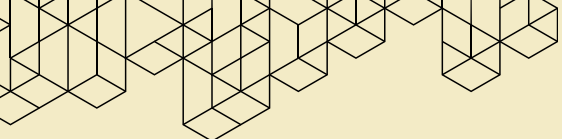# ASSESSMENT OF GOOD GOVERNANCE OF THE LEGISLATIVE BRANCH IN **NORTH MACEDONIA AND THE REGION** THROUGH THE OPENNESS INDEX

ACCORDING TO THE MEASUREMENT FOR THE YEAR 2023

CONTENTS

1. INTRODUCTION

The open governance concept encompasses a wide spectrum of policies and practices that can lead to new methods of governance. It can promote good governance and foster improved decision-making, reduced corruption, and more efficient government services for citizens. Key features of open governance include transparency, particularly the availability of information and data required for the oversight of authorities. Alongside transparency, participation, responsibility, and integrity are key principles of open governance.

To assess how well parliaments in the Western Balkans adhere to these principles, the Center for Democratic Transition (Montenegro), in collaboration with the Metamorphosis Foundation for Internet and Society (North Macedonia), Partners for Democratic Changes Serbia (Serbia) and "Zašto ne?" Citizens' Association (Bosnia and Herzegovina) – is developing an analytical instrument, a Regional Openness Index.

The Regional Openness Index reflects the level of parliamentary openness towards citizens and society, enabling us to map areas for improvement and provide recommendations. Our activities aim to contribute to the implementation of reforms in this area by building partnerships with parliaments.

Parliaments must intensify the implementation of openness policies and improve the quality of communication with citizens. Furthermore, parliaments should fundamentally change their approach to overseeing the executive branch, shifting from superficial to thorough oversight that ensures responsibility of all members of the executive branch. Only institutions that are open and responsible can contribute to creating the democratic societies that our countries aspire to.

We are conducting this research for the eighth year in a row. In this document, we are presenting the key research results on parliamentary openness for 2023/2024. During the interpretation of the results, it should be taken into consideration that the methodology has undergone minor modifications, making the results not directly comparable to those from previous years. However, data shows that the same or similar challenges continue to prevail in the Assembly's work. This prompts us to urge all parliaments to provide uninterrupted insight into their work. All details of our research are publicly available, and we remain open to all recommendations, well-intended criticism, and discussions regarding our research and conclusions.

ACTION SEE is a network of civil society organizations that work together to promote and ensure transparency and accountability of institutions in Southeast Europe, increase the potential for civil activism and participation, promote and protect human rights on the Internet, as well as build capacity for the use of new technologies.
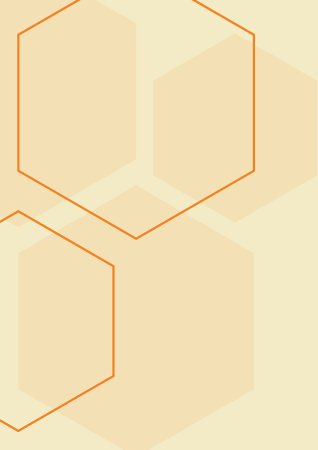
2. METHODOLOGY

The Openness Index is led by this framework of principles, yet remains aware of cultural as well as historical developments in the country and the region that affect institutions. Its methodology guarantees that the research results are technically and politically valid to draw conclusions regarding the level of good governance of the institutions in the country. The Openness Index assesses the performance of the executive government and the parliaments in the area of good governance by focusing on four pillars: (1) accessibility, (2) efficiency, (3) integrity and (4) transparency with a cross-cutting domain that is present throughout all four pillars – open data.

The four pillars of the Openness Index define and assess good governance using the following principles: **accessibility** – it assesses the degree to which the right to information access is guaranteed by law and in practice, as well as the quality of the mechanisms for engagement and consultation in policy-making processes; **efficiency**– it reviews the institutions' commitment to learn from ongoing processes and improve them through established monitoring, evaluation, and learning systems – by using milestones/indicators during strategic planning and reporting; **transparency** – it assesses the public availability of organizational information, budget, and public procurement procedures, while **integrity** evaluates the presence of mechanisms for the prevention of conflict of interests, the regulation of lobbying, as well as the availability of a code of ethics to guide and sanction the behavior of the civil servants and the public administration. Each pillar of the index consists of subdomains and indicators weighted according to the adequate value within the pillars.

The methodology was developed by consulting numerous credible resources, emphasizing the best international practices and standards of good governance, such as the World Bank and the Institute, the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, the Open Government Guide, the Global Integrity Report, and the Indicators of Governance and Institutional Quality developed by the World Bank.

The research was carried out in the period from February to June 2024. The research methods consist of (1) monitoring the websites of the targeted institutions for a set of indicators, (2) a questionnaire submitted to the institutions in order to confirm the observations of the online monitoring, (3) a request for access to public information sent with the intention to assess the level of compliance with this fundamental right by each institution as well as (4) screening of the legislative framework.

The measurement error is +/- 3%. Based on the results of the research, we conducted an analysis of the key critical points and problems in the field of openness of the institutions that we hope will be used for improving their work. It is important to note that in cases when the institutions failed to deliver their answered questionnaires, the indicators thereof were marked with 0, as indicators that were not fulfilled.

3. OPENNESS OF PARLIAMENTS IN THE REGION

3. OPENNESS OF PARLIAMENTS IN THE REGION

Parliaments play a crucial role in democratic systems and should be drivers of processes that enable citizens to monitor institutional work more efficiently. However, the complex political landscape in the Western Balkan countries has negatively affected the parliament's position and role, thereby hindering the development of openness and transparency policies.

Data from the Regional Openness Index highlights a significant disparity in parliamentary openness across the region. Montenegro and North Macedonia are the leaders in this area, while Bosnia and Herzegovina and Serbia have not achieved significant progress in providing access to information about the parliament's work and activities.

According to our results, the Parliament of Montenegro is traditionally in the lead, having met 88.14% of the openness indicators, followed by the Assembly of the Republic of North Macedonia at 74.86%. The National Parliament of the Republic of Serbia meets 57.24%, while the Parliamentary Assembly in Bosnia and Herzegovina meets 56.8% of the openness indicators (the House of Peoples meets 56.76% and the House of Representatives fulfills 56.84% of the openness indicators).

State-level parliaments in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Serbia generally achieve better results compared to provincial and entity-level parliaments. The Assembly of the Autonomous Province of Vojvodina meets only 24.86% of the openness indicators, while the National Assembly of Republika Srpska fulfills 40.94%, and the Parliament of the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina meets 37.07% of the openness indicators (the House of Representatives of the Parliament of the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina meets 38.16%, and the House of Peoples of the Parliamentary Assembly of Bosnia and Herzegovina meets 35.99%).

To understand the context in which these parliaments have operated in these countries from the region over the past year better, we will briefly outline key developments that marked and affected their work and role.

Political Developments in the Parliament of Montenegro

Montenegro experienced significant political developments in 2020, culminating in the election of a new government on October 30, 2023, following parliamentary elections in June and several months of negotiations.

Andrija Mandić, the leader of the coalition known for its outright and fierce opposition to NATO and its pro-Russian attitude, was elected as President of the Parliament. Mandić has never publicly condemned Russian aggression in Ukraine. He strongly advocated for Montenegro to retract its recognition of Kosovo, and has failed to truly come to terms with the decisions of international courts to this day. This was a sign that the new parliamentary majority would face challenges in harmonizing opinions on topics that often deviate from the fundamental EU and NATO postulates. Essentially, the key challenge is genuine acceptance of the values of EU and NATO in practice[1].

Although the Parliament of Montenegro has been the regional leader for years, according to the Regional Openness Index, the lack of transparency of the operational process for the first Law on Parliament raises concerns. At the end of last year, the President of the Parliament announced that he would submit a draft-law by the end of March 2024. In May, his cabinet reported that the legal team is preparing a draft for submission to the Collegiate of the Chief of Parliament. However, as of today, no information has been provided to the public regarding the preparation of this law.

This indicates either that the Parliament is not reporting accurate information, or that this document is being prepared behind closed doors. This approach is not typical of democratic societies and may result in proposing solutions that were previously uncoordinated, not agreed upon within the Parliament, and do not meet the needs and interests of the Montenegrin system.

We witnessed the third unsuccessful attempt to amend the Law on Free Access to Information, intended to address the problematic limitations once and for all by applying the harmfulness test and widening the range of information that institutions are obliged to disclose proactively.

As a reminder, in Montenegro, the right to free access to information was degraded with the amendments to the Law in 2017, when the Business and Tax Secret Institute was established. Therefore, the law is used to narrow the scope of oversight in areas susceptible to corruption, allowing institutions to cover up even basic information about their work.

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[1] Challenges and Expectations: An Overview of the Key Priorities of the Work Program of the 44th Government of Montenegro. Available at: https://www.cdtmn.org/analize/izazovi-i-ocekivanja-osvrt-na-kljucne-prioritete-programa-rada-44-vlade-crne-gore/

Polarization and the Need for Additional Enhancement of Transparency in North Macedonia

The 2023 European Commission Report on North Macedonia [2] recommends improving the Assembly's work through constructive political cooperation, better planning of legislative activities, and increased transparency and accountability.

One of the key issues is political polarization in the Assembly, which hinders the adoption of reform laws and nominations. Additionally, criticism has been directed at the excessive use of fast-track procedures, which were often employed due to a lack of proper consultations and planning, given that these procedures should be reserved for laws directly linked to the EU's legal norms instead of serving as means to bypass public discussions.

Furthermore, in 2023, the Assembly of the Republic of North Macedonia participated in the development of the sixth National Action Plan (NAP) for the Open Government Partnership 2024-2026 initiative[3]. In addition to measures for open government and an open judiciary, the NAP includes a section dedicated to an Open Parliament.

Building on the commitment set out in the previous NAP 2021-2023[4], a new website of the Assembly and an Open Data Portal containing datasets about the Assembly's work were created. In 2023, cameras were installed to enable live streaming of the Assembly's sessions.

Obstructions, Conditioning and Controversial Legal Solutions in Bosnia and Herzegovina

The general elections in Bosnia and Herzegovina were held at the end of 2022, and the new compositions of the national and entity-level parliaments began their work at the end of 2022 and the beginning of 2023. The adoption of laws important for Bosnia and Herzegovina's path to the EU was oftentimes conditioned by the requirements of political parties in the ruling majority. MPs from Republika Srpska also boycotted the work of the national parliament. During this period, the national and entity-level parliaments adopted several controversial laws, such as the Law on Free Access to Information and the Criminalization of Defamation in Republika Srpska, which received sharp and justified criticism from both the national public and international organizations.

During the first year of its mandate, the Parliamentary Assembly of Bosnia and Herzegovina was more active[5] compared to the previous one, holding a total of 40 sessions in both chambers.

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[2] Commission Staff Working Document. North Macedonia 2023 Report. Available at: https://tinyurl.com/ynxmj7tm
[3] National Action Plan for OGP (2024-2026). Open Government Partnership North Macedonia. Available at: https://tinyurl.com/5fymkda7
[4] National Action Plan for OGP (2021-2023). Open Government Partnership North Macedonia. Available at: https://shorturl.at/8jAyE
[5] Overview of the first year: The Parliamentary Assembly of Bosnia and Herzegovina more active and more productive in the new mandate. Available at: https://www.javnarasprava.ba/bih/News/Details?Id=234

The new Law on Free Access to Information at the institutional level in Bosnia and Herzegovina, adopted at the end of August 2023, garnered significant attention from the media, civil society organizations and the public in the country. Namely, the Law contains a long list of exceptions or potential limitations on access to information held by public authorities, thereby making room for discretionary rejection of requests for access to information.

Additionally, it is concerning that issues such as the limitation of the freedom of speech, the criminalization of defamation and matters of state ownership significantly marked the work of the National Assembly of Republika Srpska[6].

Regarding the Federal Parliament[7], it is difficult to monitor the work of both chambers, as we have observed issues with delayed publication of session minutes, denial of access to voting results, and a lack of publicly available information about the voting methods used by MPs who were directly elected by the citizens of Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Elections, Procedural Manipulations, and Political Tensions in Serbia

The National Assembly of the Republic of Serbia continued to face long-standing issues in 2023, and despite the opposition's involvement in the Assembly's work, these efforts did not lead to the normalization of parliamentary life. It's important to note that at the end of 2023, parliamentary elections were announced for the third time[8] in the last four years. Due to the long process of forming the National Assembly, its impact on Serbia's political climate has been significantly weakened. From the beginning of 2022 to the end of 2023, the National Assembly was adjourned and inactive for 447 days in total, which constitutes a third of its total working time.

The ruling majority often misused procedures, and verbal altercations continued to mark the Assembly's work throughout 2023. Meanwhile, political opponents and opposition representatives remained targets of the ruling party.

The restrictions imposed on the Inquiry Committee's work on the 2023 mass murder investigations is proof that the work of the National Assembly of the Republic of Serbia depends on politics and the executive branch.

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[6] A year of work of the National Assembly of Republika Srpska: What was discussed and how was voting carried out? Available at: https://www.javnarasprava.ba/bih/News/Details?Id=230

[7] Overview of the first year: How active was the Parliament of the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina? Available at: https://www.javnarasprava.ba/bih/News/Details?Id=233

[8] 2023 Shadow Report on the State of Play of Democracy in Serbia. Modern Policy Center. Available at: https://centarsavremenepolitike.rs/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/Stanje-demokratije-2023.pdf

Similarly to previous years, the Government remained the sole successful initiator of legislation, while a staggering 34 opposition draft-laws were not even reviewed.

The lack of transparency of the Assembly's work can be illustrated by two events in 2023. In June, members of the National Convention on the European Union were barred from attending the Stabilisation and Association Parliamentary Committee's session [9]. Later that month, the organization "CRTA" highlighted manipulations in the official session minutes when the National Assembly's leadership removed an interjection from the MP Nebojsha Bakarec (SNS), accusing an opposition MP of murder, from the official shorthand report[10].

The National Assembly of the Republic of Serbia participated in the preparation of the fifth National Plan for the Implementation of the Open Government Partnership initiative. In this context, the fifth NAP for Serbia included a recommendation to enhance proactive transparency and improve the layout of the website of the National Assembly of the Republic of Serbia. Although the NAP was adopted in 2023[11], as of the preparation of this analysis, there was no available information indicating that the implementation of this recommendation had begun.

Challenges and Critical Points in Parliamentary Openness in the Region

Information regarding parliamentary work should be available to the citizens, the media and non-governmental organizations, with continuous efforts to improve transparency and communication with the public.

However, the majority of the parliaments in the region do not employ a strategic approach to openness policies. Consequently, commitments related to openness and transparency can only emerge indirectly from various regulations governing their work and functioning. As a result, in most cases, parliamentary openness is contingent upon the will of the current leadership to adhere to good governance principles.

In Montenegro, the Rulebook on the Transparency of the Work of the Parliament of Montenegro was adopted toward the end of 2021[12]. This rulebook outlines the methods for providing public insight into the Parliament's work by monitoring the Parliament's sessions, visits to the Parliament, and press-conferences. The Assembly of North Macedonia has a Strategic Plan (2024-

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[9] The National Convention was denied attendance at the session of the Parliamentary Committee for Stabilization and Association. Available at: https://eukonvent.org/nacionalnom-konventu-uskraceno-prisustvo-sednici-parlamentarnog-odbora-za-stabilizaciju-i-pridruzivanje/

[10] Open Parliament: The censorship of the Serbian Assembly must be stopped immediately. CRTA. Available at: https://otvoreniparlament.rs/aktuelno/570

[11] Conclusion on the adoption of the Action Plan for the Implementation of the Open Government Partnership initiative 2023-2027. Available at: https://pravno-informacioni-sistem.rs/eli/rep/sgrs/vlada/zakljucak/2023/119/1

[12] Rulebook on the Transparency of the Work of the Parliament of Montenegro. Available at: https://api.skupstina.me/media/files/1643180497-pravilnik-o-javnosti-rada.pdf

2028)[13] that contains six strategic goals for a establishing a functional, open, secure, and digital parliament, as well as efficient services and parliamentary democracy.

Findings from the Regional Openness Index also indicate that parliaments in the region are insufficiently committed to publishing documents and data in open formats. However, the Parliament of Montenegro stands out as a positive example by publishing its budget in an open format.

Challenges in the Organizational and Financial Transparency of Parliaments

Certain parliaments in the region fail to meet basic indicators related to the availability of information about MPs. For instance, the biographies and contact details of MPs, as well as the biographies of leaders of the Assembly of the Autonomous Province of Vojvodina were not published on the Serbian National Assembly's website. This information is also missing for the Parliamentary Assembly of Bosnia and Herzegovina (both chambers).

Information regarding the salaries of civil servants is also unavailable in North Macedonia and Bosnia and Herzegovina (except for the House of Peoples and the Parliament of the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina). Additionally, lists of civil servants and officials cannot be found on the websites of the parliaments of Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina.

The National Assembly of Republika Srpska and the Parliament of the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina do not publish documents that are scheduled for discussion during committee sessions.

None of the parliaments in the region publish an annual work program, and only the Parliament of Montenegro publishes semi-annual reports on its work.

Financial transparency also needs improvement, particularly regarding the publication of annual balance sheets, which are unavailable on the websites of the parliaments of Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina (with the exception of the House of Peoples and the Parliament of the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina).

Parliaments in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Serbia do not regularly publish public procurement on their websites (except for the National Assembly of Republika Srpska). Moreover, decisions related to public procurement are not published by the National Assembly of Republika Srpska or the Assembly of the Autonomous Province of Vojvodina. Also, not a single parliamentary institution in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Serbia publishes public procurement contacts, while the only annual public procurement report available is published by North Macedonia's Assembly.

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[13] Strategic Plan of the Assembly of the Republic of North Macedonia 2024 – 2028. Assembly of the Republic of North Macedonia. Available at: https://tinyurl.com/5d8chf7r

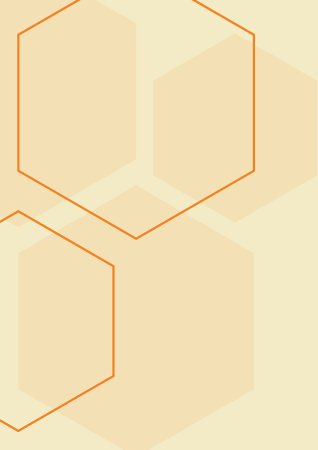**Strengthening the Relationship between Citizens and Parliaments**

Introducing an e-petition mechanism that would encourage more active participation of citizens in the legislative process is still not practiced by parliaments in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia and North Macedonia. On the other hand, Montenegro is the only country in the region that has implemented e-petitions; however, it is necessary to emphasize the need for additional promotion since data shows that e-petitions are not sufficiently implemented in practice yet.

Only the Parliament of Montenegro and the National Assembly of Republika Srpska have established mechanisms or instructions enabling citizens to submit complaints and appeals. Furthermore, only North Macedonia's Assembly and the National Assembly of Republika Srpska have opened local MP offices.

Parliaments do not sufficiently use social media to communicate with citizens. The Parliament of Bosnia and Herzegovina, the Parliament of the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina, the National Assembly of Republika Srpska and the National Assembly of Serbia do not have profiles on Facebook or X. To be more precise, the National Assembly of Serbia has an X account, but it has not been used for over 10 years.

All parliaments responded to our request for free access to information that we submitted as part of this research to gather additional insights about parliamentary work within the statutory term, except for North Macedonia's Assembly. However, when it comes to the questionnaires sent to examine practices and policies on openness and transparency in greater detail, we received no response from the House of Representatives and the House of Peoples of the Parliamentary Assembly of Bosnia and Herzegovina, the House of Representatives and the House of Peoples of the Parliament of the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina, the National Assembly of the Republic of Serbia, and the Assembly of the Autonomous Province of Vojvodina. The lack of response may indicate the degree of openness and willingness of the aforementioned institutions to cooperate with civil society organizations on such important topics.

Interestingly, the National Assembly of Republika Srpska and all entity-level parliamentary institutions in Bosnia and Herzegovina lack a section providing relevant information on how to obtain free access to information. Such information is only available on the website of the Parliament of Montenegro, where it is a legal obligation.

4. OPENNESS OF THE ASSEMBLY OF THE REPUBLIC OF NORTH MACEDONIA

4. OPENNESS OF THE ASSEMBLY OF THE REPUBLIC OF NORTH MACEDONIA

Percentage of openness of parliaments in the region
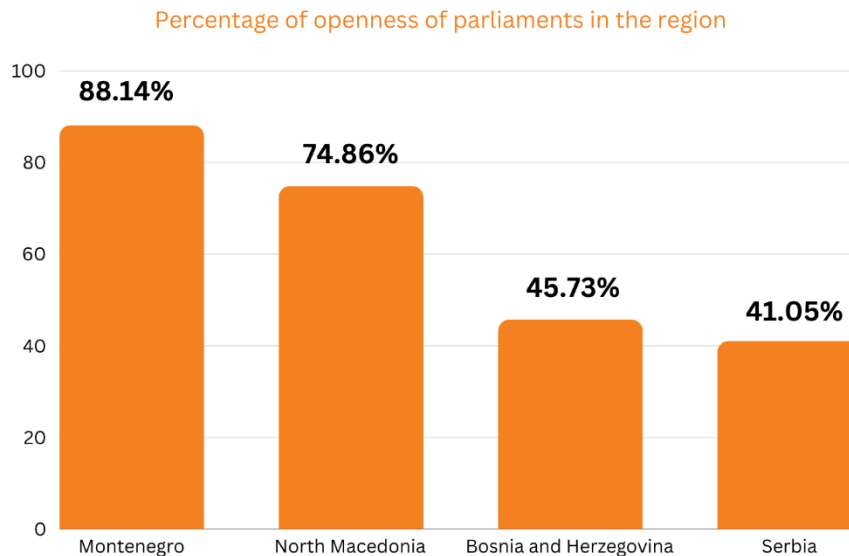
Infographic 1: Percentage of openness of parliaments in the region

At both the regional and national levels, the Assembly rose one rank higher (74.86%) in terms of fulfilling the openness criteria, according to this year's monitoring through the Openness Index, compared to last year's monitoring[14]. Although the Parliament of Montenegro (88.14%) continues to rank as the most open parliament in the region, this year, the Assembly of the Republic of North Macedonia has shown the greatest progress (3.3%) compared to the latest measurement. This improvement is largely attributed to the Assembly's dedicated efforts toward enhanced openness to the public, as well as the minimal progress or even regression observed in other parliaments in the region.

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[14] 2023 Assessment of Good Governance of the Legislative Branch in North Macedonia and the Region through the Openness Index. Metamorphosis Foundation. Available at:
https://metamorphosis.org.mk/izdanija_arhiva/procena-na-dobroto-vladeenje-na-zakonodavnata-vlast-vo-severna-makedonija-i-regionot-preku-indeks-na-otvorenost-2023/

Note: Last year's monitoring included the parliaments of Slovenia and Croatia.

Progress in the openness of the Assembly of the Republic of North Macedonia
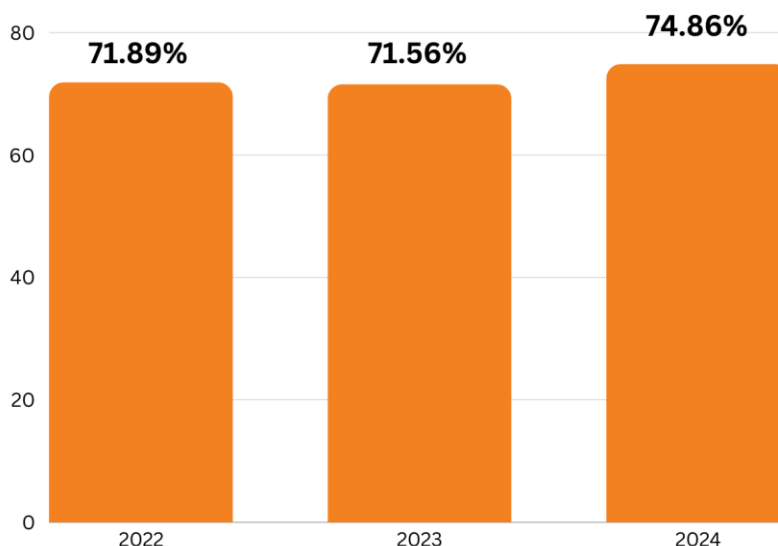
Infographic 2: Progress in the openness of the Assembly of the Republic of North Macedonia according to the Openness Index

On a national level, the Macedonian Assembly ranks fifth in openness, closely following the Ministry of Defense (90.84%), the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Water Economy (85.62%), the Government of the Republic of North Macedonia (78.33%), and the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy (76.29%).

Top 5 most open institutions in the Republic of North Macedonia
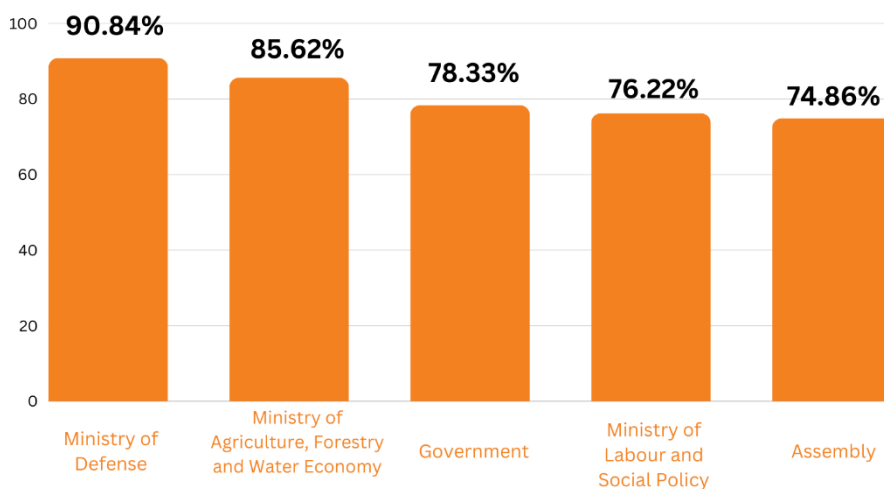
Infographic 3: Top 5 most open institutions in the Republic of North Macedonia according to the 2024 measurement through the Openness Index.

The Assembly achieved this progress despite a lack of interparty consensus and deepened political polarization, which delayed the adoption of a large number of reform laws and important nominations. The EU accession negotiation process requires broad consensus among major political parties, leading the European Commission to urge all parties to engage in a constructive and inclusive political debate[15] in its latest country report.

The Assembly's efficiency was also impacted by the adoption of laws through the fast-track procedure and the expedited procedures for adopting EU-related legislation.

Percentage of laws adopted via the fast-track procedure
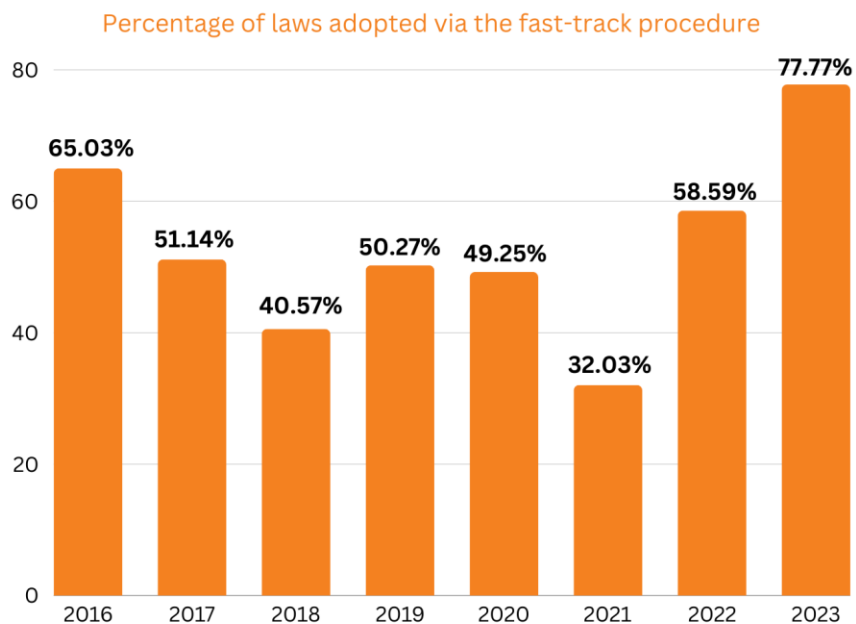
Infographic 4: Percentage of laws adopted via the fast-track procedure

Although the practice of adopting laws through fast-track procedures has decreased compared to 2016, there was an increase in 2019 and 2020. In 2023, **the number of laws adopted using fast-track procedures reached a record high for the past 8 years**; more precisely, 70 out of the 90 laws were adopted via the fast-track procedure (77.77%)[16]. This was also confirmed in the European Commission's November 2023 Progress Report of the Republic of North Macedonia which reiterates that "excessive, and sometimes inappropriate use was made of fast-track procedures and of the 'EU flag' procedure, in some cases due to the lack of consultations and poor planning of the legislative calendar."[17] Moreover, the 'EU flag' procedure was not only used for alignment with EU legislation but also to amend the Criminal Code by introducing reduced

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[15] Commission Staff Working Document. North Macedonia 2023 Report. Available at: https://tinyurl.com/ynxmj7tm
[16] Report on the Work of the Assembly of the Republic of North Macedonia for the period 01.01.2023 - 31.12.2023. Assembly of the Republic of North Macedonia. Available at: https://www.sobranie.mk/content/izvestai/GODISEN%20IZVESTAJ%202023.pdf
[17] Commission Staff Working Document. North Macedonia 2023 Report. Available at: https://tinyurl.com/ynxmj7tm

penalties for corruption-related criminal offenses and amendments to laws on labour relations, expropriation, urban planning, construction and highway construction. Our recommendation, provided for the seventh year in a row, remains valid: **the Assembly should focus on restricting the practice of adopting laws via fast-track procedures only to cases set out in the Rules of Procedure, thereby preventing the misuse of this process to sidestep consultations and debate on those draft-laws[18].**

Although there is confirmation that efforts to improve the use and quality of regulatory impact assessments, particularly budget impact assessments, will continue, it has been established that the regulatory impact assessments are still being conducted as a mere formality by the Assembly[19]. **All regulatory impact assessments**, regardless of the legislative procedure, **should be submitted to the Assembly alongside the proposed acts.** In this context, **the Assembly should start implementing the strategic assessment of potential impacts on existing and prepared legal acts in practice, especially those proposed by the Assembly itself.** The Parliamentary Institute and the Parliamentary Budget Office are available to MPs proposing laws, providing support for conducting research and analyses.

In contrast to 2022, when the Government proposed as many as 88 laws compared to the 11 laws (12.5%) proposed by MPs,[20] the MPs were more active in 2023, proposing 27 laws (42%) compared to the 63 proposed by the Government.

In relation to ensuring diverse representation and inclusive decision-making, which contributes to more just and efficient governance, the number of female MPs rose to 51 following the repeated reconstruction of the Government in 2023, marking the highest percentage of female MPs so far (42.5 %).

4.1 Ongoing Modernisation: Continued Efforts Needed for Enhanced Civic Engagement and Awareness

The modernized website of the Assembly enables easier access to Assembly-produced information, aiming to facilitate informed participation of each citizen in decision-making processes during elections and referendums. Unlike the previous version, where live streaming of plenary sessions was only possible via Internet Explorer[21], the new website allows live streaming across multiple browsers[22].

While the updated website has been made user-friendly for some persons with disabilities, offering features like text size adjustment and a black-and-white mode, alongside several audio files for persons with visual impairments, it is recommended to **adapt the website to enhance**

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[18] Rules of Procedure of the Assembly of the Republic of North Macedonia (consolidated text). Assembly of the Republic of North Macedonia. Available at: https://tinyurl.com/txbmpsch
[19] Commission Staff Working Document. North Macedonia 2023 Report. Available at: https://tinyurl.com/ynxmj7tm
[20] Ibid.
[21] Error 404: Youth in virtual reality, the Assembly stuck on Internet Explorer. Radio MOF. Available at: https://www.radiomof.mk/error-404-mladite-vo-virtuelna-realnost-sobranieto-zaglaveno-na-internet-eksplorer/
[22] Session stream. Assembly of the Republic of North Macedonia. Available at: https://www.sobranie.mk/zivo.nspx

accessibility for other persons with disabilities in line with the Web Content Accessible Guidelines (WCAG)[23].

When it comes to protecting users' personal data and privacy, taking into consideration that the website collects personal data through cookies and from individuals who want to visit the Assembly[24], the Assembly is obliged to post a **Privacy Policy.** This document is currently unavailable, much like last year[25]. In addition to the Privacy Policy, a **Cookie Policy** should be made accessible on the website, transparently detailing the types of cookies used, their purposes, and how they function.

Among the parliaments in the region, only the Assembly of the Republic of North Macedonia has an Open Data Portal[26], which is expected to significantly boost the Assembly's transparency and accountability. The portal should allow users to access data in its most basic form, offering significant potential for processing such data for the purposes of research, analyses, storytelling, as well as digital solutions for existing challenges.

However, during our research, we observed that the **Portal is not yet fully operational**. On the first page, citizens are greeted with an incomprehensible message,[27] and none of the datasets - some of them in .xlsx, .csv, .json formats – are accessible for viewing or downloading. Sections dedicated to news, applications, research, data requests, login, and registration are also still under development.

While the Assembly's representatives make commendable efforts to build internal capacities related to open data, the Assembly meets a total of 46.59% of the open data indicators, indicating **minimal progress** compared to the latest monitoring (45.29%). Considering the Assembly's initiatives in this area and the creation of the portal, a much higher percentage was expected.

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[23] Accessibility Fundamentals Overview. Web Accessibility Initiative (WAI). Available at: https://www.w3.org/WAI/fundamentals/

[24] Schedule a visit. Assembly of the Republic of North Macedonia. Available at: https://www.sobranie.mk/visits.nspx

[25] Privacy Policy. Assembly of the Republic of North Macedonia. Available at: https://sobranie.mk/content/privacy_policy.pdf

[26] Open Data Portal. Assembly of the Republic of North Macedonia. Available at: https://data.sobranie.mk/mk/

[27] "Welcome to CKAN. Seems like a suitable introduction to CKAN and to the site in general. We have not prepared a text for this part yet, but we soon will."

Open Data Portal. Assembly of the Republic of North Macedonia. Available at: https://data.sobranie.mk/mk/

Infographic 5. Percentage of fulfillment of open data indicators

This year, the Assembly made notable progress in fostering an online democratic environment by creating and launching the **Registry of Organizations[28],** a tool aimed at digitalizing the work of the Assembly's services in cooperating with organizations registered under the Law on Associations and Foundations [29]. Furthermore, this tool aims to facilitate and foster civic engagement in policy-making, enabling registered civil society organizations to receive regular updates on the Assembly's work and its relevant working bodies[30]. Although this initiative is a step in the right direction for enhanced civic engagement, it remains to be seen how effectively this tool will be promoted and utilized in practice.

4.2. Greater Predictability of the Assembly's Operations for Enhanced Accountability and Civic Engagement

The Assembly continues to regularly update its website, which features a functional search engine, information about the Assembly's structure in the form of an organogram, details on the Assembly's competences and composition, full texts of the Constitution and Rules of Procedure, the president's biography, the composition and competences of each committee, the contact details and biographies of every MP, as well as the name and position of public administration

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[28] Register of Organizations. Assembly of the Republic of North Macedonia. Available at:
https://registar.sobranie.mk/
[29] "Register of Organizations" web application presented. Assembly of the Republic of North Macedonia. Available at: https://www.sobranie.mk/ns-newsarticle-prezentirana-veb-aplikacijata-registar-na-organizacii.nspx
[30] Report on the Work of the Assembly of the Republic of North Macedonia for the period 01.01.2023 - 31.12.2023. Assembly of the Republic of North Macedonia. Available at:
https://www.sobranie.mk/content/izvestai/GODISEN%20IZVESTAJ%202023.pdf

officials. Although this information is available within each MP's biography, for easier access, we recommend that the Assembly publish a structured list of MPs and their contact information in an open format. A dataset titled 'Members of Parliament 2020-2024' can be found on the Open Data Portal[31], but it is neither viewable nor downloadable. **What the Assembly has failed to take into consideration for eight consecutive years is the recommendation to publish the salaries of MPs and the parliamentary leadership, as well as the funds they request in the form of travel expenses.**

Although the Assembly regularly publishes detailed annual reports on the work of the Assembly, the working bodies and the Assembly's services, similarly to the past seven years,[32] **it still does not publish an annual work program that guides its activities, the implementation of relevant strategies, and serves as a basis for its annual work reports.** Annual planning of the Assembly's work, and the publication of a preliminary annual calendar of activities are essential for enhancing the predictability of the Assembly's work. In the future, this will also contribute to improving the quality of debate, which remains relatively low [33] , and fostering better communication between political parties.

In this context, through the Parliamentary Support Program, in 2023, the Assembly worked on introducing a **parliamentary calendar** by mapping the rules, practices, and processes for establishing a more predictable parliamentary calendar[34]. The selected calendar model provides for the sessions of working bodies to be held on Mondays and Tuesdays, with plenary sessions on Wednesdays and Thursdays.

4.3. STRATEGIC STRENGTHENING OF PARLIAMENTARY TRANSPARENCY AND CITIZENS' TRUST

The Assembly has continued to improve its openness as part of the Open Government Partnership (OGP) through the implementation of the National Action Plan (NAP) 2021 – 2023. This plan includes activities such as the modernization of the website, the launch of the Open Data Portal, and the procurement of equipment for live streaming sessions, all of which have yielded tangible results.

In 2023, the Assembly also prepared a **NAP for OGP 2024-2026**[35]**,** which includes initiatives such as creating a register of regulatory bodies established by the Assembly, informing the public via

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[31] Members of Parliament 2020 – 2024. Open Data Portal. Assembly of the Republic of North Macedonia. Available at: https://data.sobranie.mk/mk/dataset/ttpatehnun-2020-2024

[32] Reports on the work of the Assembly. Assembly of the Republic of North Macedonia. Available at: https://www.sobranie.mk/godishen-izveshtaj.nspx

[33] Parliament Watch: Monitoring Report on the Debate Quality in the Parliament (June-December 2023). Institute for Democracy Societas Civilis – Skopje. Available at: https://tinyurl.com/3nsepy94

[34] Report on the Work of the Assembly of the Republic of North Macedonia for the period 01.01.2023 - 31.12.2023. Assembly of the Republic of North Macedonia. Available at: https://www.sobranie.mk/content/izvestai/GODISEN%20IZVESTAJ%202023.pdf

[35] National Action Plan for OGP (2024-2026). Open Government Partnership North Macedonia. Available at: https://tinyurl.com/5fymkda7

the Parliamentary TV channel, conducting an oversight hearing in the Assembly on the implementation of the NAP for OGP 2024-2026, and launching a parliamentary caravan – a mobile parliament for direct communication between MPs and citizens. Given this new opportunity to enhance the Assembly's openness and accountability, it is recommended that the Assembly fully and promptly fulfil the commitments outlined in the Action Plan and increase the involvement of civil society organizations in the implementation of these commitments.

The Assembly **has adopted a strategic approach to institutional openness** through the **Strategic Plan 2024-2028**[36], which complements its participation in the Open Government Partnership initiative. In that context, part of the strategic goals outlined in the Strategic Plan pertain to a **Functional Parliament, which is** aimed at strengthening the supervisory function, promoting civic engagement in the legislative process, improving the legal framework for the Assembly's work, enhancing integrity and efficiency; an **Open Parliament** that promotes a culture of openness, engaged and informed public and vulnerable categories of citizens, reform of the Parliamentary channel, a Parliament that is part of the Open Government Partnership, proactive communication with the public and media, and transparency and openness of data; and a **Digital Parliament** that, inter alia, prioritizes digitalization of services. Each goal and priority within the Strategic Plan is accompanied by significant values to guide their achievement.

While the significance of this document is acknowledged, a more precise strategic approach is needed. This should involve reinforcing the plan with **annual action plans** that outline specific activities for each goal and priority, precisely define quantitative and qualitative success indicators, clearly articulate timelines for their completion, and designate a responsible body. To monitor the achievement of strategic commitments successfully, it is recommended to establish a framework for monitoring, evaluation and reporting, with a designated body responsible for these tasks.

In this context, it is also recommended that the **Assembly prepare and publish a separate communication strategy.** Analyses of citizens' perceptions[37] indicate that in 2023, citizens rated the Assembly's work with a median score of 2.2 out of 5. This score reflects a continuous decline over the past four years, with the majority of the remarks being directed at the inconsistent performance of the supervisory role, increasing corruption, and MPs being perceived as unfit to make decisions on behalf of the citizens and unprepared for the obligations arising from the EU integration process[38]. This underscores the need for the Assembly to adopt a strategic approach to public communication to rebuild trust in its work. To address this issue, the Parliamentary Service announced that **the Assembly has prepared a PR strategy, but it has not been adopted or published on the Assembly's website.**

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[36] Strategic Plan of the Assembly of the Republic of North Macedonia 2024 – 2028. Assembly of the Republic of North Macedonia. Available at: https://tinyurl.com/5d8chf7r

[37] Parliament Watch: Citizen perceptions of the work of the Assembly of the Republic of North Macedonia (2023). Institute for Democracy Societas Civilis – Skopje. Available at: https://tinyurl.com/3ds9wa5y

[38] Survey on the "Parliamentary Suppport Program": Citizens' trust in the Assembly and MPs low. Institute for Democracy Societas Civilis – Skopje. Available at: https://tinyurl.com/m7juyfv3

4.4. LIVE STREAMING AND DOCUMENT ACCESSIBILITY: BRIDGING THE GAP IN COMMITTEE SESSIONS

In general, the Assembly is committed to its work, regularly publishing detailed annual work reports, strategies, annual work reports of the committees within the Annual Work Report of the Assembly, agendas and documents for upcoming plenary sessions, proposed and approved amendments, as well as information about MP attendance in plenary sessions. This year, we observed **more efficient reporting of MP attendance at working body sessions,** but there is still room for improvement. Access to such information continues to depend on the committees; some regularly and properly document MP attendance, while others do not or only occasionally keep records. In addition, the Assembly regularly and promptly publishes stenographic notes from plenary sessions, but this is not the case for stenographic notes from committee sessions. Documents on the agenda or arising from committee sessions are available on the website, though not all committees consistently follow this practice.

The Assembly remains consistent with the good practices for easier tracking of the MPs' votes during plenary sessions, with each item on the agenda showing which MPs were registered to vote and how they voted. However, the Assembly still needs to establish a practice of **publishing the voting records for committee sessions.**

In 2023, the Assembly successfully installed audiovisual equipment and connected the committee halls and the plenary hall to a media server and the Assembly's website, allowing viewers to watch Assembly sessions online, and partially via social media. Plenary sessions can be watched live on the website[39] and the Parliamentary channel, and making the **videos from these streams available for every plenary session[40]** was a step in the right direction, which was previously not common practice. However, only the budget adoption procedure within committee sessions is directly broadcasted on the Parliamentary channel. All other working body sessions, along with the audio and video files, are published on the Parliamentary channel and are available on the Assembly's website. Considering that technical conditions are now in place, it is recommended that **working body sessions be streamed live.**

4.5. SUSTAINABLE FISCAL TRANSPARENCY PRACTICES

In 2023, the Assembly remained committed to strengthening its fiscal transparency, particularly in the area of public procurement, which can be seen from the continued practice of publishing annual public procurement plans, public calls, selection decisions in the form of notices, and contracts along with annexes. Although the Assembly publishes a detailed list of realized public procurement contracts, it is also recommended to publish brief annual reports on public procurements. These reports should include summarized information on realized and unrealized procurements, the performance status and settlement of concluded contacts, as well as reasons for the termination of contracts.

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[39] Session stream. Assembly of the Republic of North Macedonia. Available at: https://tinyurl.com/bddpfz38
[40] Media. Assembly of the Republic of North Macedonia. Available at: https://www.sobranie.mk/media1.nspx

To further enhance the transparency of all national and local institutions regarding public procurement and to reduce the potential for corruption, improvements to the legal framework are necessary. Specifically, the Law on Public Procurement should be amended **to require tenderers to publicly disclose the ownership of the legal entity on whose behalf they are applying, thereby preventing the awarding of tenders to companies owned by public officials or their close relatives.** In addition, the **Law on Prevention of Corruption and Conflict of Interests** should be amended to require **individuals involved in conducting public procurement to submit asset declarations, similar to those required of officials,** to reduce susceptibility to bribery and corruption.

The Assembly continues to regularly publish the parliamentary budget, monthly financial reports on budget execution, and the subsequent annual balance sheet on its website. **The recommendation to publish a Civil Budget on the Assembly's website has been made for six years in a row** to help the public understand what funds are at the disposal of the Assembly and their intended uses in the Assembly's work. The recommendation to post mid-term reports on budget spending on the Assembly's website also remains in place.

When reviewing the annual balance sheet, the auditor's report is an integral part of the material, and documentation from parliamentary bodies that review and approve the budget and public funding activities is publicly available on the Assembly's website. A shortcoming we've highlighted for the past five years is the fact that **even though the Finances and Budget Committee and the Legislative Committee discussed the latest the state budget proposal, all committees must be involved in that discussion within their mandates.** Additionally, the recommendation for the Assembly **to make it a requirement for the executive branch to engage the public in the budget creation process** so that the budget better meets citizens' needs is still valid.

4.6. FREE ACCESS TO INFORMATION: NEW PRACTICES AND PERSISTING CHALLENGES

Despite insufficient efforts at the regional level, the Macedonian **Law on Free Access to Public Information** remains one of the most advanced laws in the region. However, it cannot be said that this practice is "inherent" in the work culture of public administration. According to international and regional best practices, the Law should be improved by reducing the response deadline from 20 to 15 days to enhance efficiency and avoid the "obsolescence" of requested information. Unlike last year, the Assembly **did not respond to our request for free access to public information this year**, but it did fill out the institutional openness questionnaire, which is an integral part of our research.

The Assembly's new website includes a section dedicated to free access to public information that contains contact details of officials responsible for access to public information, the text of the Law on Free Access to Public Information with instructions on its implementation and corresponding forms, annual reports on the Law's implementation, and a link to the Agency for the Protection of the Right to Free Access to Public Information. As per our recommendation in last year's research, **representatives of the Parliamentary Service attended training on free access to public information in 2023** with the aim of continuously building their capacities and
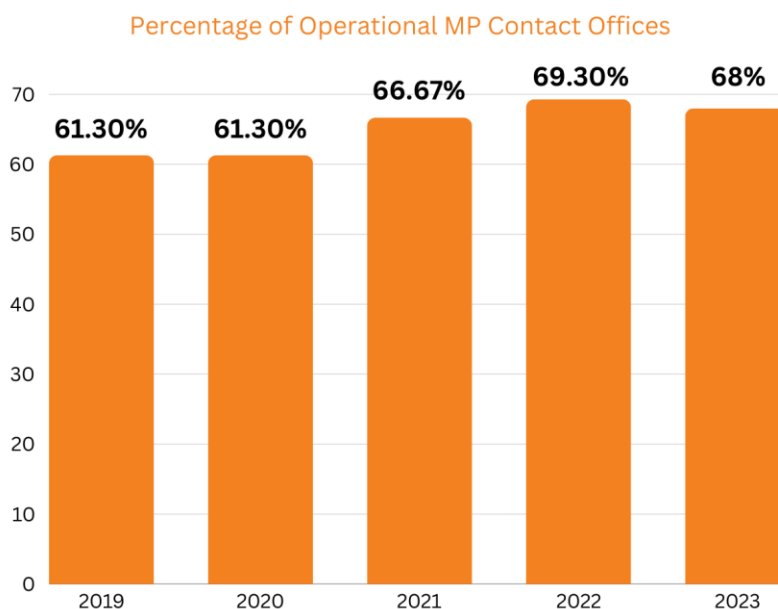
keeping up with new trends in the field. Additionally, the Assembly reported the development of an internal software solution, "e-training", where a personal file is kept for each employee outlining all generic and specialized training. We consider this an excellent way to track the building of internal capacities and assess future needs for improvement.

To enhance access to information and reduce the administrative burden on the Parliamentary Service, we again recommend that **approved requests for free access to public information be regularly published on the Assembly's website.** We believe that this would significantly reduce the number of requests submitted to the Assembly, allowing parliamentary services to focus on other essential processes.

4.7. PARLIAMENTARY CARAVAN – MOBILE PARLIAMENT FOR DIRECT COMMUNICATION BETWEEN MPS AND CITIZENS

The Assembly of the Republic of North Macedonia is one of the few parliaments in the region, along with the National Assembly of the Republic of Serbia, **which has established local Contact Offices for MPs to engage directly with citizens.** These offices aim to provide citizens with opportunities to exchange information, recommendations, and suggestions through direct contact with MPs, thereby increasing public engagement in the work of the Assembly. However, **not all Contact Offices are operational; more precisely, out of the 75 offices envisaged with the 2003 Assembly project,** only 51 offices were operational in 2023[41].

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[41] "In the period from January to December, the Department for Support of the MP-Citizen Contact Offices established a total of 51 offices in the following municipalities: Aerodrom, Bitola, Bogdanci, Veles, Vinica, Vasilevo, Gostivar, Gevgelija, Gazi Baba, Delchevo, Debar, Demir Hisar, Gjorche Petrov, Kisela Voda, Kavadarci, Kichevo, Karposh, Kochani, Mavrovo and Rostushe, Negotino, Ohrid, Plasnica, Prilep, Petrovec, Radovish, Resen, Strumica, Sveti Nikole, Tetovo, Tearce, Chair, Shtip, and Shuto Orizari"

Report on the Work of the Assembly of the Republic of North Macedonia for the period 01.01.2023 - 31.12.2023. Assembly of the Republic of North Macedonia. Available at: https://www.sobranie.mk/content/izvestai/GODISEN%20IZVESTAJ%202023.pdf

Percentage of Operational MP Contact Offices

Infographic 6. Percentage of Operational MP Contact Offices

According to the latest annual report of the Assembly, continuous steps have been undertaken in cooperation with local self-government units, the Association of the Units of Local Self-Government of the Republic of North Macedonia, and the Government, to provide facilities and make the remaining offices operational in accordance with Article 36 of the Law on the Assembly[42]. However, **in 2023, there was 1 fewer contact office** compared to 2022, when 52 offices were operational.

In addition to updating its website, the Assembly has also enhanced the **office map,** which provides information about office hours, addresses, contact points with their telephone numbers, as well as the MPs working in each office and the political parties they represent. This information is available for **34** of the **51** offices in both Macedonian and Albanian.

In 2023, a total of 5,039 office visits were recorded, leading to the registration of 3,294 cases, 1,782 of which were resolved. In addition, 113 MP questions and 25 civic initiatives were submitted to the offices[43], further underscoring the need for such offices.

This year, the Assembly has continued its efforts to educate and raise awareness among citizens by organizing educational workshops, seminars, Assembly visits, and effectively using social media to actively inform citizens of its activities. According to the latest NAP for OGP 2024-2026, in order to improve its reputation and gradually build the perception of an open institution, the Assembly has committed to implementing a **parliamentary caravan – a mobile parliament for**

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[42] Law on the Assembly of the Republic of Macedonia. Available at: https://tinyurl.com/2p862r3a
[43] Report on the Work of the Assembly of the Republic of North Macedonia for the period 01.01.2023 - 31.12.2023. Assembly of the Republic of North Macedonia. Available at:
https://www.sobranie.mk/content/izvestai/GODISEN%20IZVESTAJ%202023.pdf

direct communication between MPs and citizens. This initiative was piloted in 2022 and is planned to be implemented annually in every city where a Contact Office has been established.

However, the findings on substantial public engagement in the work of the Assembly remain demoralizing. Although the civil sector and independent experts are formally allowed to participate in and oversee the Assembly's work, **the committees requested the public's opinion on specific laws, strategies, declarations, etc., 10 times less in 2023.** Despite our repeated recommendation over the past five years, the Assembly has not yet adopted the practice of publishing expert opinions of the European Commission, Venice Commission, TAIEX etc., as well as draft-laws. We further recommend publishing expert opinions that are provided as part of the consultations.

Despite emphasizing the need to introduce e-petitions for the sixth year in a row, the Assembly has not yet implemented this participation mechanism. However, there are potential plans in this regard. During the Open Government Partnership Eighth Global Summit in Estonia, the Assembly's representatives participated in bilateral meetings with the Parliament of Estonia to discuss the digitalization of parliamentary services, an e-petition system as a digital form of citizen participation, communication with the public via the website, and an open section in the Assembly for anti-corruption practices and policies. Launching the **Register of Organizations[44]**, which is intended to enable civic engagement in policy-making, represents progress in providing an online democratic environment, but its practical implementation remains to be monitored.

To improve communication between citizens and the Assembly, it is recommended that the Assembly provide **a direct channel for communication with the institution via the website, along with clear instructions on how to submit complaints.** In this context, it would also be beneficial to establish and publish a deadline within which citizens should receive a response to their complaints, as well as a system for tracking the status of their complaints in real time. Only when such a highly functional mechanism is established will citizens feel heard and start to regain their trust in the Assembly, which, according to international research, ranks low—11th out of 15 institutions, including the media, banks, political parties, non-governmental organizations, etc., that citizens either trust or do not trust, just above the last four places reserved for political parties, the State Commission for Prevention of Corruption, the judiciary, and the Public Prosecutor's Office[45].

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[44] Register of Organizations. Assembly of the Republic of North Macedonia. Available at: https://registar.sobranie.mk/

[45] National Survey on North Macedonia | April-May 2023. International Republican Institute. Available at: https://www.iri.org/resources/national-survey-of-north-macedonia-april-may-2023/

4.8. FOSTERING DEMOCRATIC GOVERNANCE THROUGH IMPROVED CONTROL SYSTEMS

In its latest country report, the European Commission notes that parliamentary oversight of the executive is regularly exercised through parliamentary questions to ministers, but the country needs to strengthen its capacity for parliamentary oversight of the intelligence services.[46] Compared to the last two years, during which the Assembly did not hold a single oversight hearing, **one oversight hearing** on the application of the legal provisions of the Law on Unregistered Persons in the Birth Registry was held in 2023[47]. Additionally, to reinforce its supervisory role, the Assembly has strategically included the "Oversight Hearing in the Assembly on the NAP for OGP 2024-2026 Implementation" commitment in the latest NAP for OGP 2024-2026. Following this step in the right direction, we recommend introducing **sanctions for ministers and other executive officials who fail to engage in oversight hearings.**

Despite the lack of government interpellations, one interpellation regarding the work of the Public Prosecutor was submitted in 2023 but was dismissed as non-material[48]. In relation to parliamentary investigations, an **Inquiry Committee for the work of PHI University Clinic for Radiotherapy and Oncology**[49] was formed in 2023, which held one session to adopt the Rules of Procedure and a second session for a material discussion with 15 extensions[50].

To enhance cooperation between the Assembly and the State Audit Office in carrying out their respective duties through professionally sustainable and efficient relations with the aim of strengthening the efficiency and transparency of public financial oversight, the Assembly signed a **Memorandum of Cooperation with the State Audit Office**[51]. The Memorandum regulates the methods of communication and information exchange regarding audit reports, technical support, and cooperation with the Assembly's professional audit services through joint meetings, briefings, educational events and other activities aimed at improving MPs' understanding of audit reports. It also regulates how final audit reports which were submitted or summary reports for a

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[46] Commission Staff Working Document. North Macedonia 2023 Report. Available at: https://tinyurl.com/ynxmj7tm

[47] Oversight hearing on the topic: "Application of legal provisions of the Law on Unregistered Persons in the Birth Registry." Assembly of the Republic of North Macedonia. Available at: https://tinyurl.com/yvufauvy

[48] "Note: THE ASSEMBLY CONCLUDED THAT THE INTERPELLATION ABOUT THE WORK OF THE PUBLIC PROSECUTOR OF THE REPUBLIC OF NORTH MACEDONIA, LJUBOMIR JOVESKI, IS NON-MATERIAL, THEREBY CLOSING THE PROCEDURE ON THIS TOPIC, SINCE THE TERM OF THE PUBLIC PROSECUTOR OF THE REPUBLIC OF NORTH MACEDONIA, LJUBOMIR JOVESKI, EXPIRED ON 25.12.2023."

Interpellation about the work of the Public Prosecutor of the Republic of North Macedonia, Ljubomir Joveski. Assembly of the Republic of North Macedonia. Available at: https://www.sobranie.mk/detali-na-materijal.nspx?param=0c4f6406-e341-4041-95ae-1b851ed9d200

[49] Proposal of the Decision on establishing an Inquiry Committee into the scandal of PHI University Clinic for Radiotherapy and Oncology. Assembly of the Republic of North Macedonia. Available at: https://www.sobranie.mk/detali-na-materijal.nspx?param=ced598ba-6962-49ce-ba50-6ad6b4b79aff

[50] The commission's mandate is to determine whether the fundamental human rights of patients treated after the KATO system for the preparation of cytostatics was taken out of use were violated in this case.

[51] Memorandum of Cooperation between the Assembly of the Republic of North Macedonia and the State Audit Office. State Audit Office. Available at: https://dzr.mk/sites/default/files/2022-10/Memorandum_Sobranie_RSM_DZR.pdf

group of auditees will be reviewed by the Assembly's competent working bodies, as well as how consultations and decisions will be made regarding which final audit reports or summary reports for a group of similar auditees will be reviewed by the Assembly. In 2023, The Assembly reviewed the 2022 Annual Report on Performed Revisions and the Operations of the State Audit Office[52], which contains an **overview and findings from all audits conducted throughout the year.**

4.9. STRENGTHENING THE CODE OF ETHICS AND INTEGRITY MEASURES

The Code of Ethics for MPs[53] defines the procedures for addressing violations of the Code and mandates the publication of the final results from investigations into allegations of unethical conduct. In 2023, no procedures for establishing violations of the Code of Ethics were recorded. For the sixth year in a row, we are highlighting the absence of **monitoring mechanisms for the implementation of the Code.** Additionally, the recommendation **to strengthen the regulation of political activities and assets through the Code** remains.

Asset declarations for all MPs and officials are publicly available in electronic format on the website of the State Commission for Prevention of Corruption. However, it is advisable to **attach hyperlinks or tabs to these asset declarations within each MP or official's biography** to make their files complete.
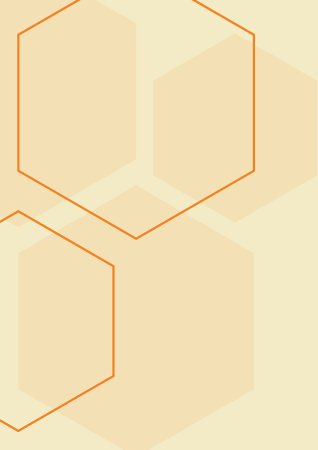
This year, the Assembly has continued its efforts to build capacities of officials in areas related to conflicts of interest, prevention of corruption, and handling irregularities. As part of a strategic approach to enhancing the institution's integrity, the Assembly has adopted a **Strategy on Risk Management of the Assembly of the Republic of North Macedonia 2023-2028** [54], which includes a registry of risks for all organizational units in line with ISO procedures established within the quality framework. To ensure enhanced accountability in implementing the obligations arising from this Strategy, it is recommended that annual reports be published.

It is important that the Assembly's website includes public information on whistleblower protection, including the Law on Protection of Whistleblowers, instructions for the implementation of the Law, the contact point responsible for internal and external reporting, a rulebook on protected internal reporting in public institutions, as well as instructions on receiving reports from whistleblowers.

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[52] 2022 Annual Report on Performed Audits and the Operations of the State Audit Office. Assembly of the Republic of North Macedonia. Available at: https://www.sobranie.mk/detali-na-materijal.nspx?param=b81b4d5e-3517-4b02-adc0-867887cf4f24

[53] Code. Assembly of the Republic of North Macedonia. Available at: https://www.sobranie.mk/kodeks.nspx

[54] Strategy on Risk Management of the Assembly of the Republic of North Macedonia 2023-2028. Assembly of the Republic of North Macedonia. Available at: https://tinyurl.com/3huy68yv

5. COMPREHENSIVE GOOD GOVERNANCE PLAN FOR THE ASSEMBLY OF THE REPUBLIC OF NORTH MACEDONIA

5. COMPREHENSIVE GOOD GOVERNANCE PLAN FOR THE ASSEMBLY OF THE REPUBLIC OF NORTH MACEDONIA

Based on this year's analysis, we have prepared a set of recommendations addressing the abovementioned issues, which should serve as a comprehensive plan for good governance in the Assembly of the Republic of North Macedonia.

Transparency

- The Assembly's website should be made fully accessible to all categories of persons with disabilities, in accordance with the Web Content Accessible Guidelines (WCAG). In addition, the Assembly should publish its Privacy Policy and Cookie Policy on the website.
- The Assembly should prepare and regularly publish annual work programs, along with a preliminary calendar of its activities based on the programs.
- The Assembly should improve the Open Data Portal to ensure users can view and download data in an open format. At the same time, it is recommended that the Assembly produce more open data and discontinue the practice of publishing scanned or unsearchable documents to enhance access to information.
- The Assembly should publish a structured list of MPs, including their contact details, in an open format.
- The Assembly should publish the salaries of MPs and parliamentary leadership, along with the funds they request in the form of travel expenses, on its website.
- The Strategic Plan of the Assembly should be reinforced with annual action plans that outline specific activities for each goal and priority, precisely define quantitative and qualitative success indicators, clearly articulate timelines for their completion, and designate a responsible body. To monitor the achievement of strategic commitments successfully, it is recommended to establish a framework for monitoring, evaluation and reporting, with a designated body responsible for these tasks.
- The Assembly should adopt and publish a separate Communication (PR) Strategy outlining its communication with various stakeholders through various communication channels.
- The Assembly should post videos of each committee session on its website.
- The Assembly should ensure greater transparency of committee sessions by regularly posting all documents resulting from committee sessions, including stenographic notes, information about MP attendance at sessions and transcripts of their votes.
- The Assembly should publish expert opinions that are provided as part of the consultations, and post opinions from international bodies (for instance, the Venice Commission) alongside draft-laws.
- The Assembly should publish a Civic Budget from the state budget, and prepare and publish the Civic Budget of the Assembly on its website.
- All committees of the Assembly should review the state budget recommendation within their mandate.

- The Assembly should formally require the executive to engage the public in the budget creation process.
- The Law on Public Procurement should be amended to require tenderers to publicly disclose the ownership of the legal entity on whose behalf they are applying, thereby preventing the awarding of tenders to companies owned by public officials or their close relatives.
- The Law on Prevention of Corruption and Conflict of Interests should be amended to require individuals involved in conducting public procurement to submit asset declarations, similar to those required of officials, to reduce susceptibility to bribery and corruption.

Accessibility

- In line with international practices, the Law on Free Access to Public Information should reduce the response deadline from 20 to 15 days to enhance efficiency and avoid the "obsolescence" of requested information.
- The Assembly should regularly publish information that has already been disclosed through free access requests. This would significantly reduce the number of new requests, allowing the Assembly to focus on other processes.
- The Assembly should adopt an internal act on consultation processes. Until this act is adopted, committees should increase cooperation and solicit public opinion more often by publishing calls for comments and suggestions.
- The Assembly should focus on restricting the practice of adopting laws via fast-track procedures only to clearly defined conditions and ensure these mechanisms are not misused.
- The Assembly's website should include a direct communication channel with clear instructions for submitting complaints and establish a separate mechanism for e-petitions.
- The Assembly fully and promptly fulfil the commitments outlined in the Action Plan on the Open Government Partnership and increase the involvement of civil society organizations in the implementation of these commitments and the creation of the new Action Plan.
- In cooperation with local self-government units, the Association of Local Self-Government Units (ZELS), and the Government, the Assembly should revise the need for making 75 instead of 81 contact offices operational in order to cover all municipalities and the City of Skopje. At the same time, the remaining offices should be made operational to ensure all citizens have the opportunity to voice their needs to MPs.
- The Assembly should enhance the office map to provide information on all operational Contact Offices.

Integrity

- The Code of Ethics for MPs should also regulate the political activities of MPs.
- The Assembly should establish clear mechanisms for tracking the implementation of the Code of Ethics for MPs.

- The Assembly should publish information on whistleblower protection on its website.
- Publishing annual reports is recommended to ensure enhanced accountability towards the public in implementing the obligations arising from the Strategy on Risk Management.
- We recommend attaching hyperlinks or tabs to these asset declarations within each MP or official's biography to make their files complete.

Efficiency

- The Assembly should increase public engagement in its work through existing mechanisms that involve the civil sector and independent experts.
- All regulatory impact assessments, regardless of the legislative procedure, should be submitted to the Assembly alongside the proposed acts. In addition, the Assembly should start implementing the strategic assessment of potential impacts on existing and prepared legal acts in practice, especially those proposed by the Assembly itself.
- The Assembly should conduct parliamentary oversight over the executive branch more often through MP questions to ministers.
- Sanctions should be introduced for ministers and other executive officials who fail to engage in oversight hearings.

The Metamorphosis Foundation for Internet and Society is an independent, non-partisan, and non-profit foundation based in Skopje, North Macedonia.

Its mission is to contribute to the development of democracy and increase the quality of life through innovative use and sharing of knowledge. Our guiding values are openness, equality, and freedom. Our guiding values are openness, equality, and freedom.

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• Education for Innovation
• Social Accountability
• Human Rights Online