SNAPSHOT
ANALYSIS

Sponsored political advertising on Facebook and Instagram during the 2025 local elections in North Macedonia:

Vivid, yet unregulated

METAMORPHOSIS
Foundation for Internet and Society

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Executive Summary

1. Executive summary

This analysis provides a comprehensive overview of sponsored political advertising on Meta platforms (Facebook and Instagram) during the final 20-day monitoring period of the 2025 local elections in North Macedonia. From September 29 to October 17, 2025, the monitoring tracked **52 mayoral candidates and their supporting political entities across 26 strategically selected municipalities**.

From the monitored 52, **28 candidates (54%)** actively advertised, i.e. sponsored posts on at least one of the Meta platforms. The monitored scope showed **€23,308** recorded in the final 20-day localized monitoring. Most of the advertisements on their pages were sponsored by the candidate themselves (92.6%), and the rest were sponsored by the political parties they represent. However, the additionally obtained cumulative data for all political advertising in North Macedonia on Meta Ad Library, for the same period shows that the top 50 political pages alone spent a total of €153,342 representing dominance of **central party pages and state and party officials** over individual mayoral candidates. As the top overall spenders are national political entities and party leaders, not local mayoral contenders, this suggests that parties centralized their budget to promote their leaders and national platforms, which then cascaded down to local levels.

The recorded expenditure for social media advertising on Meta platforms for the **28 candidates** that sponsored advertising of their posts (**54% of the total 52 monitored candidates)** consisted of **812 active advertisements**. From these, a distinct concentration of digital activity was observed in the Skopje region, specifically in the municipalities of Chair, Kisela Voda, and Butel, which together accounted for **55%** of the total monitored budget.

While most of the monitored content is promotional and official, the strategic use of third-party financing and negative narratives in competitive zones highlights a complex and sophisticated digital electoral landscape.

Key findings include:

- **Financing structure: 92.6%** of monitored ads on the pages of candidates were official promotional content funded directly by candidates, while **7.4%** utilized third-party financing models, in this case all by their political parties or coalitions. However, the additionally obtained cumulative data for all political advertising in North Macedonia for the same period shows dominance of **central party pages and officials** over individual mayoral candidates. Here the central party appears as third-party, different from the account of the candidate.
- **Communication tone:** While **91.75%** of monitored ads were promotional, a strategic subset of **8.25%** consisted of negative ads focused on discrediting opponents rather than promoting programs. This tactic was heavily localized, with candidate **Goran**

Trajkovski (SDSM/Kisela Voda) responsible for **64%** of all recorded negative ads among the monitored candidates. This, however, relates to the monitoring scope only.

- **Targeting disparities:** A significant gender gap was identified, with **men accounting for 66%** of the total reach of the ads.
- **Age demographics:** Advertising was **heavily optimized for the 25–44 age bracket**, while youth engagement (under 24) remained critically low at less than **7%.**
- **Candidate Dynamics: Goran Trajkovski (SDSM)** was the most active among monitored candidates within the official campaign period, investing **€2,983** in **123 ads** within the monitored pages. He was followed by **Bujar Osmani (NAI)** and **Darko Kostovski (VMRO-DPMNE)**, both of whom maintained aggressive visibility in high-stakes urban zones.
- **Regulatory Needs:** It is necessary to introduce changes to the Electoral Code which will regulate third-party financings. Additionally, the Electoral Code must be expanded to include precise reporting obligations for social media spending including non-contestant entities.

MONITORING METHODOLOGY

2. Monitoring methodology

This report contributes to a broader initiative that complements ongoing efforts to monitor the potential misuse of administrative resources (MAR), carried out by 70 civil society monitors from 10 civil society organizations (CSOs) across 26 municipalities[1] chosen based on their political importance and the intensity of the electoral competition.

The MAR monitoring aimed to assess whether public office, activities, or resources were used during the 2025 local elections in ways that could undermine the equality and fairness of electoral competition. By extending the monitoring to sponsored political advertising in the same municipalities, this initiative sought to provide a more comprehensive picture of campaign practices and identify potential risks to electoral integrity across both offline and online spaces.

Taking into the consideration the above, the monitoring methodology for the sponsored political advertisement was strategically designed to ensure transparency and accountability in digital political advertising on the Meta platforms (Facebook and Instagram) during the 2025 local elections.

The data was collected through the Meta Ad Library API, which provides insight into all political advertisements published on Meta platforms. The monitoring includes a detailed analysis of the costs, geographical and demographic distribution of advertisements, as well as their content and availability. The analysis includes the collection, verification and processing of data from public sources in order to determine the volume and sources of financing of political advertisements. Special emphasis is placed on the identification of advertisements financed by third parties, i.e. entities that are not official bearers of the election campaign.

To ensure comprehensive oversight within these areas, the developed methodology included following dimensions.

- **Targeted geographical and subject scope:** The monitoring included **52 mayoral candidates** across the **26 monitored municipalities**, spanning six electoral districts. The **52 monitored candidates** were selected as one coming from the ruling option, and one from the biggest opposition option generating a total list of **62 profiles or pages** (some candidates used multiple advertising channels). These candidates were connected to nine (9) parties or coalitions and there were three (3) independent candidates.
  From the monitored 52, **28 candidates (54%) actively advertised**, i.e. sponsored

[1] Bitola, Bogovinje, Butel, Chair, Centar Zhupa, Debar, Delchevo, Dolneni, Gostivar, Kisela Voda, Kochani, Kumanovo, Lipkovo, Makedonski Brod, Ohrid, Prilep, Saraj, Shuto Orizari, Shtip, Struga, Strumica, Studenichani, Tearce, Tetovo, Valandovo, and Vrapchishte.

posts on at least one of the Meta platforms making them the primary source of the data for this analysis.

- **Systematic data collection:** Real-time data was gathered regarding the number of active advertisements, total spending per page, and the presence of financial disclaimers to identify the exact source of funding within the 28 candidates that advertised on Facebook and Instagram.
- **Categorization of content and financing:** All recorded advertisements were analysed and coded into specific categories based on their primary communication objective (Promotional or Negative) and their financing structure (Official or Third-Party).

For the **complete list** of all 52 monitored candidates and their respective municipalities , please refer to **Annex 1** at the end of this document.

Additionally, for the needs of longitudinal analysis, the data for the top 50 political spenders was obtained.

Contextual background: The third-party funding risk

3. Contextual background: The third-party funding risk

The digitization of political campaigning in North Macedonia has significantly outpaced the existing regulatory framework, creating critical vulnerabilities regarding campaign finance transparency and electoral integrity.

Within the sphere of electoral regulation, “third parties” refer both to individuals and to organisations who are not legally tied to, or acting in co-ordination with, any candidate or political party, but who nonetheless act with the aim of influencing the electoral result. Third-party financing in relation to election campaigns has been defined as, “campaign expenditures made independently of a candidate or party with the aim of promoting or opposing a candidate or party, either directly or indirectly.” (Joint Guidelines on Political Party Regulation OSCE/ODIHR & Council of Europe Venice Commission, 2020).

While the **Electoral Code** imposes strict reporting obligations on official election contestants (candidates and coalitions), it lacks specific provisions effectively regulating **third-party actors** in the digital sphere. This current regulatory gap can allow for the proliferation of entities that finance and disseminate political content without the same level of oversight as official candidates.

3.1 The "party-as-third-party" mechanism

In the specific context of this monitoring, the term "third parties" predominantly identifies a systemic workaround utilized by major political subjects. Monitoring revealed that **political parties in some cases act as third-party financiers** for their own local candidates.

- **The mechanism:** Instead of funds flowing through the candidate’s dedicated transaction account, which is subject to audit conducted by the State Audit Office (SAO), campaign ads are paid for and sponsored directly by central party pages or affiliated entity pages.
- **The consequence:** This creates a "grey zone" where campaign expenditures are technically dissociated from the candidate’s financial report prepared as required by the existing legislation. Consequently, a candidate may appear to have a modest budget for political advertisement used for digital space, however s/he can at the same time benefit from a massive advertising campaign, funded by unverified sources, that remains invisible to immediate oversight.

3.2 Systemic vulnerabilities to illicit finance

This lack of regulation for non-contestant spenders opens a conduit for **illicit financial flows** to enter the political cycle. Because third-party advertisers on social media do not face the

same rigorous "Know Your Customer" (KYC) or source-of-funds verification standards as official candidates opening bank accounts, the system is vulnerable to:

- **Unverified sources:** Funds from unknown or unregulated sources (e.g., cash payments, offshore accounts, or non-transparent business donations) can be used to purchase prepaid cards or digital credits for ad boosting.
- **Shadow campaigning:** Parallel campaigns can be run by "proxy" pages, ostensibly independent community groups or media outlets, that are funded by political actors to attack opponents without leaving a financial trace in the official campaign books.

3.3 The risk of malign influence

While the primary focus of this report is on domestic political entities, the infrastructure used by parties to bypass financial limits is identical to the infrastructure used for **foreign malign influence**.

- **The open door:** If a domestic political party can successfully fund a candidate's campaign through a third-party page without immediate detection, foreign state actors or external interest groups can exploit the same loophole to influence voter sentiment, suppress turnout, or amplify polarizing narratives.

Disclaimer: It is important to clarify that while this report categorizes political parties as the primary third-party actors observed during the 2025 cycle, this does not imply that other forms of third-party financing do not exist. The findings serve as a baseline indicator that the digital ecosystem in North Macedonia remains highly permeable to unregulated financial influence.

Financial analysis

4. Financial analysis

This chapter represents a forensic financial analysis of the digital campaign, grounded in the systematic aggregation of expenditure data from the Meta Ad Library for the critical 20-day period preceding the election (September 29 – October 17, 2025). By tracking the flow of **€23,308** across 28 mayoral pages that actively advertised, the analysis quantifies the "cost of visibility" in the digital sphere, moving beyond simple rankings to expose the structural dynamics of political investment.

4.1 Analysis by advertiser (sponsor)

To assess the financial aspects of the digital campaign, all recorded advertisements were analysed and coded into two specific categories based on their financing structure as **official candidate ads** and **third-party financed ads** on the pages of monitored candidates. Specific patterns emerged regarding how candidates financed their visibility.

- **Official candidate ads (92.6%):** This category comprises the vast majority of the number of ads. These promotional messages are funded directly by the candidate's campaign page, ensuring a direct link between the candidate and the expenditure.
- **Third-party financed ads (7.4%):** This represents a strategic segment where the financier is a non-candidate entity, such as political parties and coalitions.

The fact that most advertisements were financed directly by individual candidates, leads to conclusion that the campaigns had a personalized and decentralized character. However, this refers to monitoring of the candidate pages, the wider set of data for all political advertising shows dominance of central parties' and officials' pages, over candidate pages.

Financing through political parties or coalitions as third-parties was observed (within the definition explained above), such as these candidates whose advertised posts on their pages/profiles were completely financed by the central pages of their political parties or coalitions.

• **Izet Mexhiti** – 100% of posts sponsored by the **Democratic Movement (part of VLEN)**

• **Arsim Dalipi** - 100% of posts sponsored by the **National Alliance for Integration (known as AKI/NAI)**

• **Blerim Islami** – 100% of posts sponsored by **Alternativa (part of VLEN)**

However, even though the ads were not sponsored by the candidates, these cases represent a relatively positive example of transparent party financing, where the source of funds is clearly stated and verifiable.

The analysis shows that the vast majority of ads (795 out of 812, or 97.9%) have a clearly stated funder, which represents a high level of transparency and compliance with Meta's

rules for political advertising. Only 17 advertisements (2.1%) appear without a designated financier, and this applies to a total of 7 candidates, as shown in the table below:

Candidate	Number of ads without a listed financier
Gjoko Kamchev	4
Bajram Rexhepi	4
Ilirijan Fetahu	3
Martin Kostovski	3
Nazim Taipi	1
Bilal Kasami	1
Goran Trajkovski	1

The low percentage of listings without a listed financier (only 2.1%) is negligible and most likely the result of a technical timeout in the approval process. Here we must emphasize that this refers to non-EU countries, as the political advertising for EU countries is currently stalled.[2]

Overall, the required transparency of political advertising system via Meta platforms is characterized by a high level of compliance with political transparency rules.

4.2 Analysis by candidate

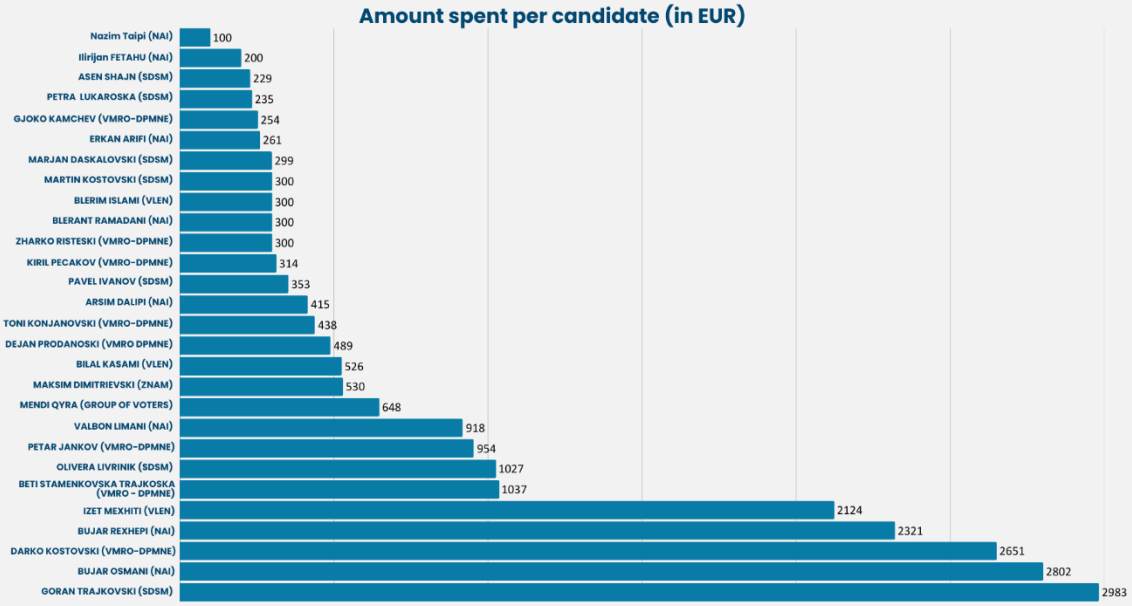


Chart 2: Amount spent by the 28 candidates from the monitored scope that actively advertised

[2] Ending Political, Electoral and Social Issue Advertising in the EU in Response to Incoming European Regulation, Meta, 25 July 2025, please see: https://about.fb.com/news/2025/07/ending-political-electoral-and-social-issue-advertising-in-the-eu/

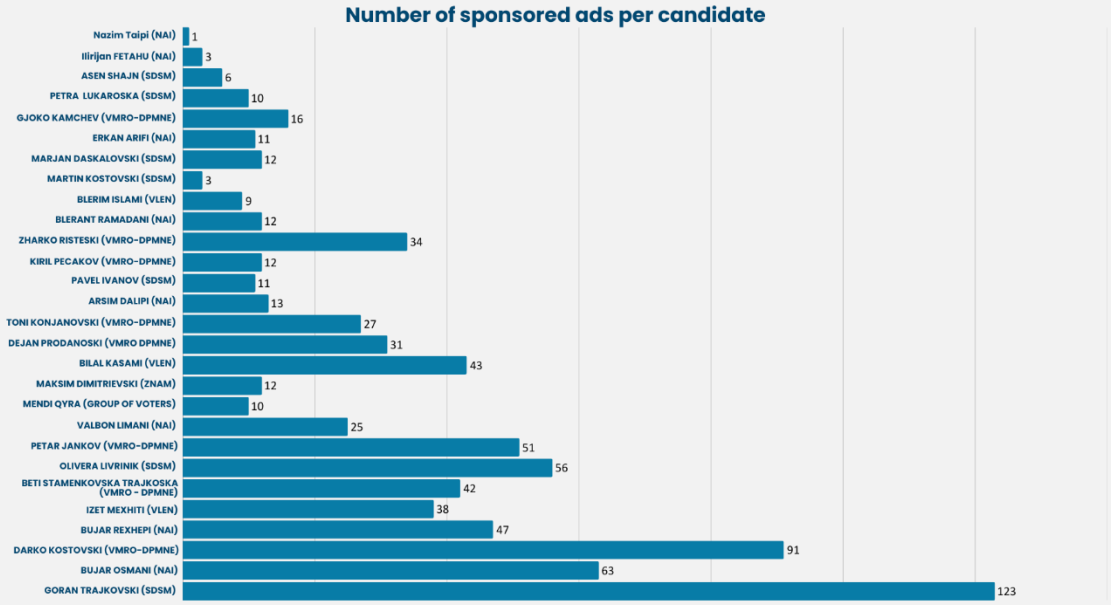


Chart 3: Number of sponsored ads per candidate that actively advertised

Regarding candidates, **Goran Trajkovski (SDSM)** in **Kisela Voda** stands out with the highest budget - **2,983 euros** and the largest number of published advertisements - **123**, from the monitored pages, which indicates an intensive and continuous campaign aimed at local targeting of voters in municipality of Kisela Voda.

The campaign is the most extensive with a wide range of impressions - from 1,000 to over 150,000, with dominance in the 10,000-50,000 and 100,000+ categories.

This indicates a strategically placed mix of reach and frequency - some of the ads were aimed at mass reach, and some at repeating messages to an already engaged audience. Practically, this means that the audience in his municipality (and beyond) saw the content multiple times, which creates a recognisable effect.

Candidate **Darko Kostovski (VMRO-DPMNE) in Butel** recorded a significant level of investment (over 2,650 euros), which is an indicator of the strategic importance of this municipality within the Skopje region. With 91 ads, with dominance in the 30,000-70,000 impressions segment, shows a continuous but controlled distribution of intensity. Some of the ads reach over 100,000 impressions, which means they were re-amplified during the campaign.

Bujar Osmani (AKI/NAI) had 63 ads, many of which have over 70,000 impressions, and a few even over 250,000. This indicates an aggressive and consistent digital strategy, with a focus on high visibility in the targeted urban municipalities (Tetovo, Chair, Gostivar).

In **Chair** municipality, candidates **Bujar Osmani (AKI/NAI)** and **Izet Mexhiti (VLEN)** together generated more than **5,000** euros in expenses, which represents almost one fifth of the total detected budget in the sample. This indicates that Chair, as a politically sensitive and

symbolically significant municipality, represented a focal point of activity for the two Albanian coalitions.

When considering the overall distribution of expenditures, it can be concluded that political options apply a selective approach to budget allocation, directing funds towards geographical areas with a larger number of voters and greater media exposure.

Olivera Livrinic, **Petar Jankov**, **Bajram Rexhepi** have most of their ads in the 20,000-70,000 impressions range, which indicates a well-optimized local reach.

They achieve high stability of exposure without excessive fluctuations, which is usually a sign of an organized but budget-moderate campaign.

Bilal Kasami (VLEN) and **Zharko Risteski (VMRO-DPMNE)** have a relatively small number of ads (43 and 34), but with a high number of impressions - which indicates that the same creative has been run multiple times with a boosted budget.

This approach creates an effect of recognition and repetition, typical of campaigns that rely on a strong visual identity.

Although with smaller budgets, independent candidates and voter groups, such as **Mendi Qyra** in **Struga**, showed a conscious effort to increase visibility and communicate directly with voters through social media. Their average investment is under 700 euros, but the content of the ads is personalized, with an emphasis on local context and messages of accountability and independence.

The distribution of resources reflects the diverse digital strategies adopted by the leading political subjects, with a notable focus on high-stakes urban battlegrounds.

A few high-profile candidates drive the majority of digital volume from the monitored pages, focusing resources on competitive zones.

Regarding the impressions, most political ads have 10,000-80,000 impressions, which is the most common exposure zone in local elections. About 15% of ads reach over 100,000 impressions, which marks them as high-frequency, budget-intensive ads and a small portion of ads (under 5%) have under 2,000 impressions, likely test ads or campaigns with a suspended duration.

4.3 Analysis by municipality

Within the monitored scope, the results show that the municipalities of **Kisela Voda, Chair, Butel and Tetovo** are among the most active in terms of the number of advertisements, which reflects the high political competition between the leading parties. These municipalities represent zones of increased visibility and targeted communication, where candidates invest more in paid advertisements with high reach, aimed at the young population and urban voters.

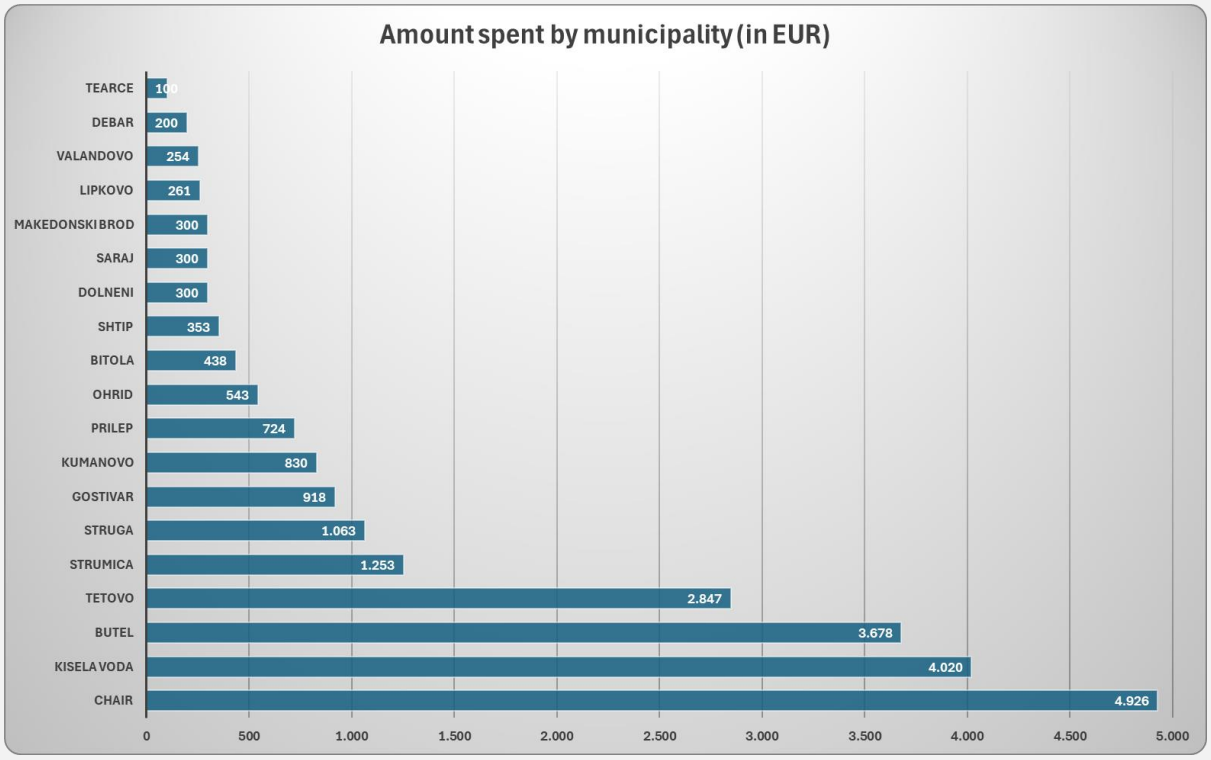


Chart 4: Spent funds (in euros) by municipality

From the presented data, it can be concluded that the highest amounts of advertising funds on social networks Facebook and Instagram were recorded by candidates in **Chair, Kisela Voda** and **Butel**, which positions these municipalities as the most dynamic electoral zones in online communication with voters.

Chair leads the list with 4,926 euros and 101 advertisements, followed by Kisela Voda with 4,020 euros and 165 advertisements, and Butel with 3,678 euros and 147 advertisements. These three municipalities together account for more than half of the total monitored budget (around 55%) and represent the core of election communication on social networks.

The municipalities of **Tetovo** (2,847 euros / 90 advertisements) and **Strumica** (1,253 euros / 63 advertisements) follow the leading three, showing moderate but continuous intensity of campaigns, indicating the use of Facebook and Instagram as an additional channel for mobilizing and informing voters.

In the other parts of the country, spending is moderate and mostly limited to a few short-term campaigns, which indicates that advertising on social networks Facebook and Instagram is still used as an additional, rather than a central channel of communication. In this regard, municipalities outside Skopje (Bitola, Prilep, Ohrid, Valandovo, Makedonski Brod, Dolneni, Saraj, Lipkovo, Debar and Tearce) have significantly lower budgets, usually under 500 euros per municipality. In most of these cases, the advertisements are short-lived, with limited reach, and most often have an informative character (event announcements, field reports, reactions, etc.).

This indicates that advertising on social networks in smaller local environments does not yet have a developed strategic function but is used selectively and with minimal resources.

4.4 Analysis by political option

Within the monitored scope, candidates from different parties and coalitions utilized distinct institutional models reflecting their organizational capacity.

- **NAI candidates:** Recorded the highest total expenditure of €7,317, focusing on urban-centric strategies in Chair, Tetovo, and Gostivar.
- **VMRO-DPMNE candidates:** Published the highest number of unique advertisements (304), maintaining a ubiquitous presence at a lower average cost per ad.
- **SDSM candidates:** Spent €5,426 across 221 ads with a messaging focus on "accountability and continuity".
- **VLEN candidates:** Footprint concentrated in western municipalities, leveraging ethnic-specific themes for mobilization. They spent €2,950 on 90 sponsored ads.

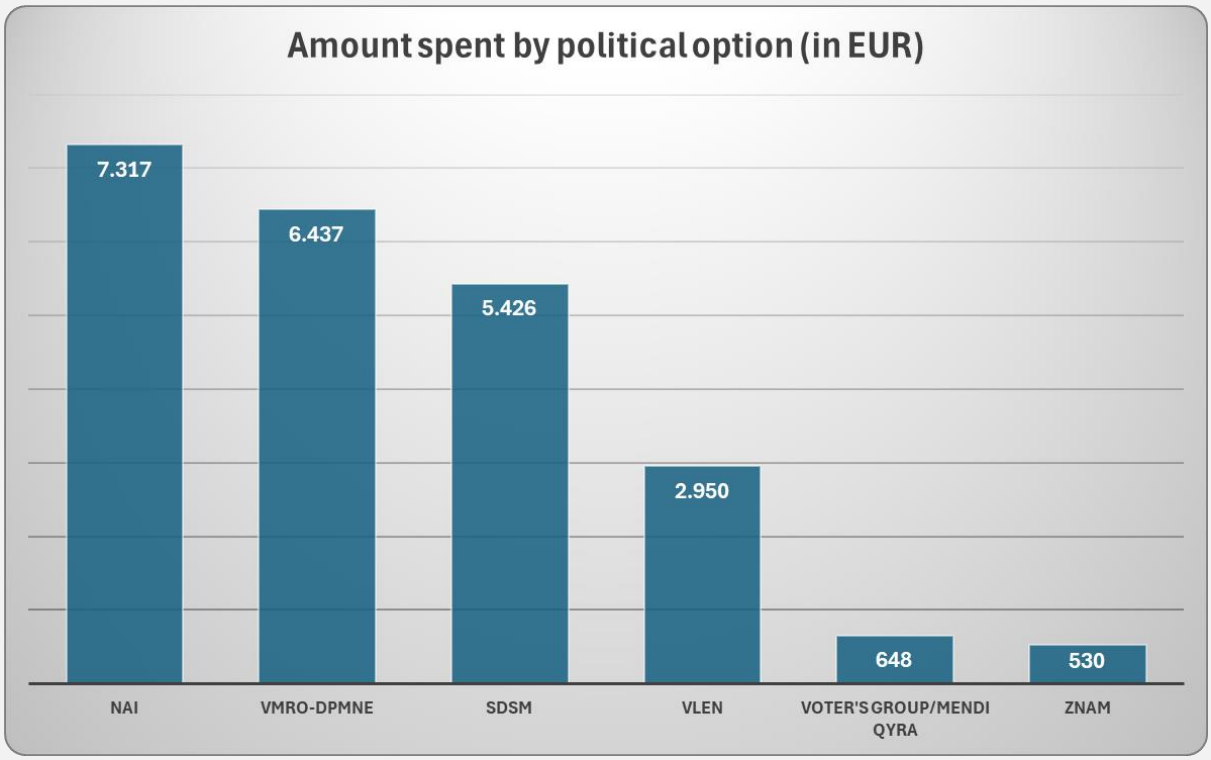


Chart 5: Amount spent per political option

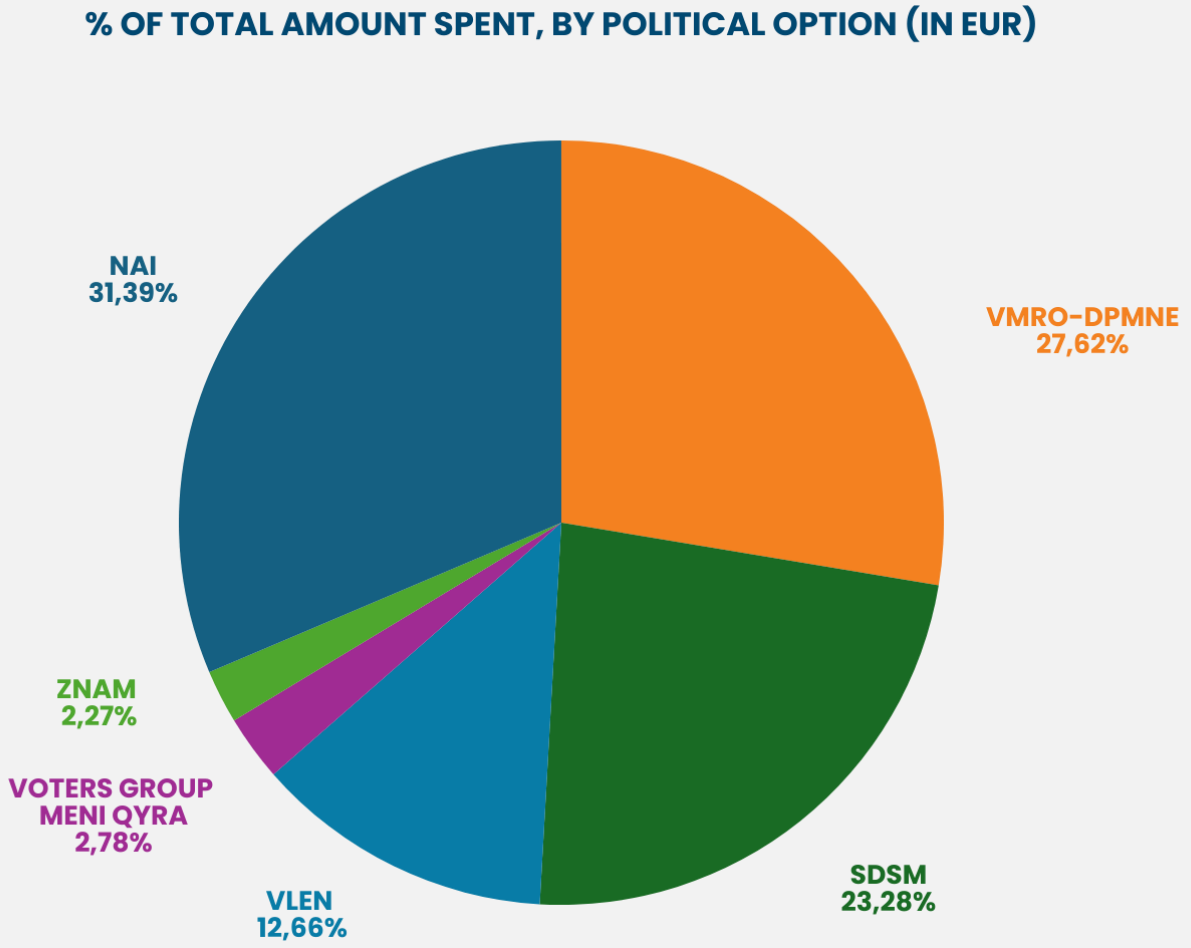


Chart 6: Percentage of the total amount spent per political option

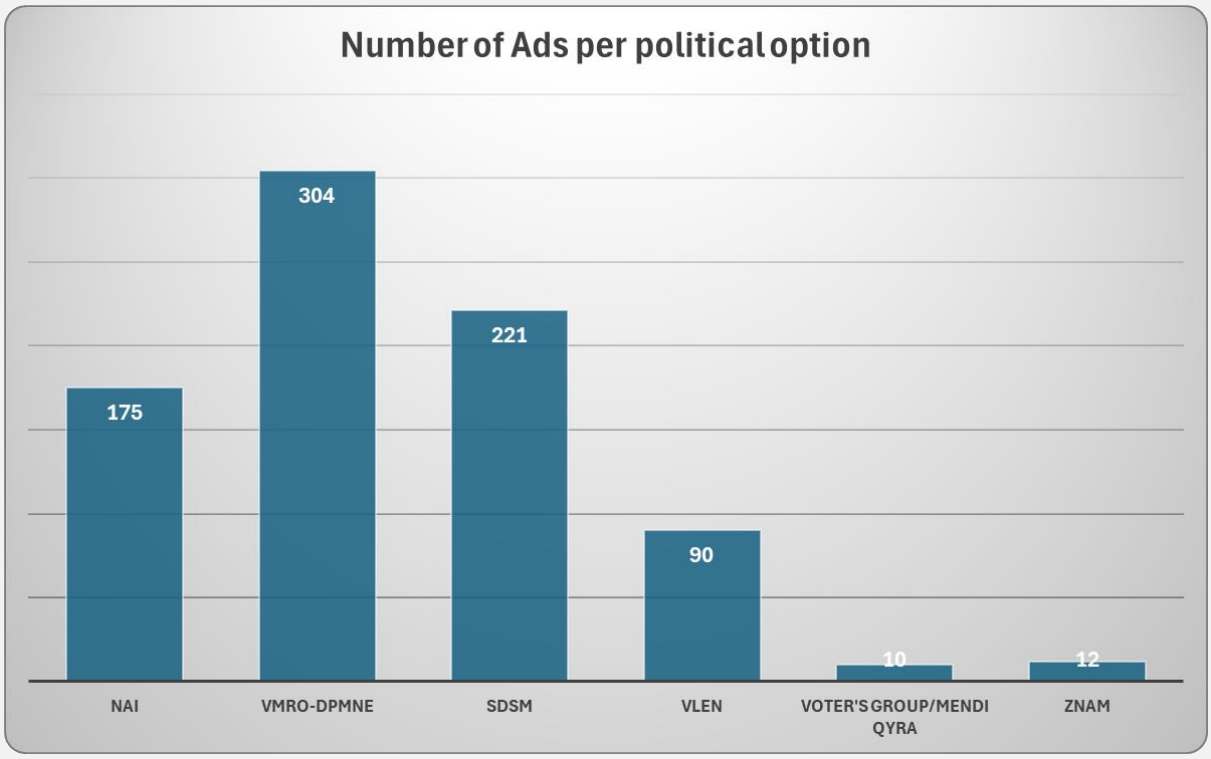


Chart 7: Number of Ads per political option

The **AKI/NAI coalition** (National Alliance for Integration) recorded the highest total amount of advertising funds spent on social networks - **7,317 euros**, with **175 active ads** within the monitored scope

This indicates a clear strategy of presence and aggressive campaigning, especially in municipalities with a dominant Albanian population (Chair, Saraj, Gostivar, Struga, Lipkovo, Tetovo).

AKI/NAI is clearly using online promotion as a primary communication channel to reinforce its own political narrative and to target the younger and urban population.

With **304 ads** and total costs of **6,437 euros**, **VMRO-DPMNE** is the party with the highest number of published ads within the monitored scope, but with a relatively moderate budget per ad (around 21 euros per ad).

This indicates a strategy of mass and consistency, i.e. continuous presence with many short and targeted announcements, instead of a small number of expensive and long-term campaigns.

The party is clearly applying a distributed advertising model, covering multiple municipalities and constituencies with a relatively even investment.

SDSM recorded **221 advertisements** with total costs of **5,426 euros**, which positions the party as the second most active entity in the total volume of advertising.

Although the budget is somewhat lower than VMRO-DPMNE and AKI/NAI, it is characteristic that the advertisements are aimed at larger urban municipalities and most often contain messages about accountability, transparency and continuity of projects.

This indicates a more moderate and institutional approach to the campaign, with an emphasis on the presentation of results and achievements, rather than direct promotion of individuals.

The political coalition **VLEN** has **90 advertisements** within the monitored scope, with a total value of **2,950 euros**, which represents a moderate but geographically focused presence.

Most advertisements are concentrated in the municipalities of the western part of the country (Tetovo, Gostivar, Struga, Saraj), and their content is often focused on identity issues, public support and voter mobilization.

Compared to AKI/NAI, VLEN's strategy seems more selective and targeted, although with a smaller number of advertisements.

Independent candidates and new political movements are present with a limited number of advertisements and modest budgets, analogue to their number candidates analysed:

• **Mendi Qyra Voters' Group** - **10 advertisements** and **648 euros**,

• **ZNAM - 12 advertisements** and **530 euros**, for the monitored municipalities.

Although the budgets are minimal compared to the major parties, which is also a result of the lower number of their candidates, their presence shows a tendency to use social networks as an alternative medium for communication with citizens, outside of traditional channels.

Overall, the relationship between the number of ads and the funds spent indicates different strategies:

• **AKI/NAI** invests more in **quality** and targeting (average of around 42 euros per ad),

• **VMRO-DPMNE** focuses on **quantity** and reach,

• **SDSM** has a **balanced** model,

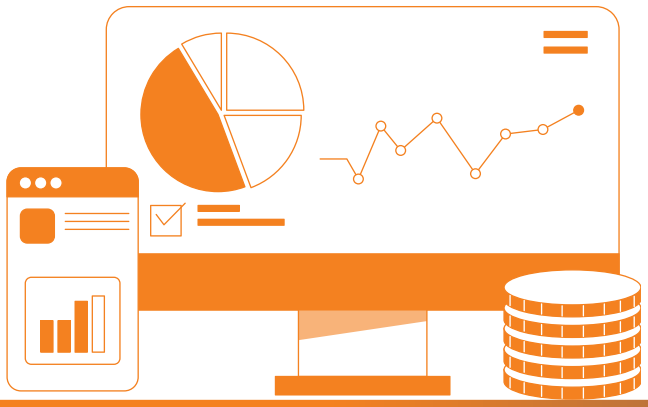
• **VLEN** applies a selective, regionally oriented approach.

4.5 Meta platform trends

The 2025 local elections confirm that Meta platforms Facebook and Instagram, have become a important pillars of political mobilization in North Macedonia. This part of digital landscape during the 20 day electoral campaign was characterized by the following trends:

- **Facebook over Instagram dominance:** Facebook remains the universal tool for political advertising, utilized by all monitored candidates. From the 28 candidates who sponsored their posts on Facebook, Instagram serves as a secondary reinforcement channel, used by approximately 80% of candidates that advertised.
- **Spending intensity:** The average spending per candidate is estimated at **€700 to €800**, though significant deviations were recorded in high-stakes urban centres where spending tripled the average.
- **Regional focus:** Digital activity is heavily concentrated in Electoral Districts 1 and 2 (Skopje region), which account for 70% of the total expenditure from 28 active spending from all 62 monitored profiles/pages.
- **Technical integration:** Most campaigns utilize a **synchronized "Facebook + Instagram"** model to maximize visibility across platform formats.

Longitudinal analysis of the overall political advertising in North Macedonia on the Meta platforms



5. Longitudinal analysis of the overall political advertising in North Macedonia on the Meta platforms

While the primary monitoring focused on the election campaign that lasted for 20 days across 26 municipalities, an analysis of the data showing **overall top 50 political spenders** for the same 20-days obtained from Meta Ad Library, reveals a larger scale of digital investment. This data which includes national party leadership and municipalities outside the initial monitoring scope (such as Gevgelija and Berovo), captures most of the financial weight of the campaign.

The cumulative data shows that during this election campaign in North Macedonia the **top 50 active political pages** spent a total of **€153,342** during the same timeframe. This is raw data for all political spending in the same period with the simple purpose to illustrate and frame in order to avoid wrong impressions. Understandably, the figure is larger than the **€23,308** recorded in the final 20-day localized monitoring of **28 candidates.**

A key finding in this dataset is the **dominance of political advertising on central party pages and pages of state and party officials over individual mayoral candidates.** For example, the page of the Prime Minister who is also President of VMRO-DPMNE spent more on sponsored posts than his political party, or any other mayoral candidate. Same applies for the president of SMSM Venko FIlipche. Regarding political party pages, the top three positions are held by national political entities rather than local contestants or branches, suggesting that parties centralized their budget to promote their leaders and national platforms, which then cascaded down to local levels.

Top 10 sponsors of the advertisements on Meta platforms

Rank	Page Name	Affiliation	Amount Spent (€)	Ad Count	Strategy Profile
1	**Levica**	Levica	**€12,170**	64	**High Value:** Fewer ads, significant investment per post (~€190/ad).
2	**Hristijan Mickoski**	VMRO-DPMNE	**€11,298**	80	**Leader-Centric:** Heavy promotion of the party president.
3	**Venko Filipche**	SDSM	**€10,178**	39	**Targeted Precision:** Highest cost per ad (~€260/ad), focusing on reach.
4	**Orce Gjorgjievski**	VMRO-DPMNE	**€10,109**	200	**Mass Saturation:** The highest-spending local candidate with maximum volume.
5	**SDSM - Social Democratic Union**	SDSM	**€9,473**	68	**Institutional:** Official party branding and platform promotion.
6	**Amar Mecinovic**	Levica	**€6,113**	20	**High Impact:** Extremely concentrated spending on very few ads.
7	**Sotir Lukrovski**	VMRO-DPMNE	**€5,583**	77	**Local-High:** Significant spend for a local candidate (Karposh).
8	**Aleksandar Stojkoski**	VMRO-DPMNE	**€5,340**	90	**Consistent:** Steady flow of promoted content (Gjorche Petrov).
9	**Bujar Osmani**	AKI/NAI	**€4,932**	63	**Urban Efficiency:** Focused on high-impression ads in Chair/Skopje.
10	**Darko Kostovski**	VMRO-DPMNE	**€4,812**	91	**Volume-Based:** High activity similar to Stojkoski (Butel).

When analysing the **number of advertisements** (frequency) rather than just cost, among the top 50 political spenders, a different pattern emerges. Local candidates, particularly incumbents, utilized a "high frequency" strategy to maintain daily visibility in their municipalities.

- **The "Orce Gjorgjievski" case:** Orce Gjorgjievski is the only candidate who tops both the spending and volume charts. With **200 paid ads** and over **€10,000** spent, his campaign effectively functioned with the resources of a national party headquarters, overshadowing all other local contenders.
- **Non-monitored candidates:** The broader list reveals significant activity in municipalities outside the initial 26-zone scope. For example, **Andon Saramandov** (Gevgelija) published **117 ads**, and **Petar Ruzhinski** (Berovo) ran **52 ads**, indicating intense digital battles in rural hubs can go unnoticed in Skopje-centric analyses.
- **The "Demokrati" case:** The political entity "Demokrati" recorded the second-highest volume with **169 ads**, yet their total spending (€4,099) was moderate. This points to a strategy of "micro-boosting"—promoting many posts with small amounts (€10-€20) to maintain constant, low-level feed presence.

This longitudinal data confirms that while local candidates fight for visibility, the financial backbone of the election is the national party leadership. The massive sponsorship by non-mayoral candidate pages like the pages of Levica, or party leaders like Hristijan Mickoski and Venko Filipche suggest that the 2025 elections were fought as a country referendum, at central level, as much as a local contest. Furthermore, the extreme spending disparity between candidates like Orce Gjorgjievski (€10k+) and the average mayoral candidate (~€800) highlights a "two-tier" digital democracy where resource-rich incumbents possess overwhelming communicative dominance.

Post character analysis

6. Post character analysis

The character of the political communication on social media was analysed to determine the balance between positive promotion of political platforms and negative campaigning aimed at discrediting opponents. The monitoring categorized all 812 posts into two primary types: Promotional and Negative.

To objectively assess campaign tone, the monitoring applied a functional classification system based on the **primary communicative intent** of each advertisement, distinguishing between "acclaims" and "critiques."

- **Promotional narratives** were defined as content where the primary subject is the candidate or their program. These posts utilize self-referential language (e.g., "We," "Our Plan") and positive visual cues to highlight achievements, future infrastructure projects, and personal virtues.
- **Negative narratives** were identified by their focus on the opponent or the status quo. These posts employ opponent-referential language (e.g., "They," "The previous administration") to critique specific failures, corruption, or stagnation, often reinforced by darker imagery and stark, high-contrast graphics to demobilize opposition support.

The overwhelming majority of the digital campaign was focused on affirmative messaging.

- **Promotional content:** Accounting for **91.75%** of all analysed advertisements (745 ads), the primary strategy for most candidates was to highlight their own achievements, infrastructure projects, and future promises. This high percentage indicates that candidates prioritized building their own brand image over engaging in direct conflict.

While negative campaigning was the minority, representing **8.25%** of the total content (67 ads), it was deployed strategically by specific candidates in highly competitive races. Understandably, the most negative posts were by the oppositional candidates opposing current Mayors and their policies.

Primary critic: The most active user of negative narratives was **Goran Trajkovski** (SDSM/Kisela Voda), who was responsible for **45 of the 67 negative ads** (67% of all negative ads). His strategy involved a systematic critique of his opponents, contrasting sharply with the generally positive tone of other campaigns. Part of the motive could be found that the then active Mayor of the municipality was a candidate for Mayor of the capital Skopje.

- **Other negative campaigners:** These candidates used negative ads as a supplementary tactic rather than a main strategy. This tier of candidates including employed sporadic

negative messaging, primarily focusing on specific local grievances rather than the systemic criticism seen in Trajkovski's campaign.

- **Darko Kostovski:** 5 ads (7.5%)
- **Olivera Livrinikj:** 4 ads (6%)
- **Petra Lukaroska:** 3 ads (4.5%)
- **Dejan Prodanoski:** 3 ads (4.5%)
- **Maksim Dimitrievski:** 3 ads (4.5%)
- **Izet Mexhiti:** 2 ads
- **Gjoko Kamchev**: 1 ad
- **Bilall Kasami**: 1 ad

Interestingly, **94.2% of negative ads** (65 out of 67) were funded directly by **candidate pages**, challenging the assumption that candidates use third-party proxies for "dirty work." Only 2 negative ads were sponsored by third-party entities and those are by **Izet Mexhiti**, who is the sole verified example in this dataset of a candidate using **central party funds** to sponsor **negative** advertisements.

The digital sphere during this election cycle was largely used as a platform for **programmatic promotion** rather than a battlefield for smear campaigns. However, the concentrated use of attack ads by a single dominant candidate (Goran Trajkovski) highlight how negative messaging can be weaponized as a specific, localized tactical choice rather than a general party strategy.

Demographic distribution and audience targeting strategies

7. Demographic distribution and audience targeting strategies

The digital political advertising on Meta platforms allows for the precise direction of messages toward specific groups of citizens. However, the analysed monitoring data reveals that instead of a balanced approach, the campaigns were strongly oriented toward certain dominant segments of the population.

One of the most notable findings in the monitoring process is the pronounced gender imbalance in the delivery of political advertisements.

- **Male audience dominance**: Men account for a significant **66%** of the total reach of all political ads. This indicates that Meta's algorithms, in combination with the targeting settings selected by the political parties, prioritized displaying ads to male users.
- **Female representation**: The female audience comprises only **34%** of the total reach. This ratio of nearly **2:1** in favour of men suggests that women are significantly less exposed to paid political messages in the digital sphere.

The analysed candidate strategies, apparently, were primarily aimed at the working-age and most politically active population.

- **Primary target group (25–54 years)**: This segment represents the core of the digital campaign, covering approximately **50%** of the total ad reach. The highest concentration of reach is found in the 35–44 age group, followed closely by the 25–34 and 45–54 age brackets. These groups are perceived by campaign teams as having the highest level of digital activity and electoral influence.
- **Engagement with older voters (55+)**: Voters aged 55 and over remain a significant target group, especially on Facebook, accounting for approximately **29%** of the total reach. These users often show higher trust in institutional and local community pages.

A potential weakness in the digital communication of all political sides is the low engagement with the youngest voters.

- **Limited youth reach (18–24 years)**: This category accounts for less than **7%** of the total reach (4.23% for men and 2.71% for women).
- **The under-18 segment**: The 13–17 age group saw only a symbolic **0.01%** reach, which is expected as they do not yet constitute a voting body.

The demographic data confirms that the digital campaigns in North Macedonia are not yet fully inclusive. The heavy focus on men aged 25–54 leaves women and young people on the margins of digital political discourse. For future monitoring and regulatory improvements, it is recommended that political subjects diversify their outreach to ensure a more representative engagement with the entire electorate.

Conclusions and regulatory recommendations

8. Conclusions and regulatory recommendations

The monitoring of digital political advertising during the 2025 local elections provides critical insights into the transparency, reach, and regulatory compliance of social media campaigning in North Macedonia. The data confirms that while the technical compliance with disclosure rules is high, with 97.9% of advertisements clearly labelling the financier, the digital landscape remains characterized by significant financial and demographic imbalances.

A cross-analysis of the top 50 political spending pages reveals the existence of a "two-tier" digital democracy. While the average local candidate operates with a moderate budget, the financial backbone of the election is heavily centralized within national party leaderships and resource-rich incumbents. This centralization often overshadows local challengers, effectively turning local elections into a proxy battle for national political narratives. Furthermore, the campaign environment in high-stakes urban centres (Chair, Butel, Tetovo) highlights that social media is increasingly utilized for negative campaigning, where attack-oriented narratives are weaponized to discredit opponents rather than promote policy.

Beyond financial dynamics, the digital campaigns exhibited persistent demographic disparities. The heavy reliance on targeting men aged 25–54 has marginalized women and younger voters, leaving them on the periphery of the digital political discourse. Additionally, systemic inaccuracies in the geographic mapping of municipalities by social media platforms continue to hinder precise local oversight.

Based on these findings and the broader observations of the international mission, the following regulatory and strategic improvements are proposed:

- **Regulating third-party actors:** To prevent shadow campaigning and address legal provisions that currently disadvantage independent candidates[3], the Electoral Code must be expanded to include precise reporting obligations for social media spending by non-contestant entities.
- **Fair regulation for social media advertising:** The current system for distributing advertising funds in the media significantly distorts the playing field.[4] Advertising on social media during the election campaign should be regulated in an open, fair and transparent way.
- **Strengthening institutional oversight:** To address the lack of proactive oversight and accountability[5], the State Commission for Prevention of Corruption (SCPC) and SEC must be empowered to monitor digital spend in real-time, eliminating "technical buffer" periods where ads run without visible disclaimers.

[3] ODIHR International Election Observation Mission, Statement of Preliminary Findings (Round 1), 19 Oct 2025, p. 1 (noting disadvantages for independent candidates)
[4] ODIHR Election Observation Mission, Statement of Preliminary Findings (Round 2), 2 Nov 2025
[5] ODIHR Election Observation Mission, Statement of Preliminary Findings (Round 2), 2 Nov 2025

- **Promoting inclusive digital outreach:** To uphold fundamental freedoms and genuine voter choice,[6] parties must diversify targeting strategies to close the current 2:1 gender gap and ensure messaging reaches women and youth, rather than optimizing solely for the "most likely voter."
- **Institutional dialogue for technical accuracy:** Electoral authorities should establish a formal channel of communication with major social media platforms to correct systemic geographic mismatches, which is essential for effective local outreach and regional spending monitoring.

[6] Ibid.

ANNEX I

ANNEX 1

Monitored pages

No.	Municipality	Party	Name	FB Profile/Page
1	Vrapchishte	AKI/NAI	Isen Shabani	https://www.facebook.com/IsenShabaniofficial
				https://www.facebook.com/isen.shabani
		VLEN	Mehmet Seferi	https://www.facebook.com/profile.php?id=61580804966593
2	Valandovo	SDSM	Pero Kostadinov	https://www.facebook.com/k.asparuh
		VMRO - DPMNE	Ѓоко Камчев	https://www.facebook.com/kamcev.g/
3	Tetovo	VLEN	Bilall Kasami	https://www.facebook.com/KasamiBilall
		AKI/NAI	Bajram Rexhepi	https://www.facebook.com/bajramrexhepioffical
4	Tearce	AKI/NAI	Nazim Taipi	https://www.facebook.com/nazim.taipi
				https://www.facebook.com/NazimTaipi1
		VLEN	Daut Memishi	https://www.facebook.com/daut.memishi
5	Studenichani	Voter's Group	Azem Sadiki	https://www.facebook.com/profile.php?id=100050496429369#
				https://www.facebook.com/azem.sadiku
		AKI/NAI	Ejup Abazi - Faqja Zyrtare	https://www.facebook.com/Mr.EjupAbazi
6	Strumica	SDSM	Марјан Даскаловски	https://www.facebook.com/marjandaskalovski
		VMRO - DPMNE	Petar Jankov	https://www.facebook.com/petarjankovsr
7	Struga	AKI/NAI	Arsim Dalipi - Faqja Zyrtare	https://www.facebook.com/profile.php?id=61579133697277#
		Voter's Group	Mendi Qyra	https://www.facebook.com/profile.php?id=61578034554333#

8	Shuto Orizari	OZP	Dudush Kurto Kucoo (Курто Дудуш)	https://www.facebook.com/kucoo.dudush
		CPM	Elvis Bajram	https://www.facebook.com/profile.php?id=100069340264259
9	Shtip	VMRO DPMNE	Иван Јорданов	https://www.facebook.com/IvanJordanovv
		SDSM	Павел Иванов - кандидат за градоначалник на Општина Штип	https://www.facebook.com/profile.php?id=61579233893478
10	Saraj	AKI/NAI	Blerant Ramadani	https://www.facebook.com/blerant.ramadani.2025
				https://www.facebook.com/blerant.first
		VLEN	Muhamet Elmazi	https://www.facebook.com/muhamed.elmazi.50
				https://www.facebook.com/profile.php?id=61557512347561#
11	Prilep	VMRO - DPMNE	Дејан Проданоски	https://www.facebook.com/ProdanoskiDejan
		SDSM	Петра Лукароска за градоначалник	https://www.facebook.com/lukaroskapetra
12	Ohrid	VMRO - DPMNE	Кирил Пецаков - Градоначалник на Општина Охрид	https://www.facebook.com/kirilpecakov
		SDSM	Асен Шајн	https://www.facebook.com/profile.php?id=61573636206018
13	Makedonski Brod	VMRO - DPMNE	Жарко Ристески - Градоначалник на Општина	https://www.facebook.com/profile.php?id=100066753297291#
				https://www.facebook.com/profile.php?id=100090889663773#

			Македонски Брод	
		SDSM	Ivo Ivica Stojkoski	https://www.facebook.com/ivica.stojkoski.3
14	Lipkovo	AKI/NAI	Erkan Arifi	https://www.facebook.com/erkan.arifi.1/
		VLEN	Nexhmedin Sadiku	https://www.facebook.com/nexhmedin.sadiku.39
15	Kumanovo	ZNAM	Maksim Dimitrievski	https://www.facebook.com/MaksimDimitrievskiOfficial
		SDSM	Martin Kostovski	https://www.facebook.com/MartinKostovski83
16	Kochani	Voter's Group	Venko Krstevski	https://www.facebook.com/venko.krstevski
		VMRO DPMNE	Александар Андов	https://www.facebook.com/profile.php?id=61580953469761
17	Kisela Voda	VMRO - DPMNE	Бети Стаменкоска Трајкоска	https://www.facebook.com/beti.s.trajkoska
				https://www.facebook.com/betistamenkoska
		SDSM	Горан Трајковски	https://www.facebook.com/goranstraus.trajkovski
				https://www.facebook.com/profile.php?id=100089971033838#
18	Gostivar	VLEN	Sebaedin Dauti - Faqja zyrtare	https://www.facebook.com/profile.php?id=100057961574150
		AKI/NAI	Valbon Limani	https://www.facebook.com/profile.php?id=61570061910618
				https://www.facebook.com/valbon.limani
19	Dolneni	DUI	Flamur Gjoleka - Faqja Zyrtare	https://www.facebook.com/profile.php?id=61580741811296#
		VLEN	Blerim Islami- Kandidat për Kryetar të Dollnenit	https://www.facebook.com/blerim.islami.1

20	Delchevo	SDSM	Glindzarski Dejan Glindzaro	https://www.facebook.com/dejanglindzaro.glindzarski
		VMRO DPMNE	Ivan Gocevski	https://www.facebook.com/ivan.gocevski.1
21	Debar	AKI/NAI	Ilirian Fetahu - Faqja Zyrtare	https://www.facebook.com/Ilirianfetahufaqjazyrtare/
		VLEN	Fisnik Mela - Faqja Zyrtare	https://www.facebook.com/profile.php?id=61581071634166#
22	Chair	VLEN	Izet Mexhiti	https://www.facebook.com/izetmexhiti
		AKI/NAI	Bujar Osmani	https://www.facebook.com/bujar.osmani.7
				https://www.facebook.com/bujar.osmani.942
23	Centar Zhupa	DPTM	Forza Ariyan Ibraim	https://www.facebook.com/profile.php?id=100065669071782#
		DNET	Alil Emrula	https://www.facebook.com/dzejlan.shishkowa
24	Butel	VMRO - DPMNE	Дарко Костовски	https://www.facebook.com/darkokostovskizabutel
		SDSM	Оливера Ливриниќ	https://www.facebook.com/oliveralivrinikj
25	Bogovinje	AKI/NAI	Besnik Emshiu	https://www.facebook.com/besnikemshiu
		VLEN	Feti Abazi - Faqja Zyrtare	https://www.facebook.com/profile.php?id=61579138661786
26	Bitola	VMRO - DPMNE	Тони Коњановски	https://www.facebook.com/konjanovskitoni
		SDSM	Методија Куновски	https://www.facebook.com/profile.php?id=61571372702261