding speculation or emotional framing. Avoid sensationalist headlines and exaggerated reporting of incidents. If irregularities, tensions, or technical issues arise, verify the facts before reporting. Use statements from electoral bodies or verified observers and resist pressure to “break” unconfirmed stories. This is especially important in communities with low electoral trust.

**Tip 31: Respect the integrity of polling stations**

Journalists assigned to polling locations must be clearly identified and must follow all electoral rules. Do not photograph or film inside polling stations unless permitted. Always protect the privacy of voters and the secrecy of the ballot. Coordinate with election officials to ensure that journalistic activities do not interfere with the voting process.

**Tip 32: Delay projections and exit poll coverage until legally permitted**

According to the Electoral Code, it is prohibited to publish results of public opinion polls or voter projections before 19:00 on Election Day. Exit polls or early forecasts must not be shared in any form, including graphics or headlines, until the polls are officially closed nationwide.

**Tip 33: Clearly distinguish preliminary from official results**

Once polls close, be careful in presenting data from party headquarters, unofficial counts, or quick counts by observers. Always specify whether results are preliminary or certified by the SEC. Mislabeling results can mislead the public, undermine trust in institutions, or create tensions among political actors and supporters.

**Tip 34: Ensure that post-election coverage includes diverse voices**

As results come in, broaden coverage beyond party winners. Interview civil society monitors, representatives of marginalized communities, and ordinary voters to capture a fuller picture of the election’s impact. Highlight voter turnout, ballot accessibility, and lessons for democratic participation, not just party competition.

**Tip 35: Report ethically, even under pressure**

The hours after polls close are among the most politically charged. Journalists may face pressure from political actors to frame narratives favorably or ignore irregularities. Media must remain independent, adhere to professional standards, and rely on verified sources. Use your editorial policies as a shield to protect ethical reporting.

## 4.6 Engaging Content for the Audience

This section builds on the principles outlined in Section 2.4 on Inclusion and Representation, translating them into practical content strategies for the election period. Engaging audiences requires more than visibility – it involves reflecting the diversity of society through accessible formats, inclusive language, and thoughtful editorial choices across all platforms.

To achieve meaningful engagement, media outlets should tailor election content to meet the informational needs of diverse segments of the population. This includes producing content in minority languages, using sign language interpretation or subtitles where possible, and ensuring that online platforms are accessible to persons with disabilities. Equally important is the tone and framing of stories – coverage should avoid elitist jargon and instead use language that resonates with everyday experiences, especially for rural voters, young people, and marginalized communities who may feel excluded from formal political discourse.

### **Tip 36: Prioritize stories that explain, not just report**

Go beyond day-to-day campaign events. Use explainers, Q&As, and visual formats to clarify how the electoral system works, what the voting thresholds are, how parliamentary seats are distributed, and what each institution’s role is. Citizens, especially first-time voters or marginalized groups, benefit from informative content that demystifies the process and encourages participation.

### **Tip 37: Humanize political stories**

Present politics from the citizen’s perspective. Feature real-life stories of how election outcomes impact everyday life, employment, education, healthcare, and local development. Cover how specific proposals from political actors affect ordinary people, not just elite narratives. This makes the elections more relatable and reduces cynicism about politics.

### **Tip 38: Create inclusive, participatory formats**

Use polls, social media Q&As, and open calls for questions to actively involve the public in shaping your coverage. Invite citizens to express their concerns and priorities and allow underrepresented voices to be heard. Involving audiences in editorial choices boosts trust and relevance.

### **Tip 39: Use multimedia and accessible language**

Different formats reach different audiences. Use infographics, videos, audio explainers, and short posts on platforms like Facebook and Instagram to expand your reach, especially among younger voters. Use subtitles, sign language interpretation, and minority languages whenever possible. Clear and plain language should be the rule, not the exception, in election reporting.

Consider experimenting with additional creative and visual formats to engage audiences more effectively:

- Interactive timelines of key campaign events and candidate visits.
- Infographics comparing party platforms, major promises, or policy positions side by side.
- “Myth vs. Fact” visuals to help counter common election-related disinformation or misunderstandings.
- Audience-submitted questions featured in live social media Q&A sessions, short video explainers, or audio stories.
- Maps highlighting regional election issues, candidate strongholds, or community concerns.
- Short micro-documentaries or photo stories showing the impact of political decisions on everyday life, especially in marginalized communities.

#### **Tip 40: Track and respond to audience engagement**

Monitor which election stories generate the most attention or questions and use this feedback to adapt your content. If disinformation or misunderstandings gain traction online, respond with verified facts and context. Consider publishing follow-up explainers, corrections, or myth-busting features to clarify complex or contested topics.

#### **Tip 41: Showcase political diversity and civic debate**

Balance studio panels and interview guests in terms of gender, ethnicity, political affiliation, and generation. Avoid repetitively hosting only party leaders or well-known commentators. Include civic voices, experts, teachers, students, farmers, workers, and voters from different walks of life. This mirrors society’s complexity and makes political discourse richer and more grounded.

#### **Tip 42: Emphasize media integrity**

Be transparent about how your coverage decisions are made. Let the audience know how you select topics, verify claims, and manage political advertising. Clearly labeling sponsored content and distinguishing it from editorial material fosters trust. Make your editorial standards public through your website or in programming to demonstrate a commitment to fairness and professionalism.

#### **Tip 43: Build trust before and beyond elections**

Avoid the trap of “parachute journalism”—intensifying coverage only during elections. Use the election period as a chance to forge long-term relationships with audiences by showing consistency, openness to feedback, and respect for diverse perspectives. Trust is the most powerful capital any media outlet can earn, and it must be cultivated with every piece of content.

## *Glossary of Terms*

**Agency for Audio and Audiovisual Media Services (AVMU):** The regulatory body that monitors broadcasters to ensure compliance with media laws during election periods. It develops monitoring methodologies and may initiate sanctions.

**Association of Journalists of Macedonia (AJM):** The main professional association advocating for journalists' rights and freedom of expression and a co-developer of ethical standards.

**Campaign Silence (Election Silence):** A legally mandated period that begins 24 hours before Election Day and prohibits the publication or broadcast of any campaign-related material until polls close. Violations include direct promotion, veiled campaigning, and publication of poll results.

**Council of Media Ethics of Macedonia (CMEM):** A self-regulatory body that promotes ethical journalism. It offers dispute resolution and maintains the Register of professional online media.

**Electoral Code:** The principal legal framework governing elections in North Macedonia. It defines the responsibilities of institutions, media, political actors, and citizens during the electoral process. The Electoral Code includes specific provisions on media coverage, paid political advertising, election silence, campaign finance, and sanctions.

**Law on Audio and Audiovisual Media Services:** A law regulating the operation of broadcasters, including the public broadcaster. It sets standards for pluralism, non-discrimination, and protection from hate speech. During elections, it complements the Electoral Code by defining general principles for fair media conduct.

**Law on Media:** A law applying to print and online media. It includes provisions on the right to reply and correction, prohibition of hate speech, and general journalistic responsibilities.

**Media Plan and Report on Delivered Services:** Documents required from political entities and media to track campaign advertising, expenditures, and timing. Submitted to the SEC, SAO, and SCPC.

**Paid Political Advertising:** Media content purchased by electoral participants to promote their platforms. It must be clearly labeled, priced transparently, and distinct from editorial material. It is subject to strict regulation under the Electoral Code, including registration and reporting obligations.

**Register of Media:** An official list maintained by the SEC of all media outlets authorized to carry political advertisements during the campaign. Inclusion requires submission of a valid price list and documentation.

**State Audit Office (SAO):** Conducts audits of campaign finances, including the allocation and use of public funds for media advertising. It plays a crucial role in identifying financial irregularities in the election process.

**State Commission for Prevention of Corruption (SCPC):** Monitors the use of public resources during electoral campaigns, investigates possible misuse of state funds, and receives media contracts and advertising documentation.

**State Election Commission (SEC):** The central body responsible for organizing and administering elections in North Macedonia. It oversees voter lists, monitors campaign procedures, and manages the register of media for paid political advertising.

## ***Resources***

[AVMU Methodology for Monitoring Electoral Media Representation \(2019\)](#)

[Electoral Code of the Republic of North Macedonia \(Consolidated amendments up to 2024\)](#)

[Law on Audio and Audiovisual Media Services](#)

[Law on Media](#)

[2025 amendments to the Law on Media](#)

[Code of Journalists of Macedonia](#)

[Code of Conduct in the Online Sphere during Electoral Processes and Referenda](#)

[Guidelines for Ethical Reporting in the Online Media](#)

[Guide for Ethical Media Coverage of Elections in North Macedonia](#)

[State Election Commission](#)

[State Audit Office](#)

[State Commission for the Prevention of Corruption](#)

[Agency for Audio and Audiovisual Media Services](#)

[Ethical and Professional Principles of MRT for Media Coverage of Election Processes](#)

[IFJ Tips on Media for Elections Reporting](#)

[Journalists Handbook on Covering Elections](#)

[Responsible Media Coverage of Elections - A Training Guide – Search for Common Ground](#)

[Resource Pack - Journalists' Guide to Ethical Election Reporting](#)

[Towards Inclusive Internet Portals and Election Advertising](#)

[Guidelines for Broadcasters for the Presidential and Parliamentary Elections 2024 – Consolidated Text](#)

[Guidelines for Paid Political Advertising for Local Elections 2021](#)

[Guidelines for Confirming Reports on Broadcasted Paid Political Advertising](#)

[Methodology for Monitoring Electoral Media Representation through Radio and Television Program Services During Election Processes](#)

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